

John Agard Receives Queen's Gold Medal for Poetry

Alumnus (1960 – 1967) and poet John Agard was awarded the Queen's Gold Medal for Poetry in 2012. The medal was actually presented to Agard by the Queen earlier this year on 12 March, 2013.

The award was based on Agard's most recently published works, *Alternative Anthem: Selected Poems* (Bloodaxe Books, 2009) and his collection of poems for children, *Goldilocks on CCTV* (Frances Lincoln, 2011). Carol Ann Duffy said of the decision: "John Agard has always made people sit up and listen. He has done this with intelligence, humour and generosity. He has the ability to temper anger with wit, and difficult truths with kindness. He levels the ground beneath all our feet, whether he is presenting Dante to children or introducing his own (Guyanese) culture to someone who hasn't encountered it before."

Both the Queen and Agard looked tickled, and they shared a laugh as she presented him with the honour at Buckingham Palace. Her Majesty saw the funny side as, while one side of the medal bears the crowned effigy of the Queen, the other side has an image of a naked woman. This side was designed by late French illustrator Edmund Dulac and, according to the official explanation, shows "Truth emerging from her well and, holding in her right hand, the divine flame of inspiration - Beauty is truth and Truth Beauty". If laughter really is the best medicine, this moment of mirth was aptly timed for the Queen, who had been suffering from a debilitating bout of gastroenteritis and was forced to cancel the rest of her public engagements for the next week.



Poet John Agard is selected for Queen's poetry medal

Biography

Just as Trinidadian Slinger Francisco aka [Mighty Sparrow](#) (born July 9, 1935), whose career as a singer started at Newtown Boys Catholic School, then blossomed into a calypso singer, songwriter, and guitarist of world renown, our own [John Agard](#) (born June 21, 1949) started his career in a Catholic school (Saints) and used Poetry to portray the Caribbean Culture, thereby earning worldwide fame.

Playwright, poet, short-story and children's writer John Agard was born on 21 June 1949 in British Guiana (now Guyana). Growing up in Georgetown, Agard loved to listen to cricket commentary on the radio and began making up his own, which led to a love of language. At Saints, he went on to study English, French, and Latin at 'A' level, writing his first poetry when he was in the Sixth Form. Leaving school in 1967, he taught the languages he had studied and worked in the local library.

He also worked for the *Guyana Sunday Chronicle* newspaper as sub-editor and feature writer publishing two books whilst still in Guyana, before moving to England in 1977, where he became a touring lecturer for the Commonwealth Institute, travelling to schools throughout the UK to promote a better understanding of Caribbean culture.

In 1993 he was appointed Writer in Residence at the South Bank Centre, London, and became Poet in Residence at the BBC in London, an appointment created as part of a scheme run by the Poetry Society in London. He also played a key role in the 'Windrush' season of programmes in 1998.

He won the Paul Hamlyn Award for Poetry in 1997 and has travelled extensively throughout the world performing his poetry. His published poetry includes *Man to Pan* (1982), winner of the Casa de las Américas Prize, *Limbo Dancer in Dark Glasses* (1983), *Mangoes and Bullets: Selected and New Poems 1972-84* (1985) and *Weblines* (2000). He is also the author of many children's books, including *Lend Me Your Wings* (1987), shortlisted for the Nestlé Smarties Book Prize, and *Hello New!: New Poems for a New Century* (2000), named by the Poetry Society as a Children's Poetry Bookshelf Best Anthology.

He has contributed to, and edited, several anthologies, including *The Penguin Book of Caribbean Verse* (1986), and is also co-editor of *A Caribbean Dozen* (1994) with his partner, the poet Grace Nichols, with whom he also co-wrote *No Hickory, No Dickory, No Dock* in 1991. Their latest collaboration is *Tiger Dead! Tiger Dead! Stories from the Caribbean* (2008).

John Agard lives in south-east England. His poetry collection *We Brits* (2006), was shortlisted for the 2007 British Book Awards Decibel Writer of the Year award, and *The Young Inferno* (2008), a poetic reworking of Dante's *Inferno* for young people, won the 2009 CLPE Poetry Award. His latest poetry collection is *Clever Backbone* (2009). A further Selected Poems, *Alternative Anthem*, was also published in 2009.

Critical Perspective

Explain yusef /
wha yu mean /
when yu say half-caste /
yu mean when picasso /
mix red an green /
is a half-caste canvas'?

So questions the narrator of John Agard's well-known poem 'Half-caste', a wry, imaginative and darkly comic take on racial misconceptions and divisions.

References

[Poet John Agard awarded Queen's poetry medal BBC News-December 20,2012](#)

[John Agard, Biography](#)