

# Benjamin Zephaniah

Benjamin Obadiah Iqbal Zephaniah is a British poet, writer and performer. He has written and performed many books and poems for both children and adults. His first book of poetry for children, 'Talking Turkeys', was so popular that it sold out in only six weeks!

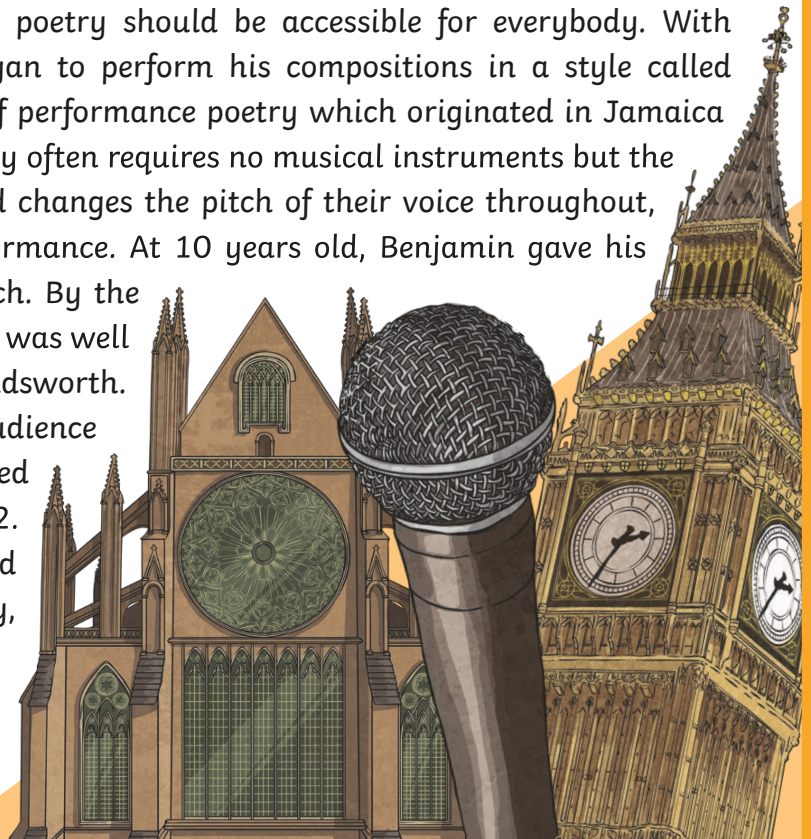
## Early Life

Benjamin Zephaniah was born on the 15<sup>th</sup> April 1958 in the Handsworth district of Birmingham. His father was a postal worker who was originally from Barbados and his mother was a nurse who was originally from Jamaica. Benjamin found it difficult to read and write when he was young and left school at the age of 13. Around this time, he started writing and performing his own poetry which was based on current events in both Jamaica and his home town of Birmingham.



## Moving to London

Benjamin strongly opposes the idea that poetry is only for people in school and university. He believes that poetry should be accessible for everybody. With this in mind, Benjamin began to perform his compositions in a style called dub poetry. This is a form of performance poetry which originated in Jamaica during the 1970s. Dub poetry often requires no musical instruments but the poet reads with rhythm and changes the pitch of their voice throughout, resulting in a musical performance. At 10 years old, Benjamin gave his first performance in a church. By the time he was 15 years old, he was well known for his poetry in Handsworth. Wanting to find a larger audience for his poetry, Benjamin moved to London at the age of 22. This was where he published his first book of poetry, 'Pen Rhythms'.





## Books and Poetry

Benjamin has written a variety of books, poems and plays for different audiences. To begin with, he was reluctant to publish a poetry book aimed just at children as he believed that poetry shouldn't be given an age limit. In 1999, Benjamin published his first novel aimed at teenagers which was called 'Face'.

## Causes

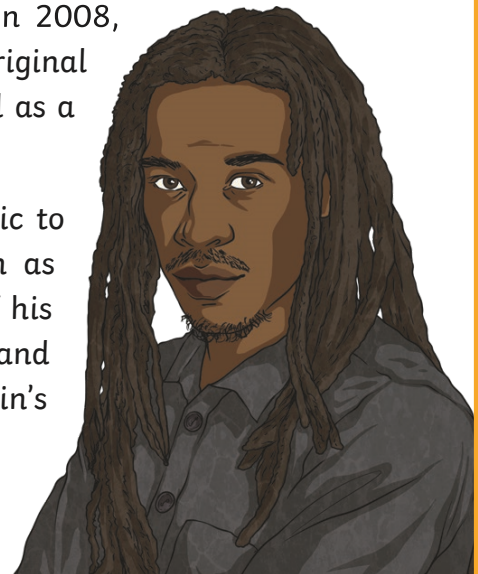
When creating poetry, Benjamin writes about causes that he has strong beliefs about. In the early 1980s, he created poetry which protested the issues that he saw in Britain. During this time, his poetry could be heard at demonstrations and outside police stations. To this day, Benjamin still supports a number of groups which fight for the rights of both humans and animals. These groups still influence the poetry that he writes.



## Achievements

Alongside publishing a number of books, poems, albums and plays, Benjamin has won a variety of awards. In 2009, Benjamin 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. Since he began writing, 16 universities have awarded Benjamin 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. In 2008, Benjamin won an award for creating the best original song, highlighting his talent as a musician as well as a poet.

Benjamin is still writing poetry and creating 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 China. Many young writers and singers say that they have been inspired by Benjamin's ability to write pieces that everyone can enjoy.



# Questions

1. Where was Benjamin living when his first book of poetry was published? Tick one.

- ☐ South America
- ☐ Birmingham
- ☐ London
- ☐ China

2. Draw four lines to match each event with the year that it happened in.

Benjamin published his first novel  
for teenagers.

1958

Benjamin won an award for the best  
original song.

1999

Benjamin was born in Handsworth.

2008

Benjamin was listed in the top ten of  
the nation's favourite poets.

2009

3. Look at the section called **Moving to London**.

Find and copy one word which means the same as 'against'.

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4. Who does Benjamin believe that poetry should be for?

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5. Name one place that you could have gone to in the early 1980s if you had wanted to hear Benjamin's poetry.

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6. How do you think that Benjamin's life might have changed had he not moved to London? Explain your answer.

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7. What impression of Benjamin does this text give you? Explain your answer.

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8. Do you think that Benjamin enjoys writing poetry? Explain your answer.

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9. After reading this text, what part of Benjamin's life would you like to discover more about? Explain your answer.

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