



AN INTERVIEW WITH CLiPPA WINNER JOSEPH COELHO

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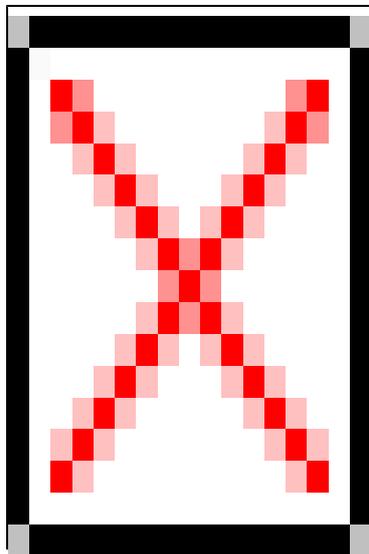
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Ferelith Hordon speaks to poet **Joseph Coelho**.

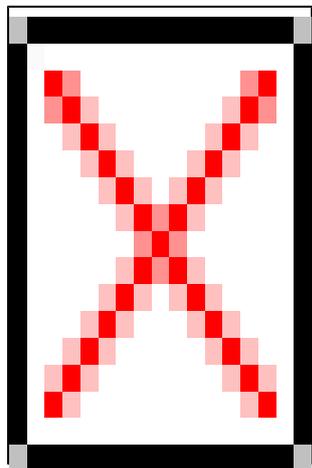


Earlier this summer, the winner of the **CLiPPA** was announced, the [CLPE Poetry Award](#)

[3]. The judges chose [Werewolf Club Rules](#) [4] by Joseph Coelho, describing it as 'a wonderful mixture of lyrical verse, personal experience, humour and insight', adding, '(Joseph's) delight in language, ability to tell everyday stories and use of comedy and pathos are what made this book our winner.' **Ferelith Hordon** interviewed Joe for **Books for Keeps**.

When did you discover poetry? This was the first question that I put to Joe Coelho, winner of the [CLiPPA Poetry Award 2015](#) [5], when I met him. I was all ready for the stock answer; that he had been writing poems in Infant School or had loved reading or listening to poems when very small. Far from it. Joe came to poetry quite late. 'My first memories? I remember writing a poem for a competition at school in Year 8 ... I wrote a poem about a performing bear called Unbearable', he told me. Then later in Sixth Form, a visit by a performance poet opened his eyes to the realisation that poetry could be performed and could be a career, while GCSE English had introduced him to the work of Sylvia Plath. However, his real interest lay with the theatre. 'I loved drama classes' but even as an adult working in amateur dramatics on a public stage, he never felt he could be an actor; it was a hobby. It was only at university where he studied Archaeology, but kept his interest in drama that he became aware that it could be more. After graduating he found himself directing and producing. Slowly he started performing poetry and it snowballed from there.

Had he been aware of other poets at school? He had known and enjoyed Michael Rosen, of course, but what about



the canon of classical poets? Did he find himself exploring others? ?I tend not to read too much poetry. ...But I get scared of it influencing my own poetry too much?. Instead he has learnt by watching and listening to contemporary poetry being performed. Did he think, therefore, that poetry should always be spoken? Not at all, some poems work best on the stage, others on the page. Indeed, this was something he came to realise very clearly in creating his collection **Werewolf Club Rules**; he has a back catalogue of poems that have not been included because ?I didn't feel they translated purely on the page?. However, though he may not have been introduced to the poets of the past as a child, he feels that young people should not miss out and should be familiar with this rich heritage. This used to be done through learning by heart and the canon would have been quite prescriptive. Not an entirely bad thing, in his view. It is good for children to be challenged and to be introduced to a great, possibly difficult, poem but they should also be encouraged to make their own discoveries.

The problem seems to lie in the way poetry is handled in the classroom ?I find a lot of teachers are terrified by poetry? but visiting schools he finds great enthusiasm from teachers for the creative possibilities of using poetry. He wondered if the anxiety came from their own experience of poetry and the belief that poetry involves esoteric rules. Is he conscious of these rules? ?I see them as tools we can use; as part of the craft?. He says he loves the discipline of applying a form to an idea or an emotion but he can understand that for many this is something to fear. Children do not have this fear and can embrace the challenge. However, he is very clear that poetry is not just about the form; it should be a healthy mix. He himself is self-taught. He used to run an informal group that each week would explore a form. His present interest is in the sestina, but he has still to work out how to use this with a younger audience.

What inspires him? Memory is the starting point - an emotional link - he tries to anchor everything in an experience, building other associations on these, expanding out, layering language and form. There is a perception that poetry for children has to be funny, possibly rather rude and short which is a concern. ?You have to wonder at the state of poetry today ...children enjoy being challenged they love the play of words?. Too many difficult words may be a barrier, but to include interesting or unfamiliar words is important and children will take them in their stride. Funny poems have their place, but children deserve more.

Talking to Joe, I realise how much work is involved in writing poetry. A poem seems to arrive fully formed but this is deceptive. ?Poetry involves craft to create something that is of worth to others?. Writing a poem, clearly, is as intensive as writing a novel - and as interesting: ?With a poem you are forced to consider each word?. Joe himself writes the whole time, creating spider charts of words and association. Though his collection is aimed at a younger audience, he has written for adults and sees it as a rather false distinction; it is a matter of sensibility and packaging rather than content, ?I hope to write good poems...that connect with people ...that connect with children as well as adults.?

Much of his work is spent in bringing poetry to the classroom. Indeed, the title **Werewolf Club Rules** was chosen by pupils themselves. If he had a say in education policy, what would be his wish? ?It would be great in every subject area or topic there had to be a poem?. With practitioners like Joe, this might even happen.

[Werewolf Club Rules](#) [4] is published by Frances Lincoln, £6.99pbk.

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