Track 2 Getting started (1) (4'14’’)

Narrator
On this track, you will hear poets discussing sources of inspiration and useful methods. Now listen to W.N. Herbert, Paul Muldoon and Jackie Kay.

W.N. Herbert
One of the problems that people set themselves when they are beginning to write is they, they assume that they must be inspired. And inspiration – there’s a kind of grand notion that says it’s like almost divine wind; the great flatulence of god which must pass through people in order for them to put pen to paper at all. But of course, you know, in order to put pen to paper at all you have to actually think of something, and you actually have an interest in the craft of how you’re putting it down. And that is where inspiration comes from; it comes from work on the page.

Paul Muldoon
I think one of the things about poetry that I noticed that those who are thinking about it, perhaps for the first time, are determined to do is to make it mean as much as possible. Whereas in fact, in a strange way, to make it mean as little as possible – I don’t mean by that nonsense, but what I mean by that is to cut down on the range of possible readings. And basically if you look after one, that’s enough to be going on with and if there happened to be one- and-a-half or two – fantastic! Many people try to incorporate three or four or five readings into a poem and end up with none, because nobody knows what’s happening. And that’s one of the reasons why poems are unintelligible is that they mean no single thing. And there’s a theory of course that they should mean all things to all men, which is complete baloney. They should mean one thing, roughly speaking, to one man or woman. That’s enough to be going on with.

Jackie Kay
Well I think, you know both music and the movies are very good for poetry in a funny way, you know, because movies often give you little moments and snapshots and the way that movies can zoom in to something in a close-up is very like a poem. A poem is a kind of a close-up. It’s a close up of a moment in tiny detail often, and then it can pull right back and you can get an entire expanse of land so in a poem you can get a whole panoramic vision in a short poem. So it has that ability that the camera has, poems have, of shifting focus and moving a lot. And music also shares a lot with poetry in terms of its rhythms, whether you’re listening to classical music or folk music or jazz and blues, you’ll still always get a sense of the music’s rhythm, its patterns and the way in which certain, say jazz refrains, work, the way that they return to the same note again and again. And those kind of techniques poets use too.

W.N. Herbert
The crucial thing about a notebook is it’s where everything can begin. If you are working in between times, as I am often, then
you have to get hold of those first little bits of phrases, those first
little bits of ideas, those first colours, those first rhymes that might
start something off. I believe that it’s an essential tool for all
writers. I don’t think that anyone should ever rely on their memory
for creativity. I think if you’re not doing that as a writer then you’re
not doing your five-finger exercises; you’re not practising your
chords; you’re not sketching. And if you’re not doing that then the
next stage is harder to get on to and so people get bigger and
bigger gaps and then they come back to the notion that they have
to be inspired to start at all, and they don’t do the work.

Jackie Kay

The most important thing I tell them to do is to read contemporary
poets in particular but just to read, read, read and read. To me the
point of life is to read, just as much as it is to write. And a lot of
people that write poetry, or that want to write poetry, start off and
they don’t read and you come to them with their poems and their
poems are say, written in sort of very old English syntax and you
say to them, ‘What contemporary poets have you read?’ and they
haven’t read any. So I, I’d say that that was very important. And
to go to readings, to go and hear people read; there’s a huge
amount of literary festivals now all over the place that they could
go and hear live poetry readings, because hearing a poet read
their own work gives you a key in a way into their work.

Track 3 Getting started (2) (2’51”)

Narrator

You will now hear Jackie Kay, Paul Muldoon and Jean ‘Binta’ Breeze
talk about the use of autobiography as well as other people’s
voices as subject matter for poetry.

Jackie Kay

I often use my own life in my poetry, in the way that artists might
paint pictures of themselves. It doesn’t necessarily mean that you
are actually writing about yourself in an obvious way, in the way
that an artist isn’t necessarily painting themselves when they
paint. You can actually change your history, change your past,
change your memories and alter it, but I like to use it a bit like a
springboard to dive into the pool of my imagination; I use my own
life like that.

Paul Muldoon

Oh, I think the fact that I’m from Northern Ireland has been a
huge element in these poems. Of course, because never mind
whether or not one might be writing poems simply to – as a citizen
there – try to make sense of what’s going on, is a responsibility
and I think it’s a situation in which we’ve all tried to make sense of
things in so far as we’re able. So that is a feature of many of these
poems. But mind you, that’s a feature of life in every part of the
world. I mean there’s too often, I think, a feeling that, you know, if
one lives in England somehow everything is settled and there’s no
discussion; everything is cut and dried; everything has a sheen. Or
if one lives in the US, everything’s kind of over in some ways. Well
these ideas are blatantly false.