

OXFORD POETRY LIBRARY

A YEAR OF POETRY IN THE COMMUNITY



“Oxford Poetry Library has re-opened the door to poetry for me and I’m so grateful for this space.”

-Workshop participant

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OUR STORY SO FAR

**PHOEBE NICHOLSON,
FOUNDER AND DIRECTOR OF
THE OXFORD POETRY LIBRARY,
REFLECTS ON A YEAR OF
POETRY AND COMMUNITY**

It's been a busy year here at OPL. With this being the second full year in our residency at The Community Works, it feels we've really hit a rhythm with our programming, outreach, and establishing a presence in the centre of Oxford. With weekly library opening hours, 12 different regular workshop series and two monthly open mic sessions, plus book launches, writing groups, a full all-day workshop, and so much more, this year we've reached more people than ever since we were founded in 2017.

The stats in this report show qualitatively what is very obvious from just attending the sessions: that we are reaching a wide demographic of people all over the city and beyond, and inspiring them to read and write more. I continue to be amazed by the diversity of people who come through our doors. People from across all age groups and from all different areas of Oxford and beyond are discovering the benefits of poetry and forming a meaningful community through our regular programming.

What I am most proud of in OPL's model is our accessibility. People who've never found the words to write a poem pick up a pen at our Getting Started with Poetry, and if they've found solace or joy through that process, we have Drafting Table sessions to help them hone their craft, workshops to try out different techniques or even enhance their performance skills, then open mic spaces where they can share what they've created with an audience.



It's our ability to hold people through this whole journey, from dabbling with poetry through to sharing it publicly, that we really see people reaping the benefits of what our organization has to offer.

This year, I've seen certain writers flourish: first joining us a little shy - keen to share their work but not sure how - but who by the end of the year are regularly owning the stage at This Is Just To Say, clearly confident and established members of our OPL community.

**“OUR MISSION HAS ALWAYS BEEN TO
REDUCE SOCIAL ISOLATION AND
INCREASE JOY AND CONNECTION
THROUGH LITERACY AND CREATIVITY,
AND THIS YEAR I HAVE SEEN OPL REALLY
BRINGING THAT TO LIFE. “**

It's been volunteers who have made it all happen. OPL is special for a lot of reasons, but there is something particularly magical about the fact that things at the library happen because people are passionate about making them happen, giving so generously of their time and expertise. It's what makes OPL a genuinely grassroots, people-powered operation and as founder and director, I am eternally grateful to those who continually make the dream a reality! As we close out the year, we're starting to think of new ways to engage volunteers to run the organisation more collectively, ensure the library is more sustainable and resilient in how it operates. I'm thrilled to see what happens next.

APRIL 2023 - APRIL 2024

OPL IN NUMBERS

2473

PEOPLE CAME
THROUGH OUR
DOORS

794

PEOPLE CAME TO
OPEN MICS

496

MAILING LIST
MEMBERS

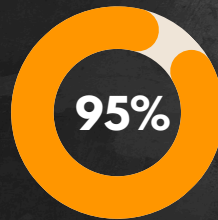
12

DIFFERENT
WORKSHOP SERIES

1161+

VOLUNTEER HOURS

Before an OPL workshop 12% of participants say they never read or write. Almost half might write or read occasionally. But after a workshop...



95%
of workshop
participants say
they will read or
write more!

WHY DO PEOPLE COME TO OUR WORKSHOPS?

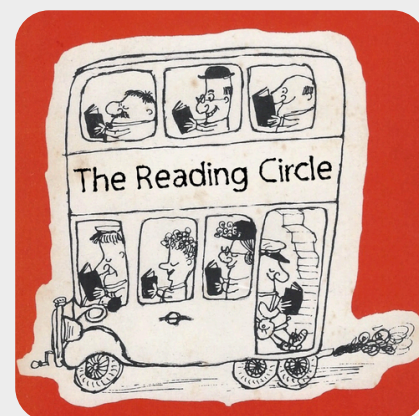


SPOTLIGHT ON WORKSHOPS

There are now 12 different regular workshop series, within the walls of the Community Works and beyond, from *Getting Started With Poetry* which is an accessible space for beginners to *Drafting Table* for those looking to develop their work to *The Shape of Poetry* which focuses on the different forms of poems. You can find out more about all of the workshops on our website but here's a closer look at three workshop series.

The Reading Circle

Set up by Alan Buckley and Vanessa Lampert, in each session they closely read and discuss four poems. Two are chosen by attendees of the circle. Vanessa Lampert reflects on the motivation behind the sessions: "Could we create a space where we could examine poems together as peers, where it would be not only safe, but expected that any of us might ask 'what on earth is going on in this poem?'. So far, 'feedback from the group has been entirely positive and we hope to continue."



The Porch

Volunteers run fortnightly creative writing sessions at The Porch, which is a day centre supporting people suffering from homelessness or housing insecurity. At each session, they read a poem or short story together, and use these as inspiration for both sharing personal reflections, and for writing. Volunteers also put together a magazine with stories, poems and artwork which you could see [here](#). The Porch directors said, "We absolutely love them! The team are over the moon about them, we can't say thank you enough."

From Page to Stage

This workshop covers elements of performance so that attendees can build the confidence to get their poetry off the page and onto the stage. Lorna Burchell, the facilitator, notes that "the sessions were great and I saw people grow in confidence with making eye contact with the audience, using pausing and silence more effectively and making sure they came on stage and owned it. We had a good sized group of attendees and many of them said they'd felt a lot more confident and aware of what was needed to give a good performance in their feedback."



OPEN MIC SPOTLIGHT

“THIS IS JUST TO SAY”, A MONTHLY SPOKEN WORD OPEN MIC EVENT, HAS GROWN IN POPULARITY THIS YEAR, FEATURING A HOST OF TALENTED PERFORMERS.

ONE OF THESE PERFORMERS, REMY NJAMBI, TELLS US A BIT ABOUT HER EXPERIENCE.



Photo credit: Anne Rogers



“The Oxford Poetry Library is an incredible, vibrant space that I have benefited from both as an audience member eager to hear fellow creatives and as a featured act.

Finding a platform in Oxford to bring new work to and a place to grow in confidence as a performance poet has been invaluable.

The community that has been fostered in that lovely room is the warmest and most welcoming of communities. The best part is that the relationships I’ve formed with people I met at the OPL have gone further than that room into a great creative circle. I’ll forever be a champion of OPL.”



TASTE COMPETITION



My favourite thing to write about

is my period. I say this as a response to the word
aesthetic. Tasteful. Smacking of an autumn

you can spread on your tongue. Full of that
soft suppleness with which you tear a petal,

the ease of it addictive, clean syllables, like
skipping stones, jumping from one to the other.

Aesthetic: to be beyond filth. To be beyond
vertigo, a crudeness, chalk gliding over paper.

The ambiguity of words similar to some soft
whispers over some soft fog. Never the nails,

the red, the curdled split milk turned sour
after being left in the warmth. Never--

to mean: a negation I cannot reconcile with.
To mean a negation I will always be drawn to,

eagle rising towards a sky of drowning.

What is it about blood which makes one

cut their words so tender to the bone?

Also, the paradox. Also, the vertigo. Also,

the filth. The red canna, a watercolour,
unwilling to be bound to the paper.

There were 200 entries to our very first TASTE competition, judged by Alan Buckley, Vanessa Lampert and Jenny Lewis.

After careful deliberation, the first prize winner was Smriti Verma with 'My favourite thing to write about'. Second Prize was awarded to Estelle Price for 'A last meal with my father' and the Third Prize winner was John Gallas, with 'ábhar blas (a matter of taste sonnet)'.

The judges said: "We all chose this poem as a possible frontrunner and, when it was read aloud in our judges' meeting (as were all the shortlisted poems) the effect was mesmerising. We knew at once we had found our winner.

What gripped our imaginations from the start was the way the poem questions concepts of 'good taste' when applied to its subject, and plays with tonality and paradox to engage directly with the reader and make the most of the writer's brilliantly subversive approach to the theme of the competition."

All of the prize-winning poems can be read on our [website](#).

CELEBRATING OUR COMMUNITY

We were so thrilled to see Oxford Poetry Library facilitators and participants recognised in the Poetry Society's National Poetry Competition, one of the world's most prestigious prizes for a single unpublished poem.

A huge congratulations Shaw, Vanessa and Chantal who were all commended in the long list, and to Rency Jumaoas Raquid who won third prize.

Rency's prize-winning poem started in a Getting Started With Poetry class and was developed with support from Vanessa Lampert.

Reflecting on his poetry, Rency says "the poem in the form it's in just would not have been possible without the Oxford Poetry Library."



LIKE HER

A stretch is the beginning
of birth. Pine bracts bear
cycles of wet and dry

that make the cone bloom
and fall. Her wooden fractals
teeter around an axis, a spiral

staircase of wombs now
pointed towards the ether.
Soon she will roll down

that hill and sleep with fungi
that collect on her scales,
while her children learn

to tickle the clouds. Scoop,
cradle, offer her things
the needles kept away—

a mellow sun, the autumn
crisp. Try to make her happy.
Adore the Fibonacci, how

carefully this pattern
was planned. Or not planned.
A closer look and you are

aware of ridges that run
fickle on your skin,
the explosions of your irises.

Like her you have been
tinkered with by time.
Search, find the scales empty.

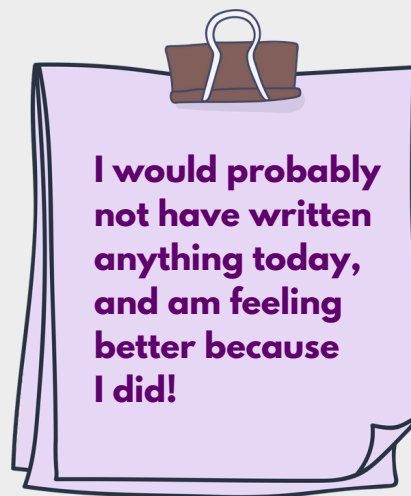
You have missed the gifts
she has offered. The beasts
have beaten you to it.

You claim her instead,
beautiful after her becoming.
How sticky and sharp,

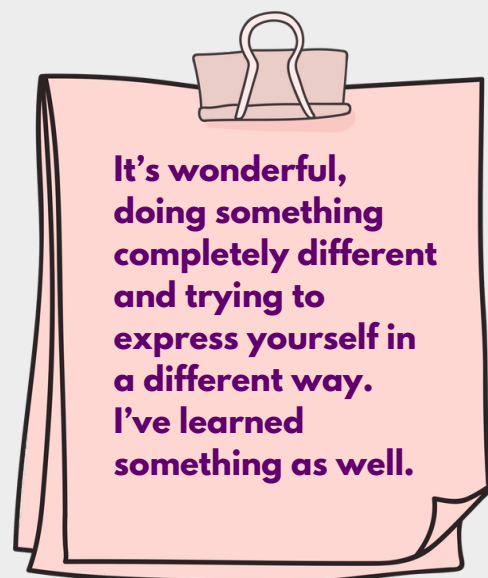
the resin that dries
on your palms.

TESTIMONIALS

We are always so pleased to hear from participants about the impact that the workshops have had on both their writing and wellbeing. Below are just some of the feedback that has been shared with us over the past year.



After a recent session with The Porch community, a day centre supporting people suffering from homelessness or housing insecurity, two of the participants wanted to share their feedback.



OUR SUPPORTERS

We are extremely grateful to everyone and everything that makes the poetry library the wonderful community it is.

Special thanks go to:

All of our **funders** and **patreons**.
Everything we do is thanks to you.

Makespace Oxford, Lula's Ethiopian Restaurant and **Wings** for helping us to create a vibrant, accessible space for this in the city.

All of our partners who help us run workshops, from **The Porch** to **Oxfordshire Mind**.

Every **volunteer** and every **participant** who come together to help us all connect and learn more from each other.



Cesca, one of our fantastic volunteers, fundraised for the Library with a trip to Everest Base Camp.

“My technical ability and confidence in my writing has blossomed in the past few years, and I put that down to the community, encouragement, and sheer silliness that my involvement with OPL has brought me.”

WE THANK YOU
FOR YOUR CONTINUED SUPPORT IN
EVERYTHING WE DO

“I’ve discovered that Oxford Poetry
Library is not just a fantastic
collection of books but also a
community of passionate people
who connect through poetry.”

-Jacquie, volunteer

“It’s a place where people's
creativity emerges and
flourishes, I've never seen
anywhere else like it.”

-Alice, volunteer

