

# Benjamin Zephaniah

Benjamin Obadiah Iqbal Zephaniah is a British poet, writer and performer. He has written, published and performed many poems, children's books and plays. His first book of poetry for children, 'Talking Turkeys', was so popular that it sold out within six weeks and had to be reprinted.

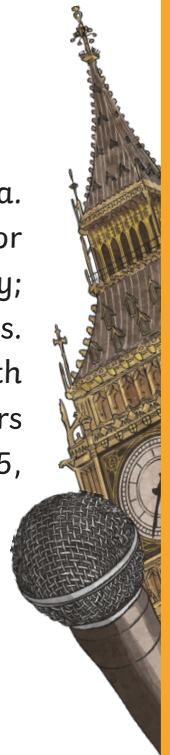
## Early Life

Benjamin Zephaniah was born in the Handsworth district of Birmingham, England, on 15<sup>th</sup> April 1958. His father was a postal worker who was originally from Barbados and his mother was a nurse who was originally from Jamaica. When he was young, Benjamin found it difficult to read and write and left school when he was just 13 years old. Inspired by Jamaica and what he has nicknamed 'street politics', Benjamin began creating poetry.



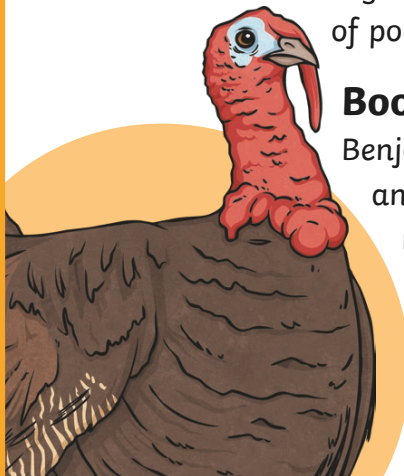
## Moving to London

Benjamin strongly opposes the idea that poetry is only for people in academia. He believes that poetry should be for everyone, regardless of their age, race or ability to read and write. Therefore, Benjamin began performing dub poetry; a form of performance poetry which originated in Jamaica in the 1970s. Dub poetry often requires no musical instruments but the poet reads with rhythm and intonation which results in a musical performance. At 10 years old, Benjamin gave his first performance in a church. By the time he was 15, he was well known in Handsworth for his poetry. Wanting to increase the number of people that his poetry reached, Benjamin moved to London at the age of 22. It was here that he published his first book of poetry, 'Pen Rhythms'.



## Books and Poetry

Benjamin has published a large number of poems, books and plays for both adults and children. Initially, he was reluctant to publish a poetry book aimed just at children on the basis that he believes that poetry shouldn't be given an age limit. In addition to writing poetry, Benjamin published his first novel aimed at teenagers in 1999; it was called 'Face'.



## Causes

When creating poetry, Benjamin gains inspiration from a number of different causes that he has strong beliefs about. In the early 1980s, he composed poetry which discussed issues that he saw in Britain at the time, including a rise in homelessness and unemployment. During this time, his poetry could be heard at demonstrations, outside police stations and at youth gatherings. To this day, Benjamin still supports a number of groups which advocate for the rights of both humans and animals. It is this work which influences the poetry that he continues to write.



## Achievements

Alongside publishing a number of books, poems, albums and plays, Benjamin has won a multitude of prestigious awards. In 2009, he came third in a poll to find the nation's favourite poet. Interestingly, he was the only living poet to make it into the top ten. An astounding 16 universities have recognised his work by awarding him with an honorary doctorate. This means that he is a doctor of letters, literature and arts and he can use a title before his name, making him Dr Benjamin Zephaniah. It is not only Benjamin's poetry that has led to his success; in 2008, he received an award for creating the best original song.

Benjamin is still writing poetry and composing music to this day. Although he still travels to places such as South America and Africa, he now spends most of his time at his home in Beijing, China. Many young writers and singers attribute their passion for writing to Benjamin and his ability to write music and poetry that everyone can relate to.



# Questions

1. Why did Benjamin Zephaniah move to London?

- ☐ he didn't like Birmingham
- ☐ to publish his first book.
- ☐ so that more people could hear his poetry
- ☐ to get inspiration for more poems

2. **Many young writers and singers attribute their passion for writing to Benjamin...**

Tick the one word which is closest in meaning to the word attribute.

- ☐ credit
- ☐ get
- ☐ copy
- ☐ blame

3. How does dub poetry manage to sound musical without using any musical instruments?

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4. Look at the section called **Achievements**.

Find and copy one word which means 'highly regarded'.

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5. What happened to 'Talking Turkeys' after six weeks?

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6. Argue that moving to London was essential for Benjamin's success.

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7. **Inspired by Jamaica and what he has nicknamed 'street politics'...**

What do you think Benjamin means by the term 'street politics'? Explain your answer.

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8. Benjamin believed that poetry shouldn't be given an age limit. Do you agree? Tick one.

☐

yes

☐

no

Fully explain your answer.

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9. What factors do you think have made Benjamin's poetry so popular? Explain your answer.

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10. Explain why Benjamin started to perform dub poetry.

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