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**Opinion**

# Poetry can move souls and thrum hearts: why wouldn't we teach our children about it?

*Joseph Coelho*



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A dispiriting new survey has found that nearly a quarter of schools teach poetry only once a year or less. What a shame that is

Joseph Coelho is the Waterstones children's laureate

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**S**chools are facing considerable barriers to teaching poetry in the classroom. That's according to a [new survey](#) from the Centre for Literacy in Primary Education and Macmillan Children's Books - the findings of which come as little surprise to me.

I have worked with many student teachers and spoken at many teacher conferences where it's clear that it is often a struggle to fit poetry into the classroom day. What a shame that is. We all instinctively know the power of poetry - it is the medium we turn to at weddings and funerals and new births, we know that it speaks to something deep within us and yet, on the whole, poetry tends to get forgotten until those times when we need it, and nothing else will do.

I often talk about the baggage that comes with poetry - the idea that it is to be analysed and studied and that there is a correct answer to its interpretation. But there is no right answer to a poem, other than the one it whispers to our souls. My own memories of poetry in the classroom are of analysing the poems of Sylvia Plath. I enjoyed it, but analysis alone can disconnect us from our enjoyment of reading a good poem. Striving to second guess a poet's intent without allowing time and space to find a poem or poet that speaks to you, for me, misses the point.

Long before I was a published poet, I used to go into schools to help get young people excited about poetry. I learned that the best way to do this was by sharing the joy I feel through writing it. By allowing young people to really engage with poetry in that way you open up a space of appreciation for the poems of others. Through writing poetry I learned how wonderfully brilliant Dylan Thomas's [Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night](#) truly is - have a go at writing your own villanelle and its genius opens itself up to you.

Engaging in free-write exercises (where you let the pen journey across the page, writing whatever comes to mind) reveals a deeper appreciation for Jack Kerouac and William Burroughs. By showing children that their thoughts and feelings and opinions are worthy of poems, you give them a seat at the table.

When I started looking to get my first poetry collection published, I was told there was really only one place to send it. Now publishers produce more poetry for a range of ages in the form of anthologies, like *Courage in a Poem* by Caterpillar Books, along with single collections like Matt Goodfellow's *Let's Chase Stars Together* (Bloomsbury) and Alex Wharton's *Daydreams and Jelly Beans*, illustrated by Katy Riddell (Firefly Press). It's an exciting time for us to renew our focus on poetry in the classroom.

I often receive messages from schools, sharing pupils' poems inspired by my own. Poems about pets and blocks of flats and emotions and animals. There is some great work being done by some brilliant teachers out there, but more resources and support are needed.

It was because of my awareness of the back seat that poetry has traditionally taken that I have made it a large part of my tenure as Waterstones children's laureate. My [Poetry Prompts](#) videos go live on the BookTrust website every Monday morning, each one offering students a fun way to start a poem. By the time my tenure is over, there will be at least 80 of these free poetry resources for teachers to use in the classroom to get children writing and appreciating poetry. And there are other resources too: [activities](#), teachers' kits and [recorded poems](#) that anyone can find online.

Despite the issues in the classroom, this is an exciting time for poetry. I really hope that with some easy-to-find resources and a better awareness of how it can be taught, poetry can gain its rightful place as a staple in all our classrooms; as a way to show children how their words, their worlds, their thoughts and their opinions have the power to move souls and thrum hearts.

Joseph Coelho is a performance poet, playwright and children's author - and the Waterstones children's laureate 2022-24

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*Editor, Guardian US*



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