

Nothing But the Poem Groups – with the Scottish Poetry Library

by Lillas Fraser

'I didn't think this was my thing, and I wasn't going to say anything,' he confides after the session with a broad grin on his face, 'and I'm sorry –' (he's not sorry, he's delighted, and so am I), 'it turns out I couldn't stop talking!'

Actually, he didn't talk non-stop at all; he was often silently absorbed in what another reader was saying. But his elation was because he surprised himself. He had been worried that talking about poems was going to expose him as stupid or less well-read than everybody else, or perhaps might make him emotionally vulnerable in front of a group. But he'd become so absorbed in a discussion about a poem that he astonished himself with how easily and perceptively those ideas and responses came tumbling out – and he seemed genuinely shocked that everybody else was interested and listening to him.

You may be practising bibliotherapy in many different circumstances, with groups or individuals with a huge range of needs or expectations. And that excited reader could be any of the people who come to our *Nothing But the Poem* groups.

We set up sessions so you don't need expert knowledge, and nobody presumes that knowledge in others. No need for readers to study any poems in advance; we'll provide copies. We'll ask people to try reading poems aloud (*only* if they want to – no pressure), because there's nothing to beat listening to poems and even more importantly, feeling their demands on breathing, mouth muscles, eyes. Who cares if anybody stumbles over a word? that's often most interesting of all, because it suggests you expected something else. And we ask readers to slow down, to think about the sound and texture and effects and patterns of a poem before they explore meaning.

Everyone's responses to these questions will be different. *Everyone* can change their minds as they go along. And that's the real pleasure of reading together, because for you, the practitioner, it's also vitally refreshing that your groups will

'teach' you. The priority is facilitating other people's experience, not your own; but to keep practice fresh you need to keep your own ideas fresh. Other readers' comments on what you read and share will give you a completely different take on a poem you thought you knew inside out. And of course, when you acknowledge that you're genuinely struck by what somebody has just said about a poem, that not only refreshes your own reading and your own practice, but it feeds back into that reader's own building excitement and confidence.

Talking about poetry in a group

Every group, and every practitioner/facilitator, has their own needs and practice.

We've found that our priorities for these groups include:

- setting up the discussion so that readers with a range of different knowledge of the poet/poetry/critical terms can feel equally comfortable with format, and welcome to contribute
- checking for everybody's physical and mental comfort and any particular needs (including preparing for moderate hearing or visual impairment, so people don't have to self-identify if they don't want to)
- reading the poem aloud – encouraging people not to worry about getting it all right, but to enjoy and note what it feels like to read
- slow down; experience the sounds, shapes, patterns of the poem without feeling a pressure to interpret straight away
- steering the conversation towards enough textual detail to be satisfyingly specific
- making it clear that you're there to make sure the conversation is easy and comfortable – but you are not going to tell them what to think
- making it clear that everybody has different experience, knowledge and understanding; so an idea that seems obvious to you may be completely fresh to your neighbor (and if somebody refers in passing to a book or film, don't hesitate to ask them to explain the reference rather than assume that everybody else gets it)

- supporting readers to know that they are free to try out ideas, change their minds, 'get it wrong'; there's not really right or wrong answers, more questions that interest each reader individually and questions that don't
- lead conversation from a desire for the facilitator to provide answers and 'solve' the poem, to understanding that it's all about the readers taking control and asking the big questions that are most important for them

Poetry is hard.

Perhaps it's not always the poem that's hard to read, but that the things it describes are hard for us to talk about?

But tackling something that is widely felt to be challenging or difficult makes the achievement feel all the more genuine.

I was never any good at poetry at school - we had to break it down.

Sometimes readers are worried that there are right and wrong ways to talk about a poem, or fear that reeling off a boring list of technical features will be an end in itself.

But love the detail – because everything a reader notices about a poem gives them more and more material to express what they feel about it, and why. Detail is only 'breaking a poem down' if readers feel they're just having senseless details drilled into them; discovering details *for yourself* will help build up a great pile of your own ideas.

Shape the detail to tell the story

Each reader uses that pile of ideas to start telling the crucial story of how they got to understand the poem. Help bring that voice into the open – it may feel rusty at first, like stating the obvious ('that felt fast and uneven when I read it, it felt exciting but nervous', 'all those 'sss' sounds feel threatening', 'oh, I feel they're really soothing'). But being able to talk about exactly why a poem has its effect on you is the root of those astonished, euphoric moments for readers later in discussion. And it can never be 'the wrong answer' if it's how you felt about the poem.

But what do you think? Do you know the answer?

Although at first some readers may really want the facilitator to explain or even impose authoritatively ideas on the poem, the confidence only begins to build when they realize that you want to hear their ideas. Observations are often tentatively phrased as questions, but some easy ways to bounce a question back to the group are: 'that's a great question, why do you ask it?'

'what does everyone else think?'

'I don't know, does anybody else know?'

'I honestly haven't made my mind up yet – what do you think?'

Some useful ways to start talking

'What sounds / words caught your attention?' All sorts of things will come out of this.

'What did that feel like to read?' Strong rhythms, tongue-twisting phrases, luscious or ugly sounds?

'What do you think is happening?' – sometimes you just need to sort out the story..

Or make it more about the particular poem:

'What kinds of journey are there in this poem?'

'What's your first reaction to this – is it a poem about love, or a poem about golf?'

(At this stage, avoid 'did you like this?' or 'how does this make you feel?' They seem like they should be nice and open, but they're often really difficult to answer until readers have had a good chance to think through their response – so leave those till later!)

Help people explore the **sounds and shape/look** of the poem. Easy to rush past these!

Is there another **important idea** in the poem – as you read it more, do you begin to see a more important question appearing?

'Does this poem seem to change direction anywhere? Where does it start to change?'

and towards the end, 'What do you think is the question we should be asking about this poem?'

Finally... At the end, you can:

- ask whether people like the poem or not;
- ask your opening question again ('so now we've discussed it, do you think this poem is more about love, or about cars?')
- ask what they think is the most important question about the poem
- ask if they liked it or not, or which of the poems they liked best

SOME USEFUL WAYS TO FIND POEMS FOR DIFFERENT SUBJECTS/GROUPS on the SCOTTISH POETRY LIBRARY WEBSITE

Search for poems online containing an individual word/theme

<http://www.scottishpoetrylibrary.org.uk/poetry/search-poem>

Browse poems online by theme, or 'tag'

<http://www.scottishpoetrylibrary.org.uk/poetry/tags/all>

For example:

- ageing <http://www.scottishpoetrylibrary.org.uk/poetry/tags/ageing>
- falling in love <http://www.scottishpoetrylibrary.org.uk/poetry/tags/falling-love>
- dying <http://www.scottishpoetrylibrary.org.uk/poetry/tags/dying>
- the future <http://www.scottishpoetrylibrary.org.uk/poetry/tags/future>

Also:

- Brand new Scottish poetry:
<http://www.scottishpoetrylibrary.org.uk/poetry/best-scottish-poems>
- For older readers and reminiscence groups:
<http://www.scottishpoetrylibrary.org.uk/learn/carers>
- For doctors and other care professionals:
<http://www.scottishpoetrylibrary.org.uk/poetry/tags/tools-trade>

The poems online are just a fraction of the poems available on the shelves, in books and magazines... So contact the Scottish Poetry Library for help with searching for poems online and in print: reception@spl.org.uk, or tel 0131 557 2876

MORE ONLINE SOURCES OF POEMS SEARCHABLE BY THEME:

Poetry Archive (UK & US) <http://www.poetryarchive.org/> Excellent and huge resource, includes sound recordings of poets reading, biographical notes

Poetry Foundation (US) <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/> Excellent and even larger resource, includes texts, recordings, biographical notes, articles and inspiration