## **[Does Poetry Matter?](https://www.nytimes.com/roomfordebate/2014/07/18/does-poetry-matter)**

Sunday's New York Times Book Review featured several new collections of poems. But does poetry matter? Is it relevant?

Wipe That Smirk Off Your Poem

*Tracy K. Smith received the 2012 Pulitzer Prize in poetry for "*[*Life on Mars*](https://www.graywolfpress.org/books/life-mars)*." Her memoir, "Ordinary Light," will be published next spring.*

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Why are there so many people who think poems are like pretty little locks to be teased open? Why is there a vast majority in this country that suspects poetry has nothing to do with the real world where a person must work, fight in a war or struggle to make do? I’d wager that it has to do with something that has gotten into a heap of contemporary poetry and deadened it, making it about as interesting and relevant to others as a dog yipping at its own shadow: Irony.

 “In the beginning was the word.” It’s an origin story like many others, but it gets to the heart of what language can do, for it was language — the wishes and dreams that language names — that set at least one version of our world into motion. We all believe this on a certain level, don’t we? We speak vows aloud, tell ourselves what we want, doom ourselves to failure, urge ourselves to the finish line all because, on a fundamental level, we understand that words invite possibility.

But Irony doesn’t believe in this. Irony refuses to be life-giving or world-creating. Irony negates wish. Irony smirks at the animating power of the word. It says, “I’m too smart to get taken in by any of this.” Poems infatuated with their own smarts and detached from any emotional grounding can leave the reader feeling lonely, empty and ashamed for having expected more. Like icy adolescents, such poetry is more interested in commiserating than acknowledging that feelings — the sentiments that make us susceptible to sentimentality — actually exist.

What I’m making is not so much an aesthetic distinction as a philosophical one. A poem can examine the vulnerability at the core of human experience in any fashion. There are myriad ways of speaking to what it feels like to be alive in the world. No one reader will like them all. But there might be more readers willing to take a stab if more poets were brave or generous enough to risk failing at something that matters.

Poems Hold the Mysteries of the Present, Dreams of the Future

[*David Biespiel*](https://www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/david-biespiel)*'s most recent book of poems is "*[*Charming Gardeners*](https://www.washington.edu/uwpress/search/books/BIECHA.html)*." His anthology "*[*Poems of the American South*](https://www.randomhouse.com/knopf/classics/catalog/display.pperl?isbn=9780375712449)*" is due out next month in the Everyman's Library series.*

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I write this by campfire light in the back country of British Columbia, cut off from the digital world and miles from the nearest town.

Every society we’ve ever known has had poetry, and should the day come that poetry suddenly disappears in the morning, someone, somewhere, will reinvent it by evening.

Since ancient times, as long as we’ve had language, poetry has ritualized human life. It has dramatized and informed us with metaphors and figures of feeling and thought, mysteries and politics, birth and death, and all the occasions we experience between womb and tomb.

Poetic utterance ritualizes how we come to knowledge. In the same way that poems illuminate our individual lives, poems also help us understand ourselves as a culture. Or at least they spur us to ask the questions. Poetic utterance mythologizes our journey of being. Poetic utterance tells and interprets our stories. Poetic utterance shapes our perspective of the mysteries of the present moment and helps us imagine the next one.

Walt Whitman hails us to join the communion between poet and human aspiration when he writes, “And what I assume you shall assume, For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you.”

In this way poetry connects us to our past, and poets unmask both private and civic memories, dreams, and urgencies. By harmonizing the body with the mind, serving both young and old, poetry is a guide to deliver us into a fresh engagement with our inner lives and with modernity.

If we care about order and disorder, then poetry matters because it is the art of the utterance of beauty and the grotesque.

If we care about the deepest aspirations of men and women across every community and culture, language and race, then poetry is always relevant because it is the art of the utterance of what we share in our innermost psyches.

Since culture and society existed both before we live and after we die, poetry is a link to our passage through our own time and a record of poets’ perspectives throughout time.

We know that human beings are intrinsically connected to one another in how we assert our being. When we read a poem, we are in the presence of this link. We are open to the metaphors of our shared natures.

Because poets have the highest faith that every word in a poem has value and implication and suggestion, a poem orients us in both our inner and outer existence. No matter what language we speak, we follow the guidance of poetry to better perceive sorrow and radiance, love and hatred, violence and wonder. No matter what continent we call home, we read poetry to restrict us in time and to aspire toward timelessness — whether we are in our most vibrant cities or in the remote woods.

Does poetry matter? Yes. Can poetry be more relevant? No. It is the song of song, the language of language, the utterance of utterance and the spirit of spirit.

Poetry Requires an Education of the Senses

[*William Logan*](https://www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/william-logan)*'s most recent book of poetry is "*[*Madame X*](https://www.penguin.com/book/madame-x-by-william-logan/9780143122388)*." He won the*[*National Book Critics Circle Award in Criticism*](https://bookcritics.org/awards/past_awards)*.*

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People can live without poetry, just as they can live without bread, or water, or air — at least for a time.

Many poets think that if only they write simply enough — in Marianne Moore’s words, “in plain American which cats and dogs can read” — that readers will love it again, the way readers loved it from the time of Gilgamesh to the death of Byron.

Perhaps that’s so, and perhaps poets should adopt a vocabulary of three or four hundred words and write as simply as sin. Like many arts, however — including opera, ballet and abstract painting — poetry requires an education of the senses. We wouldn’t give people jobs as chemists or nuclear physicists without a decade of training, or make them pilots before they’d spent countless hours in a flight simulator.

When it is once more taken seriously in the schools, poetry will be loved again — as many a misanthropic reader loves it now.

As for relevance, poetry does not need to be relevant. It needs to be good.

Earning Our Laurel Leaves

[*Sandra Beasley*](https://sandrabeasley.net/)*is the author of three books, including "*[*I Was the Jukebox,*](https://sandrabeasley.net/?page_id=8)*" winner of the Barnard Women Poets Prize. “Count the Waves" will be published next year by W. W. Norton.*

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Abraham Lincoln [loved poetry](https://www.loc.gov/rr/program/bib/lincolnpoetry/). He regularly recited William Knox’s “Mortality” and he memorized Edgar Allen Poe as well. Here in D.C., a friend stages midnight readings at the Lincoln Memorial. Poets gather with blankets and flashlights.

“Does poetry matter?” Yes. No one watching a competitive slam by students would doubt it. Every elegy drafted for President Lincoln “mattered,” even the trite or amateurish ones. Elegies by Walt Whitman, Gwendolyn Brooks, Langston Hughes and Stanley Kunitz mattered then, and have since endured.

What’s at question is poetry’s vaunted status above other artistic disciplines. “It’s poetry and power all the way!,” President Kennedy [wrote](https://www.poets.org/poetsorg/text/poetry-and-power-robert-frosts-inaugural-reading) to Robert Frost, after Frost spoke at his inauguration. He didn't write “It’s ballet and power all the way!” and it's probably for the same reason we do not have a Sculptor Laureate.

History suggests that, in every generation, certain poets bear the philosophical burdens of their time. Great poets have died for their work and, unfortunately, continue to be persecuted. Poems can inspire and spur action: something as simple as the right metaphor can shift a reader’s understanding.

Most poets, however, settle for lesser accomplishments. I'm hesitant to say it, because I don't want to seem like a curmudgeon, nor am I arguing that the only powerful poems are political poems. Many poems with the explicit purpose of shaping minds tend to bore. The work of poet-statesmen of the past — including Frost and W. H. Auden — rarely engaged the full spectrum of racial, gender and class struggles of their eras. I don’t want to trade one myopia for another.

Yet I find, even in upper echelons, as much half-assery as kick-assery. There are poets who simply transcribe personal experience, rife with the decoration that [Mary Karr warned](https://www.byliner.com/read/mary-karr/against-decoration) about two decades ago. There are poets who abandon the line’s integrity, their enjambments obscuring the poem like kudzu. Poems more interesting as Fluxist concept than as rendered work.

I find beautiful poems, too. The force of good poetry is unmistakable when seen in action. There are intelligent, fierce, deeply relevant American voices such as [Naomi Shihab Nye](https://www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/naomi-shihab-nye), [Jane Hirshfield](https://www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/jane-hirshfield), [Natasha Trethewey](https://www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/natasha-trethewey), and [Thomas Sayers Ellis](https://www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/thomas-sayers-ellis), to name a few.

Here is my challenge to the page when I write: Does the notion driving this poem survive translation? Is the craft tight? Would the poem’s rhetorical risk or emotional revelation mean something outside the terrarium of its home culture? Has the poet disturbed the universe?

Bring your flashlights and blankets, poets. We can do more. We can illuminate and transform, honoring the legacy of those poetry-lovers who came before us.

Poetry Is Hospitable to Strangeness and Surprise

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If I say last week I saw 90 high school students, who were mostly strangers to one another, howl and weep and laugh and stomp their feet to — yes — poetry, or if I say I just read poems six hours ago to a raucous house of 1000-plus young people at the Annenberg Center at U. Penn, or if I say, furthermore, that’s not even close to the biggest poetry audience I’ve seen, is that enough evidence to convince you that poetry matters? If I told you, there are children, young adults, and grownups who love poetry like this, would you believe me? No, probably not.

Part of the problem is our assessment of poetry is about awards, publications, and appointments. Not enough is about how everyday people are moved by poems. Truth is, they are hungry for it — especially when it’s written, read, performed and listened to with the whole body. If you saw the audience at Brave New Voices this week or the young folks at Sarah Lawrence College’s Summer High School Writing Conference, you’d see a heightened listening. Educators crave that kind of listening.

Maybe I should be the one asking a question: when you ask if poetry matters, I say, “For whom?”

You may want something “practical,” so I’ll say this: poetry and science are kin; they share a series of principal labors. Those are 1.) observation and attention 2.) reflection and memory 3.) description 4.) imagination 5.) re-seeing and discovery. Both disciplines cultivate curiosity and interrogation.

Moreover, both disciplines are highly hospitable to strangeness and surprise. We don’t acknowledge this enough in science. We aren’t taught to enjoy this enough in poetry.

We don’t have to do much to make poetry “more relevant.” We just have to let science and poetry grow and change as they do. We just have to give them enough space and support to work in solitude but talk together too.