

OPERATION SOAPBOX SPARKER

The Poetry Library is on the fifth floor of the Royal Festival Hall at Southbank Centre. The library collects all new poetry published in the UK and as much as they can from further afield. You can find poetry there in all sorts of formats: pamphlets, books, CDs, broadsheets, magazines, and posters. They even have a poetry magazine published in the form of a baked bean can!

The library holds poems by all kinds of poets: well-known, established writers, by primary school children, by creative writing students, and maybe one day by you! We asked the Library staff (Miriam, Oyinda, Jon, Kora, Jane, Chris, Mia, Dean and Lorraine) to contribute some ideas for how poetry can help you work with your soapbox. Here's what they told us:

"The Poetry Library answers around a thousand enquiries a month about poets and poetry. Many of the people, from all around the world, who phone, email, or visit us here in London, do so because they want to find a poem to read at a particular occasion, or a poem to help a friend to cope with a loss, or to remind an older relative or his or her youth. Here are some examples of the type of correspondence that we receive:

'Code Poem for the French Resistance' was the one I was looking for. I heard it read at my cousin's funeral and was very moved at the time. I only hope that I can read it at an upcoming funeral with the dignity it deserves.'

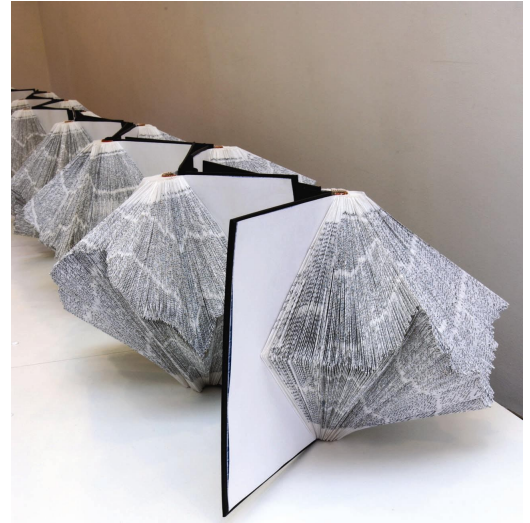
'My father I am sure also will enjoy the full text and probably think of days gone by when life for him held special memories.'

'I am a retired hospital administrator. Back in the late 1970's a lovely young red haired girl, who was a server for the hospital's cafeteria, was jokingly bemoaning the fact that she had no boyfriends. Remembering Sandberg's poem from high school days, I found the poem and gave it to her. She was pleased and grateful. Last Thanksgiving Day November 25, we celebrated with family that includes another beautiful red haired girl (our granddaughter) who is a college student that harbors the same complaint. I assured Rachel there was hope and promised a copy of Carl Sandberg's poem about all the men who are "looking for a girl with red hair"! We will visit our public library and make her a copy of 'Red-Headed Restaurant Cashier'.'

'Yes, it is relevant - it was for a friend who lost both parents within a short time and was struggling to reconcile faith and experience. Now going through the first anniversaries of their deaths. I will find it, use it and make sure I keep it.'

From these examples, we can see that poems, sayings and songs are an important part of how people think about, interpret, and remember their feelings and reactions to important experiences in their lives. These texts are also a way of marking important experiences. Can you think of a time when a poem has meant or said something special for you? It might be a poem that you wrote yourself, or it might be one written by someone else?

Poetry, according to the American writer Marianne Moore, is 'a place for the genuine'. What do you think she means by that? And how can you use poems and sayings to make your soapbox 'a place for the genuine' and to create your own personal library of significant texts?"



*a full folded dictionary
(2004)*

full
folded dictionary by Sam Winston

ACTIVITY IDEAS

We asked Miriam and the team how poetry could be a means to help us both understand and communicate the issues that matter to us most.

One thing that became clear is the power that words have to move people. A poem allows you, both as a reader, and as a writer, to approach an issue 'sideways' rather than head-on, by making you or others think about something from a different perspective.

Here's an example. Andrew Motion, the Poet Laureate, was on the radio this week talking about: *Poems from Guantánamo: The Detainees Speak*. This is a collection of poems written by people who are being held by the US government in a prison camp in Cuba under suspicion of terrorism. He explained how the poems really made one think of the experience of being held captive in a very different way. He also said that it was the poems that didn't talk about captivity directly, but focused on something as simple as a door or a window, that were actually the most powerful, and by not talking about the pain of being a prisoner directly, actually made you think about it more.

So here are some ideas for some sideways thinking as you work with your Soapbox:

1. Why not use poetry techniques as a tool for creative exploration?

For example, use your Soapbox as a 'poetry recycling box' – re-using words and text that we might otherwise throw away – to stimulate new ideas and ways of thinking.

Begin with a session gathered around the box that involves 'talking rubbish' – gibberish, made up words, talking about issues not considered 'important' etc, or shredding up old magazines and newspapers. Choose words and sentences at random from the discussion – maybe by recording it first and then playing it back - and then write these down and throw them into the box. Lines from newspapers and magazines can simply be cut out and added to the box as scraps of paper.

When the box is opened you can create new made things from what's been thrown away by drawing out and assembling the content in new ways.

14 random sentences rearranged to make sonnets

Individual words to make haikus

Rhymed poems made from words that rhyme

You can either construct your poems at random, and then see what they mean to you afterwards. So use the box as a creative brainstorming tool.

Or you can choose a theme, perhaps one of the issues or questions that is important to you, and then see what in the box can help you express those ideas, perhaps in ways that you would not have done if you had your choice of all the words and phrases in the world.

The Soapbox could even act as the arranging / writing desk to make the works. Make sure to take photos of yourself using then box and put them on the website for others to see.

2. Why not make a poetry library out of your Soapbox that tells people about you or the issue/s that matter to you?

You might decide to send poems back to Southbank Centre next year in the form of your own personalised soapbox poetry library.

This could reflect, for example, the needs and concerns, history and culture of your local or school community, and provide ways of reflecting on your experiences.

You could gather together poems from older relatives or people in your community. Did they learn poems by heart? What did the poem they learned mean to them? What does reading it or hearing it remind them of?

Or you could go to your local library and search for poems, passages from books (could be a dictionary again!), or lines from songs that particularly speak to you. What makes them relevant to your life or to the issue you are thinking about?

Once you have gathered together your library, how will you present it in your soapbox? You will need to think about how you present your poetry library to others.

The Poetry Library's collection includes not just books, but also recordings of poetry, posters, poetry postcards, artists' books, Braille texts, poetry magazines, and online resources. Will you organise your poems by theme, or do you want the visitors to your soapbox library to experience browsing your poems randomly? Will your soapbox be used as a filing cabinet or a stage for performance poetry?

You might even ask visitors to Southbank Centre to contribute their own poems on a particular theme.

3) Be inspired by what the Poetry Library itself is exploring at the moment.

The artist Sam Winston currently has an exhibition in the Poetry Library, which includes his book *Dictionary Story* (see www.samwinston.com). Sam takes the dictionary as a starting point to explore language. You could make a 'dictionary' of your local area by listing towns, local flora and fauna, well-known characters from the areas, and giving them your own definition.

What makes them special, what are their distinguishing features, their sights and sounds? What would your local area be like without them? Where did the name of the local town or animal or plant come from?

Can your 'dictionary definitions' develop into poems?

However you use your soapbox, make it a "place for the genuine".

And come and visit us if you are in London!

You can find out more about the Poetry Library at www.poetrylibrary.org.uk. If you have any questions about poetry - whether you want to know the middle name of your favourite poet, want help finding a poem you remember from nursery, or need to find poems about hot air balloons, you can phone us on 020 7921 0943 / 0664, or email info@poetrylibrary.org.uk