



Authorgraph: Joshua Seigal

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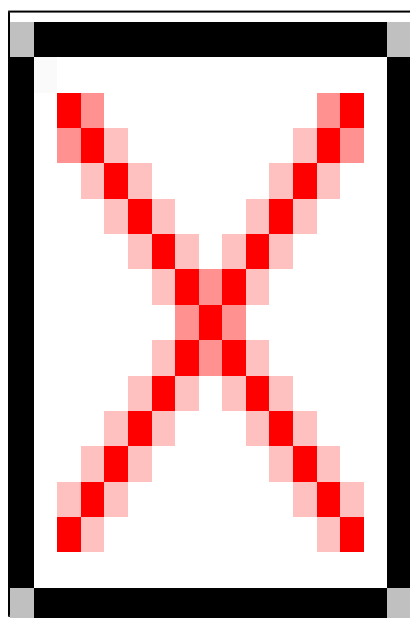
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Joshua Seigal interviewed by **Liz Brownlee**

Joshua Seigal interviewed by fellow children's poet **Liz Brownlee**



As an award-winning children's poet, Joshua Seigal uses poetry to inspire confidence and creativity in schools, so he is an enthusiastic supporter of poetry on the curriculum: 'I think poetry's hugely important for the development of children's literacy - it gives them freedom to explore a whole toolbox of writing techniques and it's instrumental in exploring identity and self-expression, which helps foster confidence in all aspects of communication.'

'I see it being used in numerous ways, and frequently embedded across the curriculum. Children love poetry as it allows them to be creative with language and to explore issues that are relevant to them. In my experience, they also love the humour, the wordplay, and the interaction of performance poetry with a real, live poet. After I've gone, schools will often continue to develop the skills that pupils explore during my sessions. They'll send their edited poems to me to put on my blog, which gives them a real sense of achievement.'

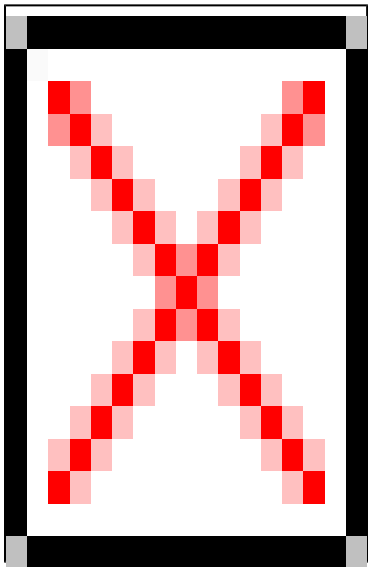
His journey into children's poetry as an educator contains some impressive adventurousness. He says he started writing: 'really quite rubbish teenage poetry' after studying Philip Larkin at A Level. Whilst reading philosophy at UCL, and later whilst doing a postgrad at Oxford, he carried on writing and then performing his poems at the **Poetry Café** in Covent Garden: 'I really got the performance bug, just the feeding off the audience. For a while I was going there every week.'

After graduating, and six months drifting in and out of voluntary jobs, Joshua came back to writing, and performing at

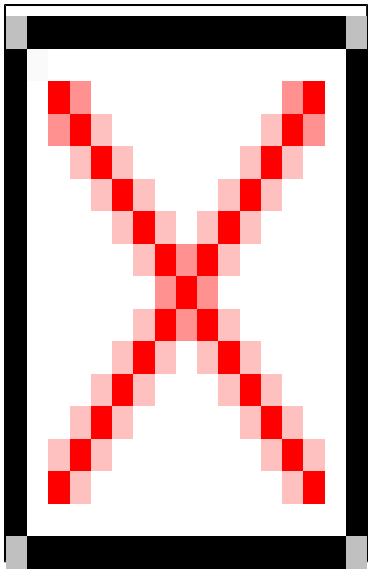
the **Poetry Café** again: 'People were telling me that children would probably really like the kind of stuff I was doing. My sister was a primary school teacher at the time, and she invited me in to come and share some work with her class.' The performance bug bit harder this time: 'maybe somewhat hastily, I decided to take a one-man poetry show to the Edinburgh Fringe in 2012. This was after only about six months of taking poetry seriously at all!'

Back home, Joshua started performing at schools, using his self-published book **My Grandpa's Beard**, before applying to do a pioneering MA on a spoken word educators programme, which was combined with creative writing: 'It was started by an American poet called Peter Kahn, who works with high school students running spoken word poetry workshops. A lot of the schools had students who were very disengaged with the learning process. So he pioneered this programme which aims to kind of engage students through spoken word poetry.'

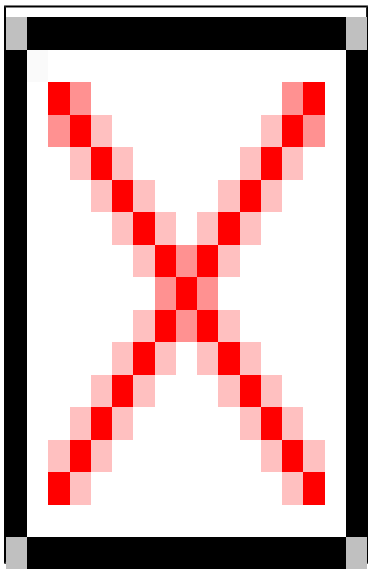
As part of the course he was placed in a secondary school in Newham: 'who decided to keep me on for 3 three years. And then the Funding ran out in 2017, round about the time when my first book with Bloomsbury came out. So I went straight from being a spoken word educator, or at Goldsmiths, to being a published poet with Bloomsbury!'



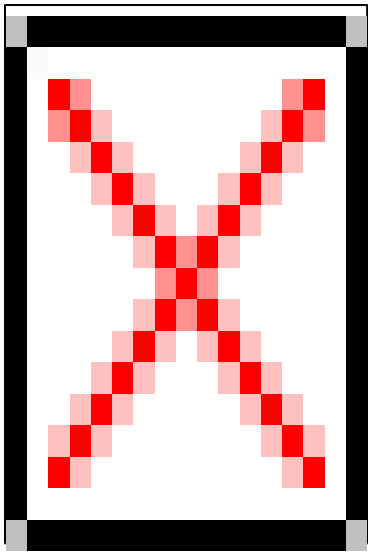
That first book with Bloomsbury was **I don't Like Poetry** - I asked if the book was the result of a perceived antipathy to poetry by some young people: 'Um, yeah, I think so. Part of my aim was that as a primary school kid I had no particular love for poetry. So I wanted to produce a collection of poems for children who might not ordinarily think they like poetry. The advice I give when I run workshops is to try and write about something you personally find interesting and that's really what fuelled that book. And the poem *I Don't Like Poetry* is intended to introduce children to techniques like metaphor, simile, alliteration, onomatopoeia and repetition, in a humorous way, really. I like to think of it as a mini lesson plan in a poem. I don't talk about rhyming. So part of my aim in that particular poem is to introduce children to the fact that there's a whole toolbox of techniques that a poet can use, other than purely rhyming. *I don't Like Poetry* is probably still my favourite book - it contains lots of 'performance pieces' which I use regularly in schools, and also because it contains my favourite poem, which is also '*I Don't Like Poetry*'. And of course many children love it, and even those that initially thought they don't soon come round to liking it.'



Little Lemur Laughing was Joshua's second book for Bloomsbury - all his poetry books are based in laughter, he even edited an anthology called **I Bet I Can Make You Laugh** as his third book with Bloomsbury. I asked Joshua, knowing he has spoken about having OCD, whether humour is his way of helping himself cope, or is it just how his poetry expresses itself: "It started, I think, as a way of helping me cope during my undergraduate degree, and during my first postgraduate degree. I found I put a lot a lot of pressure on myself, academically, to do very well. Basically my sense of identity was my academic performance. And I think I used poetry and comedy as a way of maybe distracting myself or comforting myself, just for fun. I think a lot of my poetry even though it is funny, does come from a place of sadness. I do think having OCD is, is a big hindrance to my writing. It stops me writing rather than makes me write and when I'm anxious, I find it very hard to be creative. So, yeah, I think initially I wrote as a way of escaping my pain, and I tend to write better when I'm in a better place mentally, but often the writing that I produce is informed by being in that bad place. Having OCD does have its upsides, as weird as that sounds. I really obsess over every word, and every comma and every line break and maybe I'm a better writer because of it, I don't know. I think I would swap that for not having it if I'm honest. But humour can be a good way of exploring children's conflicts within the classroom.?"

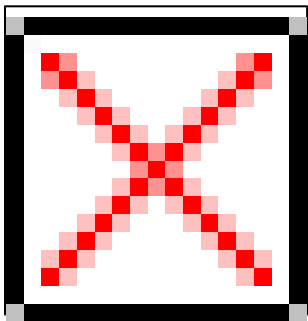


I wondered how Joshua came up with the ideas for his books - inspiration, a desire to write on a subject, a need? "With the exception of **I Bet I Can Make You Laugh**, which I was asked to edit by my editor off the back of my first Lollies nomination in 2017, my books have all been compendiums of different themes. And basically what happens is, I write a poem about bananas. The next week I'll write one about football. Maybe a couple of weeks later, I'll write one about my dad. And then maybe two years down the line, I've got 50 poems, and then there's some decision-making about how to structure them and how to order them. Often this is purely intuitive. In my most recent book, **Welcome To My Crazy Life**, there is no specific theme, but lots of the poems centre around wordplay, and playing with language generally.?"



Yapping Away, due out in March 2021, is another KS1 book, following on from **Little Lemur Laughing**. Joshua writes well for KS1, and I wondered how he gets his head into that place of wonder and ridiculousness. I'd say with that age group - this isn't like a technical thing, but there are the three R's, rhyme, rhythm and repetition, which really appeal to Key Stage one and even younger. And I just naturally have that when I write - I'm in that mindset of rhyme, rhythm and repetition. I'd say it's really challenging to come up with something with artistic merit and not to become too facile. I really try and maintain the quality of the wordplay. Regardless of the age that I'm writing for, that's what I try to do.

Joshua has boundless energy and enthusiasm for using humour, poetry and performance to engage children with learning all across the curriculum. He believes: 'children and poetry are a natural fit.' His future aspirations? 'To continue doing my work, interacting with poets, audiences and pupils both in real-life and online, maybe publishing the odd book, and making a living doing what I love.'



Liz Brownlee is an award-winning poet who has poems in over seventy anthologies, including [Reaching the Stars ? Poems about Extraordinary Women and Girls](#) [3], written with Jan Dean and Michaela Morgan. She is a **National Poetry Day** ambassador and regularly visits schools, bookshops and festivals to perform her poetry and give workshops.

Books mentioned

My Grandpa's Beard, Yabby Books,

I Don't Like Poetry, Bloomsbury, 978-1472930033, £5.99 pbk

Little Lemur Laughing, Bloomsbury, 978-1472930040, £5.99 pbk

I Bet I Can Make You Laugh, Bloomsbury, 978-1472955487, £5.99 pbk

Welcome To My Crazy Life, Bloomsbury, 978-1472972729, £5.99 pbk

Just Like Me, illus Amelie Faliere, Flying Eye, 978-1911171119, £9.99 hbk

Morris Wants More, illus Amelie Faliere, Flying Eye, 978-1911171065, £11.99 hbk

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