POETRY FOR THE PEOPLE

Expanding Literary Arts Literacy and Access Through Community Partnerships

Seth Thill, M.A.

WATERLOO public library

Hello, my name is Seth

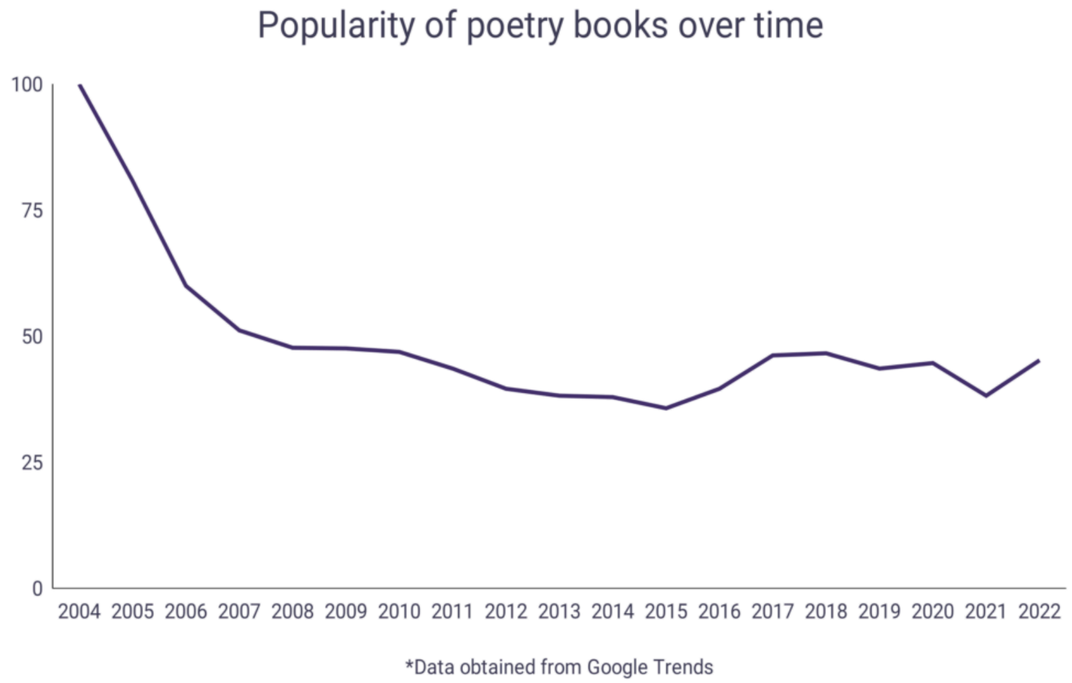
- Poet from Dubuque, Iowa, published in *Indiana Review, Cities on the Plains, Plainsongs Poetry Journal*, *West Trade Review,* elsewhere
- Former Editor, *North American Review*
- James Hearst Writer-in-Residence 2026-27
- Library Assistant at WPL since 2021
- M.A. in Creative Writing, University of Northern Iowa
- Big fan of root beer, claymation, and Snoopy



Who's reading poetry anymore anyway?

Per 2023 NEA Study on Poetry in the U.S.

- Readership down since 2018
  - 18-24 age group dropped from 17.5% to 9%
  - 25-34 stayed around 12% (Iyengar)



Why Poetry?

because it's fun! but also...

Health benefits of poetry

Per a 2021 article from Johns Hopkin University Center for Applied Neuroaesthetics...

A 2021 study found that poetry activities facilitated with hospitalized children led to reduced feelings of fear, sadness, anger, worry and fatigue

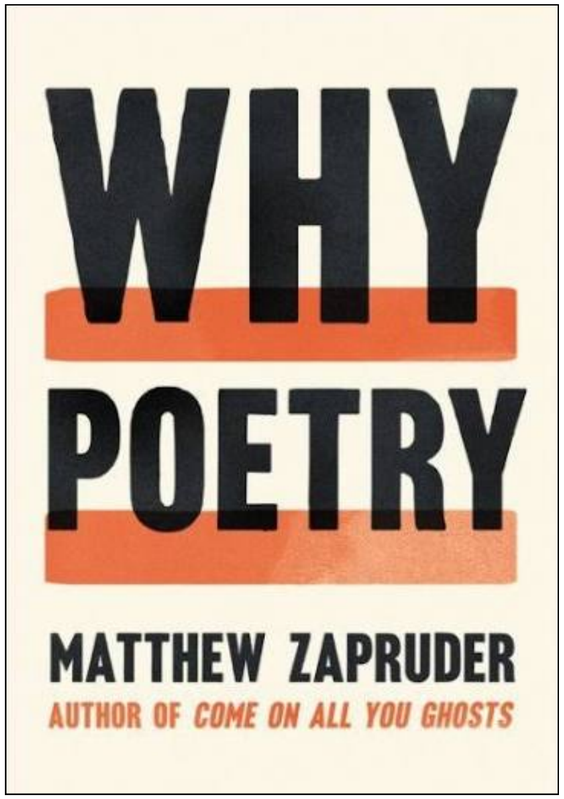
A 2013 study found poetry effective at reducing symptoms of depression in adolescent victims of abuse

A 2019 study found that perception of rhythmic and/or rhyming pieces of writing can support auditory and language skills in infants

(Sima, 2021)

Poetry and empathy

"People do not disbelieve in inequality or racism or global warming because they have not been informed: they disbelieve because they cannot or choose not to imagine. They are cruel because to them, others have become an abstraction, and cannot be truly imagined."
-Matthew Zapruder



- 2020 study in the *Journal of Palliative Care* found that poetry can increase capacity for empathy in healthcare workers and may reduce burnout (Schoonover).

- A 2023 study on poetry classes facilitated by health educators found that poetry creates, "a conducive environment for discussion" and "becomes a communal 'meeting place', facilitating empathic interaction and understanding amongst peers" (Jack).

Poetry and loneliness

- Literature review in *Journal of Poetry Therapy* surveyed several studies on poetry and loneliness, finding that, **“poetry therapy is a cost-effective and adaptable intervention, benefiting diverse vulnerable groups by addressing loneliness across all levels of the Social Economic Model.”**
- Found strong impact of poetry on young people and the elderly
- Notes that poetry can address lack of third spaces

(Evers, 2025)

Impact of Stigma on Loneliness

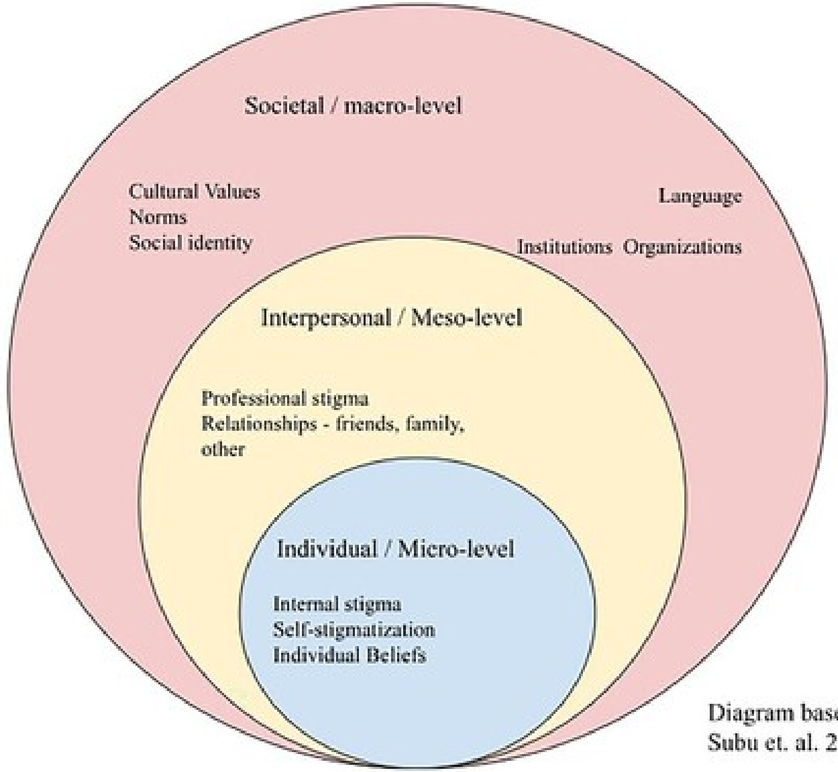
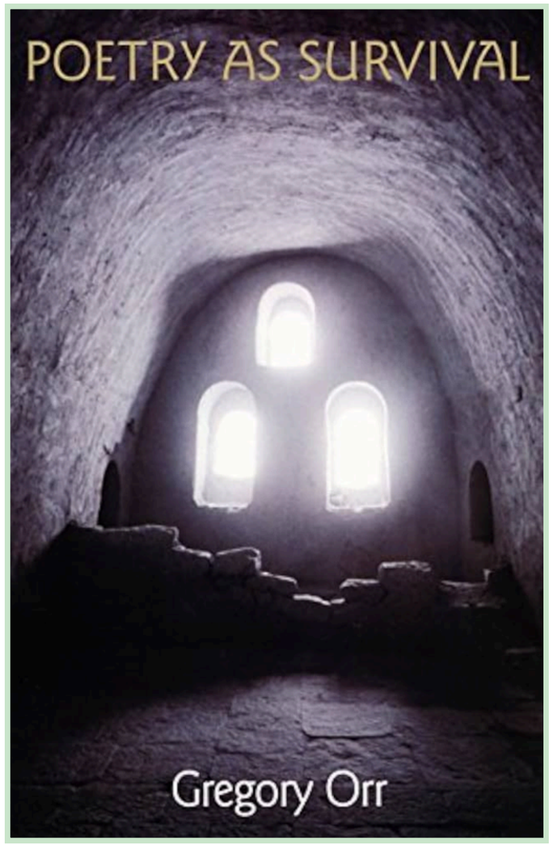


Diagram based on: Rössler, 2016, Subu et. al. 2021, Goffman, 2009



“The personal lyric says to the self in its suffering: "I will not abandon you. Nor will I ask you to abandon yourself and the felt truth and particulars of your experience.”

-Gregory Orr

Misconceptions around poetry

Puzzles to be solved

Needs to rhyme

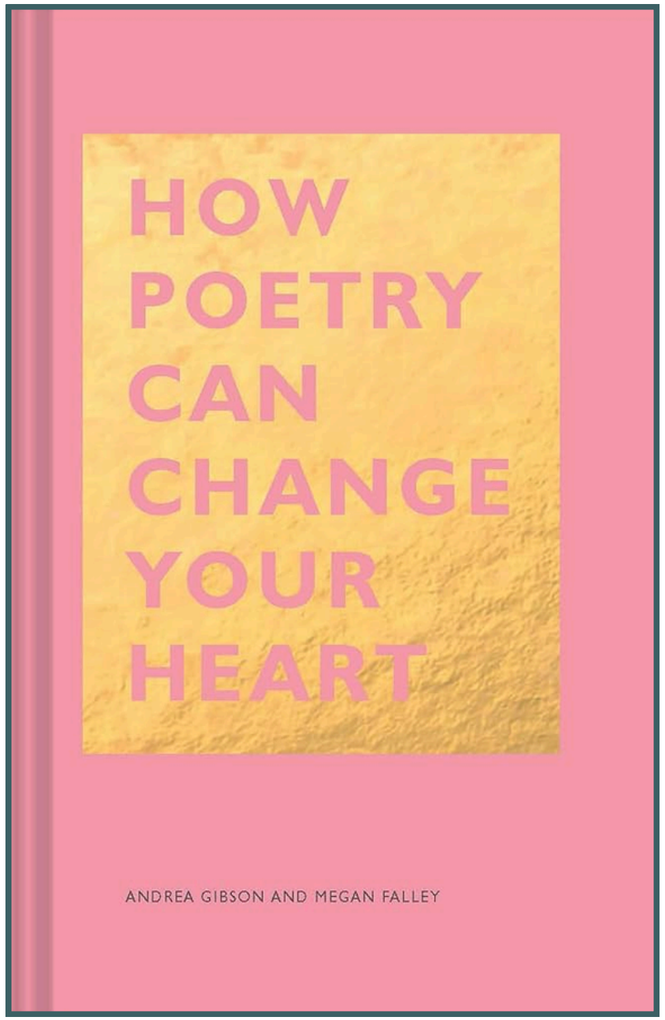
Needs to be studied to be understood

Needs to be on big, profound subjects

“Poetry can rhyme, but some poems would not be caught dead constricting themselves to the laws of sound. Poetry can be about the apocalypse or serial killers or pop stars or baseball. It doesn’t have to be in iambic pentameter or Old English, or in a way that makes you contort your brain into a question mark.” -Andrea Gibson, Megan Falley

“Poetry can be written by anyone paying attention.”

-Andrea Gibson, Megan Falley



Shared goals of poets and librarians

Access

Community

Curiosity

What does and doesn't work

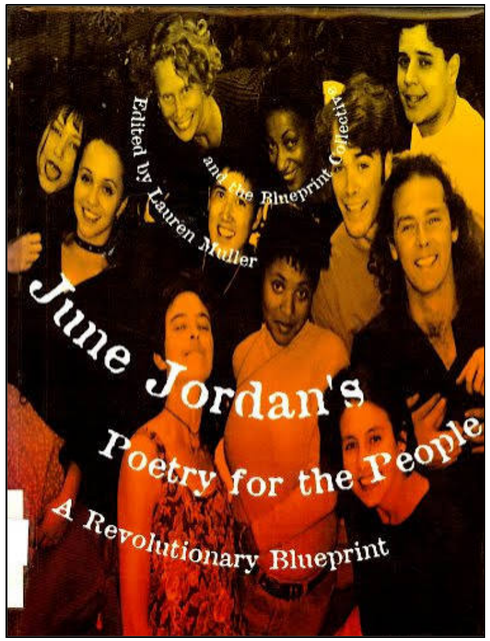


- Person-centered approach
- Hands-on experiences
- Guided exercises
- Modern/relatable poetry examples
- Holding a safe space to share work
- Value of voice

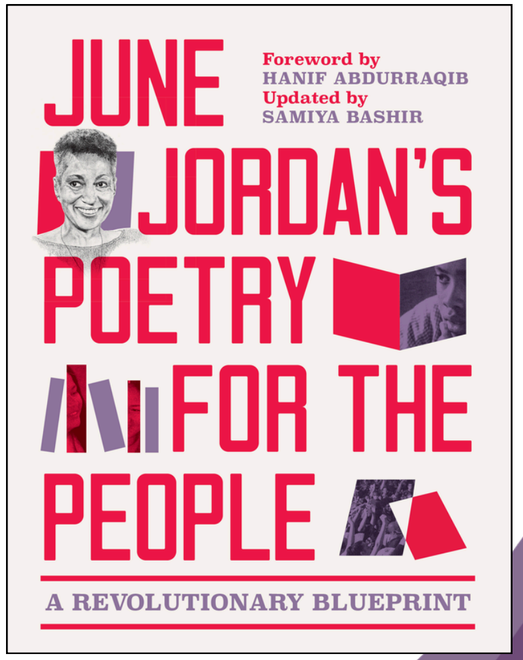


- Lectures/recreating a formal classroom environment
- Traditional, straight-forward poetry readings*
- Focus on form
- Forcing people to read out loud

June Jordan's POETRY FOR THE PEOPLE



"What makes it all come alive is the centrality of our own voices"



Poetry for the People

Jordan's Guidelines for Critique

1. Read it aloud.
2. Is it a poem?
   Poetry: A medium for telling the truth.
3. What is its purpose?
4. Is it coherent?
5. What are the strengths of the poem?
6. What are the weaknesses of the poem?
7. Is it a good poem?*
8. Is it complete?
9. How does it fit into or change a tradition of poems?
10. Read the poem aloud!

(Jordan, p.36-37)

"Once [students] know people want to hear what they have to say, there's no stopping them. Self-confidence becomes contagious."



***Some of what Jordan is looking at in a "good" poem:**

1. Strong, descriptive verbs.
2. Singularity
3. Specificity
4. Avoidance of abstractions
5. Defensible line breaks
6. Horizontal and/or vertical rhythm
7. Alliteration / Assonance / Dissonance
8. Rhyme
9. Consistency of voice
10. Dramatic inconsistencies
11. Punctuation

“Poetry’s Healing Work”

Trapeta B. Mayson, Licensed Clinical Social Worker and former Poet Laureate of Philadelphia

- Uses poems and accompanying exercises to trigger self-reflection in group settings
- Focuses on the validation and celebration of workshop members’ own stories

“[The workshops are] not a therapy session, but there are healing elements present: reading a powerful and affirming poem, hearing one’s own voice reciting it back, reflecting on one’s “story,” sharing that story in a safe space, and receiving validation that this story has value. This is healing arts. This is what clinicians strive to do with individuals during each session. This is what poetry has the power to do each time.”



Literacy Through Collaboration: The Big Public Poetry Party with University of Northern Iowa

2023 Capstone Project
UNI Languages and Literatures Dept.
Honors Seminar w/ Dr. Brooke Wonders

MAIN FOCUSES

- Practical work experience for UNI students
- Community engagement
- Increasing public access to poetry



PROJECT COMPONENTS

- Spoke with class on several occassions about librarianship
- Worked with students to design program
- Invited students+Dr. Wonders to promote program on library podcast

“THE POETRY WALL”



PROJECT COMPONENTS CONT...

- Collaborative display
- Worked with students on marketing materials for campus distribution

PROGRAM DESIGN

- Open house style w/ several interactive crafting/writing stations
- Brief opening remarks by students
- Ended with an open mic

Big Public Poetry Party cont...

POETRY STATIONS

- Ransom note poetry
- Random poetry prompt+collage
- Poetry fortune teller
- Cento station

"This is the first time I've written a poem in years!"

OUTCOMES

- Attendance ~40 people
- Several students gone on to careers in librarianship
- Begun longstanding positive relationship between WPL and UNI L&L

Literacy Through Collaboration: Writing Workshops



NORTH AMERICAN REVIEW



Literacy Through Collaboration: Writing Workshops

MAIN FOCUSES

- Building community among Waterloo writers
- Making quality writing education widely accessible
- Building relationships with local organizations and promoting

SERIES DESIGN 1.0—Author Seedbed

- Biweekly series led by combination of staff and outside speakers
- Sessions alternated between craft-centered writing workshops and publication-centered workshops

Writing Workshops cont...

SERIES DESIGN 2.0–Waterloo Writer's Workshop

- Bi-weekly sessions alternated between critique-based writing workshops and craft book discussions
- Writers submit work for feedback from whole group
- Quarterly Guest Speaker

REASONS FOR CHANGE

- Patrons wanted more opportunities to share their own work
- Focus on craft led to stronger community building

Literacy Through Collaboration: PoeTea Party with Panache Tea Boutique

PROGRAM GOALS

- Celebrate and raise awareness of National Poetry Month
- Support our local downtown business district



PROGRAM DESIGN

- Reserved space at tea boutique
- Pre-purchased tasting menu for registered attendants
- Brief guided exercise at beginning
- Writing prompts and blank journals left at each seat
- Free poetry books, pop-up poetry library+card sign-ups

A BRIEF EXERCISE

1. Start by just listing as many words/phrases as you can that either describe who you are as a person or words/phrases that are otherwise important to you (or a combination of both).
2. Now summarize that list in narrative form. Try to come with a paragraph-or-so long mission statement about yourself.
3. Go back to the initial list. Of these things, what are you most interested in writing about? Choose three topics from or related to your list of words. Ask yourself:

- What do you want to tell others about?
- What more do you want to know about these topics?
- What do you think writing about these topics might tell you about yourself?

“I never write poetry, but this made it so much easier than I thought it would be!”

NATIONAL POETRY MONTH 2026

POEMS BY _____



POETRY PROMPTS

- Are there any specific memories triggered by what you are eating/drinking currently? Write a poem about that memory.
- Choose a favorite poem of yours, or one that you read today and enjoyed. Write your own poem using the same opening line as that poem.
- Write a poem that is formatted as a recipe
- Pick out a single ingredient that goes into what you are eating or drinking right now. Write a poem about your relationship with that ingredient, or about that ingredient’s journey from where it started to where it is now, in front of you.
- Pick any color you see. List out as many things you can think of that are that color. Then, write a poem about one or multiple of the things you listed

“Tea, poetry, and a room full of connection.”











Photo credit:

live THE VALLEY

Hiding the vegetables

Teaching poetry when poetry isn't the point



POP-UP ZINE TENT



POETRY OF *THE HOBBIT*



POETRY AS SONGWRITING STRUCTURE



EDGAR ALLAN POE-TRY

These Poems

June Jordan, 1936 - 2002

These poems
they are things that I do
in the dark
reaching for you
whoever you are
and
are you ready?

These words
they are stones in the water
running away

These skeletal lines
they are desperate arms for my longing and love.

I am a stranger
learning to worship the strangers
around me

whoever you are
whoever I may become.



Thank you!

email:
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