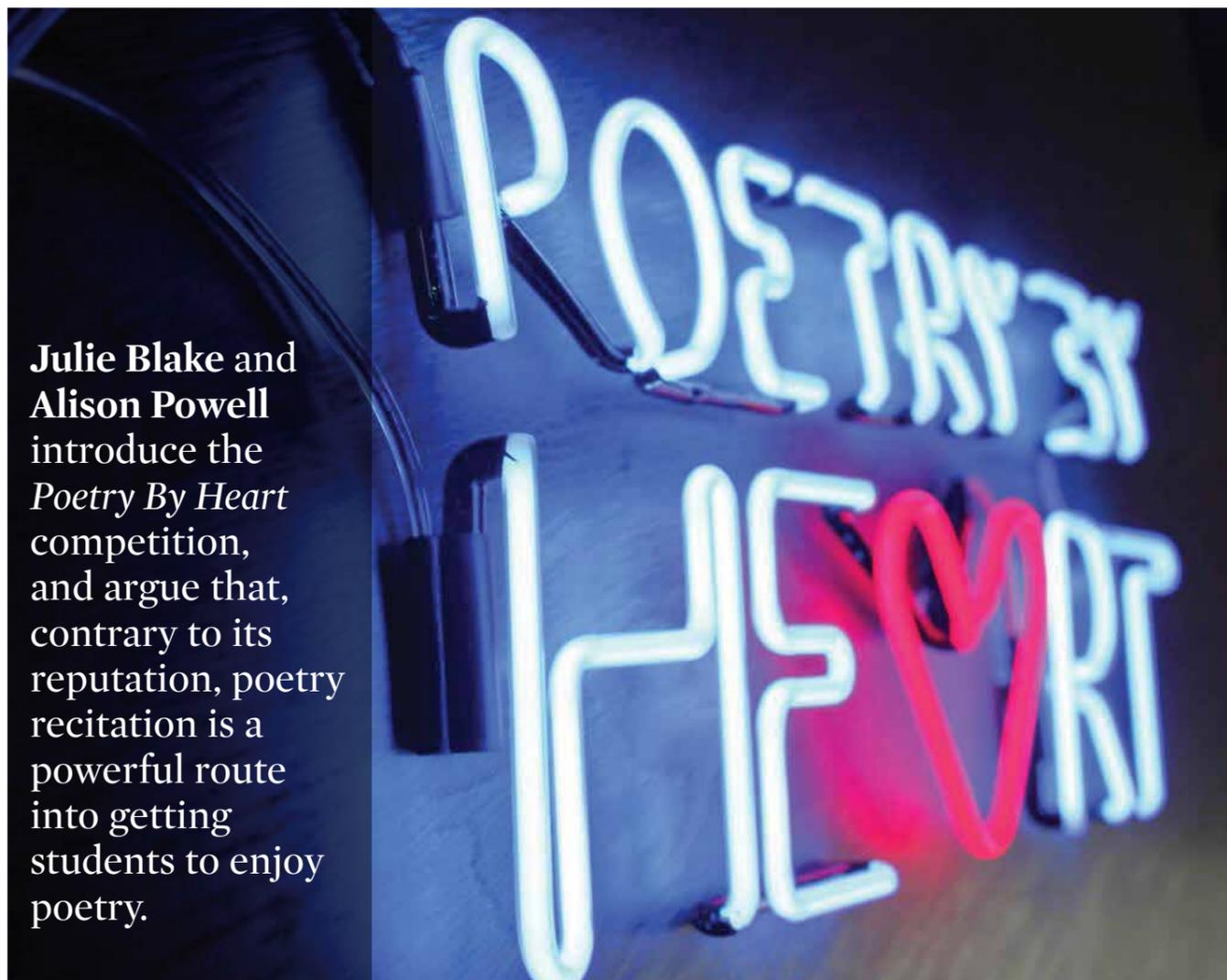


Off The Page

Bringing Poetry to Life through *Poetry By Heart*



Julie Blake and Alison Powell introduce the *Poetry By Heart* competition, and argue that, contrary to its reputation, poetry recitation is a powerful route into getting students to enjoy poetry.

Poetry recitation has had a bad press for about a century, largely related to changing attitudes to coercion, flogging and how we might educate children without fear. All good reasons in themselves: but one could be forgiven for thinking that a healthy baby got thrown out with the dirty bathwater.

When we can choose poems to recite that we love, because we want to have a go at learning them, the reality is something far more interesting, far more real and far more beautiful than anything we might imagine 'by rote' to mean. Poetry in performance has a power to it, and a rawness that demands (and always seems to gain) respect. There's a certain type of silence that falls on a room of people, no matter what their age, when someone stands up and recites a poem by heart. There is a deep respect for the performer, whoever they may be, as well as a reverence for the poem itself. It's beyond cool.

Poetry By Heart

Which is where *Poetry By Heart* comes in. This national schools poetry recitation competition was started in 2013 by Julie Blake and Andrew Motion as an educational initiative of *The Poetry Archive* (www.poetryarchive.org). *Poetry By Heart* offers young people the opportunity to learn by heart and recite poems they might not otherwise encounter in their exam years, to enjoy poetry, to fall in love with the sound of it. Andrew Motion, co-founder of *Poetry By Heart*, says the competition 'is about understanding and remembering the deep recurring truths about our experience as humans, in terms that are especially beautiful and resonant. It is about doing this in a pleasure-filled way.'

The competition is accessible to all. No-one is asked to analyse the repetition of certain motifs in a poem or to write about the poet's use of alliteration or to try and discuss the effect of the enjambement between

the third and fourth lines. But when you take a poem to heart it reveals little bits about itself with each recitation. The poet's use of alliteration might, in a burst of synaesthesia, become a taste, the enjambement between the third and fourth lines a breathless race, and the metre some kind of darkness running through. It offers a substantial, first-hand, lived experience of poetry that can't do anything but develop understanding of language, structure and form.

Kaiti Soutana, 2013's competition winner, claims the experience has deepened her understanding of and passion for poetry. She says that she still feels nervous when asked to recite the poems that she read in last year's finals. Although she has performed in a number of staged plays, she says reciting poetry is different. 'It's like giving something of yourself.'

Having fun with recitation

So how do we go about reinvigorating this classroom practice, investing it with new life and educational values? We might start by thinking about motivation: why should your students learn a poem off by heart? What's in it for them?

If you're intending to participate in the *Poetry By Heart* competition, there are plenty of obvious motivators – excellent prizes, an expenses paid weekend in London for the national finals, the chance to meet some of Britain's best contemporary poets, an opportunity to meet like-minded young people from all over the country. Alternatively you might generate motivation by setting a challenge: as ever, 'I bet you can't do this!' works with some students, whilst 'I know you'll be able to do this brilliantly!' works with others.

You could lead the way and learn a poem yourself. Not in a 'look-what-I-can-do' way, obviously! Try more of a 'we're-in-this-together' approach and see how your students respond to your attempts at memorisation. Teach First students at a recent CPD day reported that their own struggles with learning poems by heart made their students feel more comfortable to have a go.

How about getting other departments on board and having a student v. staff poetry recitation competition? Invite your leadership team to start assemblies with poems. Make poetry posters to decorate the corridors. Hold poetry recitation sessions at lunchtimes...just for fun. Invite poets into school to run recitation workshops (the *Poetry By Heart* team can help you with that). Ask students to pick a poem of the week and read it with all your classes.

For the less easily persuaded, start with something small and they are more likely to say 'yes' to something bigger later. Challenge students to learn one line this week, two next and a whole poem will seem less daunting later in the term.

Alternatively, you can persuade them that learning poetry off by heart is actually fun. Try putting your students in groups and giving them a children's poem like Joan Poulson's 'Crick Crack Crocodile' to learn. Ask them to come up with actions for each line (maybe, snapping arms together for the first line, pointing to their 'bright shiny teeth' for the next) and to teach another group their poem using exaggerated actions. Or come up with some lively actions yourself and teach the whole class the poem. This has the potential for much hilarity in the classroom, which is great as the memory loves a giggle.



Finding poems to love

Use the *Poetry By Heart* website anthology to help students find new poems to love. This is a timeline of 200 poems from over six hundred years – and this is the competition anthology if you decide to compete. An easy (i.e. no-marking) homework might involve sending your students away to explore the poems. They could browse across the centuries, or use the filter tab on the top right to pick groups of poems such as 'nasty ends', 'lovers', 'Nobel prizes' or even 'Roberts' (that's poets all called Robert!). They could use the 'random poem' function of the website home page. They could use the search tool to enter random words – once they've done all the rude words, they'll soon find some poems they like!

If you're commemorating the First World War in school/college this year, make sure you visit the *Poetry By Heart* showcase, also available on the website as part of the competition. As well as the traditional trench poems, you'll find contemporary poems about the war, female voices and poems in translation from German, French and Polish. If you're having a commemorative event, why not make poetry recitation a part of it – there won't be a dry eye in the house...

"Poetry By Heart offers young people the opportunity to fall in love with the sound of poetry."





English teachers at a *Poetry By Heart* workshop.

How to memorise

Milan Kundera says ‘There is a secret bond between slowness and memory, between speed and forgetting.’

It’s important to reassure young people that most of us are unable to simply look at a poem and upload it instantly to our memories. We are not computers and neither would we want to be. When we add a human voice to a poem we bring understanding and emotion. And that, after all, is the point of reading it out loud!

So encourage students to spend quality time with their poem. Provide opportunities for getting to know it. Allow them to take their out for walks and learn to understand and love the words as they take them to heart. Kaiti Soultana used her walk to and from the bus stop each day to learn her competition poems.

‘I’d repeat two lines on the way to college,’ she says, ‘and the challenge was to remember them again on the

way home. Then the next day I’d take the next two lines and do the same. By the end of the week I had ten lines.’

Encourage students to take advantage of time spent in queues, when walking, eating breakfast, sitting on the bus, feeding pets, waiting for a lift and use them to learn their poem.

The ‘downloads’ section of the *Poetry By Heart* website also has a selection of helpful approaches to memorisation, including a description of how to build memory temples – made popular by Benedict Cumberbatch’s recent incarnation of Sherlock Holmes! There is also a handy homework sheet to print and hand out which includes suggestions for engaging with poetry on a creative level.

Expect the unexpected

Everyone involved in last year’s competition was surprised and delighted by the range, variety and challenge of the poems young people chose. We were all reminded that if we assume that students won’t like this, won’t want to do this, will pick the shortest poems, we risk seriously underestimating them. Young people will always surprise us! So, let them go wild with the anthology, let them play with poetry, let them know that they do have the capacity to learn reams of poetry by heart. Light the touch paper, sit back and prepare to be delighted.

To find out more about the Poetry By Heart, and to be first to hear about the launch of the 2015 competition, register for our newsletter at www.poetrybyheart.org.uk.

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