

# Initiatives

## Poetry in America: Key Findings

### Introduction

The Poetry Foundation commissioned the National Opinion Research Center (NORC) at the University of Chicago to conduct a large-scale, national research study on the state of poetry in America. This groundbreaking study replaces the usual anecdotal information about poetry with factual information about Americans' attitudes toward and experiences with poetry. This research will enable the Foundation, and other literary and cultural institutions, to better understand the factors that bring poetry enthusiasts to their appreciation of poetry as well as those that may dissuade people from engaging with the art form.

### Why Poetry?

Poetry is one of the art forms that defines our culture. It improves the quality of life both for those who create it and for those who appreciate it, educating and invigorating the citizenry, and enhancing people's lives by providing them with deeply meaningful experiences. The extent to which poetry achieves these goals is neither well understood nor easy to quantify. *Poetry in America* is the first national study that asks specific questions about both the personal and social benefits associated with reading or listening to poetry. Data from this study provide one of the first views of poetry's unique and shared contributions to the public good.

### Project Goals

The *Poetry in America* study was conducted and designed by NORC to answer the following questions:

- 1) Who reads poetry?
- 2) Why do some people read and listen to poetry throughout their lifetimes?
- 3) How do people perceive poetry, poets, and poetry readers?
- 4) What prevents people without a strong interest in poetry from reading or listening to it?
- 5) What steps might be taken to broaden the audience for poetry in the United States

### Methodology

The survey used a random-digit-dial sample of telephone numbers from across the country. Adults who read for pleasure and who read primarily in English were eligible for the study.

### Key Findings

- 64 percent of adult readers think that people should read more poetry.
- Poetry is appreciated by a broad and demographically diverse portion of society; individuals from all walks of life and education levels read and enjoy poetry.
- Poetry readers tend to be sociable and lead active lives. They listen to music, read a variety of genres, use the Internet, attend cultural events, volunteer, and socialize with friends and family at significantly higher rates than do non-poetry readers.

- Most poetry readers (80 percent) first encounter poetry as children, at home or in school. 77 percent of all readers were read nursery rhymes as children; 45 percent of current poetry readers also had other forms of poetry read to them as children.
- Poetry readers believe that poetry provides insights into the world around them, keeps the mind sharp, helps them understand themselves and others, and provides comfort and solace.
- Readers turn to a variety of sources to find poetry: single-author books (77 percent), anthologies (58 percent), television (48 percent), radio (41 percent), the Internet (36 percent), poetry readings (29 percent), poetry magazines (20 percent), reviews/commentaries about poetry (19 percent), poetry slams (12 percent).
- When people encounter poetry in unexpected places such as newspapers, general-interest magazines, and public events, even non-poetry readers read or listen to it: 99 percent of all adult readers indicated that they have incidentally encountered poetry, and 81 percent reported that they read or listened to the poem when they encountered it.
- Approximately two-thirds of the respondents thought that both poets and poetry readers are people who are generally respected; 70 percent would like to meet poets, and 66 percent would like to meet poetry readers.
- Among the most frequently cited reasons that people don't read poetry are lack of time, loss of interest, lack of access, and the perception that poetry is difficult and irrelevant.
- Former poetry readers, while crediting poetry with many of the same rewards as do current readers, do so at much lower rates and are more apt to say that they personally received no benefits from reading poetry. Of those former readers who did find poetry rewarding, most championed poetry for its entertainment value and were less inclined to note intellectual or psychological benefits.
- While more than 80 percent of former poetry readers find poetry difficult to understand, only 2 percent of respondents don't read poetry because they feel it is "too hard."
- More than half of all current poetry readers read or listen to contemporary poetry, that is poetry written since 1945. About one-third restrict their involvement to contemporary poetry, and about one-quarter read or listen to both contemporary poetry and the classics.