

"Poetic Interlude. William Sieghart: What a poetry publisher thinks and claims in the 21st century."

This document is not the entire 15-minute speech – William will interject with Poems and antidotal stories.

Two summers ago I visited a literary festival in Cornwall in the South of England where, thanks to a friend's cleverness, I spent a day prescribing poetry prescriptions to those in need. It was a revelatory experience. Having spent the last twenty years or so trying to promote poetic excellence through the Forward Prizes for Poetry, Britain's biggest poetry prizes, and broader access to the art-form through National Poetry Day, I've been battling with the challenge of making poetry appear more relevant to people in their everyday lives. Battling because there is no doubt that most people find poetry intimidating. It's a fusty, dusty, back of a bookshop, elite, slim-volumed thing that's not really for them. The occasional line of a poem will be lodged in their mind from schooldays but that will be it. Ask them the name of a living poet and they will struggle. Ask them a line from a living poet and they will be silent.

So what was so revelatory about that day in Cornwall? As part of the literary programme at the festival I had given a talk about a new anthology, *>Winning Words, Inspiring Poems for Everyday Life*. In this book I've tried to collate a collection of poetry, old and new, that would help the reader through the myriad of problems associated with getting through the day. Following the talk I sat in the book tent with a couch beside me, offering to listen to people's problems for ten minutes at a time and then prescribe them with the appropriate poem or poems for them to take away and inwardly digest or commit to memory as an alternative to a cocktail of pills or any other form of therapy currently in vogue.

I was planning a two-hour slot, expecting ten or so festival goers and poetry lovers to come for a gentle chat with me as a way of whiling by the afternoon. Imagine my surprise when an orderly queue formed and I had to start taking bookings. Five hours later, when my ability to listen had been exhausted and my appetite for anguish overwhelmed, I put down my prescription pad and looked back over the day. Nearly forty people had availed themselves of my poetry pharmacy. About a quarter of them had burst into tears with a complete stranger either in recounting their troubles or when I managed to prescribe appropriately and they found a poetic complicity for their troubles and at last felt understood.

I won't break my Hippocratic oath by revealing the content of what I heard. Suffice it to say it saddened me how, in a world of so much communication, supposedly made even easier by developments in technology, people seem as lonely and unsupported as ever. But and it's a big but, the right poem at the right time could provide immeasurable sustenance. The emails I have had since prove it. As have the bookings. I've been on radio, television and stage. I'm about to embark on a twenty-date tour in the UK. The British love their poetry but they are frightened of approaching it, choosing it and even admitting their deep love for it.

Perhaps that is why we are a nation of greetings card lovers. Snobs may carp at the quality of the poetry inside but they serve a very valuable purpose in an often lonely and alienated world. And it's reinvigorated me in my mission to bring these inspiring poems to a broader public. Poetry in the right time and place can be a far better mantra for that tricky business of living than many more expensive or fashionable alternatives. I urge you to spread the word and look out for my future poetry surgeries. The Doctor is in.