

REVIVING POETRY

HOW REALITY TV CAN TEACH OUR
STUDENTS ABOUT YEATS AND BYRON
BY CHRISTOPHER CUNNINGHAM



The Tribe has Spoken
*Scott Cameron announces
which BYU-Idaho's Last Poet
Standing contestant is kicked
out of the competition*

WHEN HE ASKED HIGH school teachers about poetry in the classroom, Peter Benton, education researcher, and frequent contributor to the Oxford Review of Education was told, “Students come in with a built in hatred of poetry,” “When you bring up poetry the students groan, especially the boys,” and “Teaching poetry is an uphill battle. No one wants to do it.” Perhaps the easiest solution would be to throw poetry out. After all the United States needs more scientists and engineers, and no one is going to cure cancer or build the Hoover Dam because they mastered Yeats in tenth grade.

‘Students come in with a built in hatred of poetry.’

—ANONYMOUS TEACHER, FROM PETER BENTON’S ENGLISH EDUCATION SURVEY

Those same teachers, though, go on to say, “Poetry helps students develop skills in handling language,” and it is “an essential part of teaching students how to use the building blocks of language.” It should come as no surprise that the decline of interest in poetry has coincided with the decline of writing skills in general. Those future professionals will need to learn writing skills in some way, and according to the teachers at the front line, teaching them poetry may be the way to do it.

How, then, can interest in poetry be revitalized? Brigham Young University-Idaho, may have discovered a way to do just that. In the winter of 2011, Christopher Cunningham with the help of the university’s English department sent out an open call for poetry of any kind, and dangled a Kindle as the prize for an eventual winner. The department was swamped with over seventy applications. Those poets wrote a new poem each week based on a prompt, and were whittled down by the votes from a panel of faculty and audience votes each week, until only one remained, the poet given the title of “Last Poet Standing”—the name of the competition.



All Ears

More than two-hundred students watch Last Poet Standing

The results were more than anyone could have anticipated. Mike Hodges, a student at the time, who had previously organized poetry slams on campus explained, “In the past I was excited to get ten to fifteen...In terms of marketing the organizers need to keep doing what they’re doing.” The competition, which has now completed its second season, had an average audience of one hundred

fifty students during its first season and peaked at over four hundred students during its second season.

But the attendance is only part of the Last Poet Standing’s success. If a visitor had walked into the Brigham Young University Idaho commons March 22, 2011, she or he would have seen a stage set up with throngs of students around it in every direction, posters cheering on

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one name or another speckling the room, and t-shirts sporting stylized faces and proclaiming the wearer as “team Garrett” or “team Skyler” abounding. As one by one the subjects of adoration came to the stage, they were followed by chants and girlish cries. Last Poet Standing had created a pop band frenzy surrounding poets.

‘The organizers need to keep doing what they’re doing’

—MIKE HODGES, DESCRIBING LAST POET STANDING ATTENDANCE

IF THIS ALL SOUNDS A LITTLE like American Idol for English Majors, that is by design. While reality shows may have seemed like a lowbrow cultural passé of the early aughts, they have turned into a cultural staple with which many present day high school and college students have grown up. In fact with reality show competitions such as *Project Runway*, *Dancing with*



For Your Consideration
*Aaron Allsop performs during
 Last Poet Standing*

the Stars, and *Top Chef*, reality shows have become an accessible entrance point into otherwise intimidating cultural pursuits, a category to which poetry certainly belongs. This easy entrance point allowed poetry to be accessible to those who may have only been looking to stick their toe in the poetry waters.

Remember, before Netflix and Hulu, how a TV show could get your office buzzing the next day. Because no one could Google Last Poet Standing, each week became a must see event. Professor Steve Stewart noticed during the first season that whenever he would “walk in to start a class, someone was always talking about who had been eliminated at Last Poet...and arguing over who should have been eliminated.” By turning

abstract conversations about poetry, into a single easily identifiable decision, who was eliminated, Last Poet Standing allowed everyone to contribute something to the conversation. The popularity of these arguments, in turn, created an

‘When I would walk in to start class someone was always talking about who had been eliminated at Last Poet’

—PROFESSOR STEVE STEWART

incentive for others to attend so that they would not be left out of the loop.

The events biggest cheerleaders were always the poets themselves. While the effect of the judge’s, and the decision to ask audience members to vote for their least favorite poet, helped to mitigate the effect popularity would ever have on advancing poets, the contestants still wanted to invite as many people as possible in the hope they could sway the results. Their fans in turn, began to feed this excitement through the posters and T-shirts that began to sprout up. By giving students the power to affect who would win the coveted Kindle, which often stood propped on the stage, Last Poet Standing empowered them.

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ONE COULD BE FORGIVEN for being a little incredulous that cheering for your friends on stage is teaching anyone poetry. The competition, however, was designed to do just that. The weekly event was built around the audience needing to make a voting decision at the end. Rather than allow a simple vote for your favorite system, Last Poet Standing required the audience to choose their least favorite poet, by a hidden ballot. By not allowing the audience settle into a choice, they had to engage in an entire evening of critical thinking.

Putting the audience in the judge’s seat led to comments such as “the rhyme in that poem didn’t really add to the poem at all,” from a mechanical engineering major, or “I really liked how they used the word jagged it sounded so dirty, but then they said ‘blood curdling’ which I’ve heard a million times.” Many teachers would love to have their students make those kind of analytical comments on poetry in class; Last Poet Standing convinced students to make them during their free time.

The limited role of the faculty judges aided in this education by providing the audience with the vocabulary and analytical tools they needed to make their own decisions about the work. Just as I can no longer go to a junior high choir concert without hearing someone channel their inner Randy Jackson and call the concert “a little pitchy,” audience members at Last Poet Standing would look for the same literary devices and techniques that judges would mention in their own critiques of the poems. The results paid off in class. Professor Josh Allen, who was teaching a survey course the same semester as the first season, said that over the course of the semester “the students who were participating in or regularly attending Last Poet were becoming stronger and more confident critics of our in class readings.”

Could BYU-Idaho, have really discovered a model to get students excited about poetry? Perhaps the most pragmatic answer is that every little bit helps, but the next time we have an educational crisis in America, perhaps we need to look no further than Jeff Probst. ■

Poetry Competition in History



Since humankind has competed against one another, we have attempted to reward the greatest art, below is a sampling of history’s attempts at poetry competitions.

LAUREL CROWNS — 776 BCE

Though the details are largely unknown, poetry was one of the early Olympic competitions, awarding the winner a laurel crown.



ROYAL FAVOR — 1643 CE

Louis XIV was interested in many arts, including poetry and often rewarded those he most enjoyed with money, favor and prestige.

1984 CE — SLAM!

Marc Smith created the poetry slam, a judged competition. Poetry Slams are now held all over the United States and the national competition attracts nearly eighty teams.

