

Career profile: Ted Underwood, poet

By [Ellie Stevenson](#) Arts Hub

Wednesday, January 30, 2008

- [Print this page](#)



Ted attended Aberystwyth University where he gained a degree in English Literature, and acquired a love for poetry which ultimately led to him writing his own. Although he hasn't been writing long, he has already built up a strong reputation as a performance poet and intends to begin work on his first written collection later this year. When not being a poet he works as an English teacher in sunny Herefordshire.

You've been involved in the 'open mic/slam' poetry scene for several years - what does this involve?

Slamming is a competitive arena where poets read their work and have some fun with it. Each poet has an allotted time slot, usually around three minutes, in which you read as much of your work as you please. You are then graded by an anonymous team of judges on Quality of Work, Warmth of Audience Response and Quality of Delivery. It's rapid, rambunctious and, dare I say it, often quite risqué!

Tell us about a recent event - where you were and what it was like.

I went down to the Times Cheltenham Literature Festival Slam recently and had a great time. It was great fun, with plenty of colourful characters there and lots of great stuff to enjoy.

I was the first poet of the night (always a disadvantage, but never mind) and I read two of my newer poems (one of which you can read below). The crowd was really receptive and I was only knocked out of a top five placing by some big hitters near the end of the night. I was robbed! Still, I was pleased with my performance and it's great to get some new stuff out there, to see how the crowds like it.

What's the best thing about being involved in poetry slam?

Getting instant and brutally honest feedback about your work. You can tell more about your poems from a stranger's face than a critic could say in a whole book.

And the worst thing?

Since it's all about performance I can't just let the words speak for themselves and if I'm husky of voice or

frail of frame then I'm scuppered!

How did you get into it?

I'd been writing poetry for about a year before I actually performed in a poetry slam but I'd been to see them at university. I just decided one day to take part in the next one I saw, so I did!

What do you think makes you good at poetry slam?

I'm a good performer and I've learned over the years that silence can easily be as powerful as sound.

In the last three years you've been writing and performing your own work - how is that developing?

I'm very much inspired by the environment I'm in (or not in) so the last few years have been very much focused on a strong desire to return home, and a rejection of the urban lifestyle I found myself living. Grief has also taken a strong hold over my work for some time. Now I've moved back to the countryside, I'm a lot more relaxed and that shines through in my poetry. I'm currently focusing on nostalgic remnants of my childhood and the everyday situations I experience. For the first time now, I'm writing stuff that I don't feel needs constant revision, so that's what's leading me towards putting together a written collection of my newer work, and stuff still to write. I've thought of Fledgling as a working title because that's where I am with my writing at the moment, just starting to spread my wings!

I'm also currently talking to a theatre company and a couple of artists about doing a few collaborative performance projects - all very hush hush at the moment! There will probably be a focus upon memories and nature but I'm not going to say any more for now ...

Who's been the biggest influence on you as regards poetry slam?

Slam-wise, it would have to be John Agard. That man can really perform! I saw him whip up a crowd of about 500 school kids once with his stuff. Wish I could do that!

Who's your favourite poet and why?

I have so many favourite poets but the big three would have to be: John Hegley for his method of delivery and his punk DIY approach to the spoken word, Seamus Heaney for his rich vocabulary and amazing turns of phrase, and the late great John Betjeman for being able to make me laugh and cry at the same time.

How do you balance your work as a teacher with being a poet?

I don't! I wish I could. I'm trying to set aside one night a week for writing but it's hard.

What do your students and fellow teachers think of your "other life"?

Not many of the students know I'm a poet, to be honest. The ones that do know seem to think it's either very strange or very cool. As for the teachers, they all seem to like it.

Any advice for anyone hoping to get into this field?

Go along to a few slams first and see what you're letting yourself in for! Oh, and don't think that cussing will make you edgy or sexy, it doesn't.

Where would you like to go from here, with your poetry?

To infinity and beyond!

Sweet Potato

by Ted Underwood

As I picked you up in the supermarket,
Roughing my sapling palms against your barkish skin
You looked with startled gaze
At this bright maze of tantrums and two-for-ones.
This damp land of flinty, Saxon eyes
Roman noses
Viking mouths.
Like something lost,
Aborted,
Unfinished business
Far from its natural completion.

