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.
Jean ‘Binta’ Breeze

I think there is a private voice. I write many poems that I have published in my books which I never do on stage. The only time I do them is if I find myself in a very intimate setting with, you know, a few people and you can kind of talk and sit in a chair and say, ‘Hey, I was thinking about my daughter when I wrote this one.’ But there is a stage at which you need to kind of harness other voices beyond yourself.

Jackie Kay

Well, ever since I was a wee girl, I used to go to Burns’ suppers where there’d be all these really quite exciting addresses to the haggis. And it would be … Poetry to me was initially something very dramatic, you know. The haggis would be stabbed with a knife, and the whole idea of having a poem to a haggis anyway is hilarious when you think about it for any length of time. And so I like that – the drama in poetry from going to Burns’ suppers, and I like the idea that you could find that, that poems could be voices really, real voices that could just come out at you from the dark. So I like to try in my own poems and create some sense of drama; that’s very important. And I am, I suppose, a frustrated actress, I used to always want to be an actress so, and the next best thing to acting is writing the parts, creating the voices.

Track 4 Rhyme (1’38”)

Narrator

Jackie Kay and Paul Muldoon.

Jackie Kay

I don’t necessarily use rhyme in a completely formal way, so I like using rhymes out of the way that ordinary people speak. I like using repetitions and rhymes from their speech patterns. I’m very influenced by the way that people talk. I’ve always loved listening to how people talk and listening to them say things like, my mum will say to me, ‘I’m not hungry, hungry but I’m hungry,’ and I’m supposed to know exactly what she means [laughs]! So I love that, those kind of almost, kind of nonsense that people speak and we all know exactly what it means, and I like to try and capture that so … But I think that if you rhyme in such a way that you’re struggling to make something rhyme just for the rhyme’s sake, then it’s a bit like you wagging the tail of the dog rather than the dog wagging its own tail. So I only have poems rhyming when I feel that the voice of that poem needs to, when there’s a natural facility within the poem for the rhyme.

Paul Muldoon

One of the things I would say about it of course is that imposition is not part of the deal either in terms of the formal stanzaic patterns or in terms of what’s happening within the line. There is a tendency for the language first of all to fall into that iambic pattern – that’s the way the English language is built, there is that tendency – and also for words to find chimes and rhymes; that’s intrinsic to the language rather than something that’s imposed upon it. So one’s simply availing oneself of what’s there.