

English student wins poetry slam

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BA English with Creative Writing (</undergraduate/courses/english/english-creative.aspx>) student, Ben Norris, won the UK All-Stars Poetry Slam at the Cheltenham Literary Festival.

This is his account:

"The UK All-Stars Poetry Slam is run by prominent spoken-word promoters Spiel Unlimited, who run a series of smaller regional slams throughout the year, culminating in this one. The national finals. The winners of each of these regional slams are invited straight into the evening final, and a few places are reserved for the 6 highest scoring poets in an all-comers qualifying round held in the afternoon. I had won the Ledbury Poetry Festival Slam in July, and so booked an automatic spot in the final.

It's worth saying at this point that poetry is a bit like boxing. Not in the sense that we punch each other's lights out, or that amateurs wear helmets, but in the sense that there are no single national finals, and thus there is no single national champion. This is not the slam from which England's representative at the world championships is selected. This is not the slam with the most prize money (or, indeed, any prize money!). But it does have UK in the title - one of the few - and it does actually feature poets from all over the UK - one of the few - so I feel, despite these necessary contextual disclaimers, that in winning I still have something to be proud of.

I used to care too much about slams. I still care - of course I care; I'm writing this! - but I used to take them very seriously. And, inevitably, taking anything as subjective, unpredictable and fickle as a poetry slam this seriously always leads to disappointment, frustration, bitterness, and violent resentment. Such was the case exactly a year ago, when, having qualified that afternoon, I was dumped out of the 2012 UK All-Stars Poetry Slam Final in the first round, despite performing what I then considered my best poem. I'd never won an individual slam at this point, and I didn't compete in another one from October last year to February this year, so consuming was my disillusionment. When I finally did return to slam, it was with a very necessary lightness of heart, which I've luckily managed to retain. I now travel to slams aiming to enjoy the one poem I know I'll definitely get to perform, treating anything more than this as bonus. Ironically - or perhaps understandably - I have since done considerably better in almost every slam I've taken part in. This is somewhat down to being a better poet and performer than I was, but also has an enormous amount to do with not caring (too much).

Remembering how miserable I'd felt last year meant that I was especially keen this year not to over-think which poems I'd perform in which round. In my heat, I was drawn against friend and Birmingham alumnus James Bunting, and nearly - nearly - changed my mind about which poem to do, but stuck with my original choice (a fairly new one called 'Hypothetically Speaking') and won the heat with what turned out to be the highest score of the first round. Instinct does matter in these instances. During the interval a friend and fellow poet (who had sadly been knocked out of the competition in her heat) asked what poems I planned on performing in the semis and final, should I make it. I told her, and she urged me to change my mind, citing the judges' scoring tendencies thus far as reasoning. 12 months earlier I would have nodded solemnly and hurriedly retreated to a cupboard somewhere to sketch tables and graphs and tactics like a neurotic war strategist. But this year I just smiled and politely disagreed, saying 'I think the audience will enjoy 'x' and 'y', so I'm going to do 'x' and 'y'.'

And they did. I progressed through the semis with a poem I've been performing since the end of 2012, and then won the final with 'Gravity', a piece I wrote this year especially for the 2013 University of Birmingham Guild Awards. Winning was great, and came as something of a pleasant surprise given the non-existent expectations I'd had going into the competition. Kudos must also go to the runners-up, James Bunting and first-time slammer Luke Thomas.

I now treat poetry slams as a chance to catch up with friends, and hear new and old work from a variety of poets. The fact that I got all this, and left with a pile of books and a bottle of wine (if not a massive cheque courtesy of The Times, the festival's title sponsor!), as well as the coveted title of 2013 UK All-Stars Poetry Slam champion, made for a lovely evening."

Here (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gEMQCJ6_FMI) you can enjoy 'Gravity' performed by Ben Norris at the 2013 Roundhouse Poetry Slam.

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