

## "A joyful thing": The man who wrote his wife a poem every day for 25 years

### Level 3 • Advanced

#### 1 Warmer

Put these types of writing in order from 1 (the one you like to read most) to 6 (the one you like to read least).

- |          |                    |
|----------|--------------------|
| 1. _____ | a. romantic novels |
| 2. _____ | b. poetry          |
| 3. _____ | c. fantasy novels  |
| 4. _____ | d. thrillers       |
| 5. _____ | e. biographies     |
| 6. _____ | f. travel writing  |

#### 2 Key words

Complete the sentences using these key words from the text.

flattered  
ponder on

devastating  
collate

charmed  
grieving

exercised  
thrilled

shed  
pip

1. If you are \_\_\_\_\_ by something, it gives you a feeling of pleasure and enjoyment.
2. If you are \_\_\_\_\_, you feel pleased that someone notices and admires you.
3. A \_\_\_\_\_ is a small building, usually made of wood, in which people store things.
4. If you are \_\_\_\_\_ by something, you feel worried about it.
5. If you \_\_\_\_\_ information, you collect it and then arrange it in a sensible order.
6. If you \_\_\_\_\_ something, you think about it carefully before reaching a decision.
7. If something is described as \_\_\_\_\_, it is very shocking or upsetting.
8. \_\_\_\_\_ is the process of feeling sad after someone has died.
9. If you are \_\_\_\_\_, you are very pleased and excited.
10. A \_\_\_\_\_ is a small seed in a piece of fruit.

#### 3 Find the information

Find the following information in the text as quickly as possible.

1. When did Peter Gordon meet his wife?
2. What were they doing at the time?
3. How many / poems has he written to his wife?
4. How many of these poems now form the basis of the website *A Love in Verse*?
5. When did Gordon first start writing poetry?
6. When did his wife die?

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Actor Peter Gordon wrote verse for his wife Alison for two decades and has continued since she died. Now 87, his family has set up a website, *A Love in Verse*, to share his poetry

Alison Flood

21 May, 2020

- 1 Thirty years ago, "just for a laugh", actor Peter Gordon wrote a poem for his wife, Alison, and left it under her pillow. She liked it, and so he carried on, every day for 25 years. To this day, Gordon continues to add to the thousands of poems he has written for Alison, even after her death in 2016.
- 2 "She was quite amused by it, both charmed and flattered, as I had hoped, and I went on from there to turning it into little rhymes, and then the rhymes got bigger and bigger, and I started doing it every day. So it became a custom," says Gordon, now 87, from lockdown at his home in Sunbury, where he lives with one of his daughters. "I was out of work sometimes or hanging about in the dressing room, so it was something for me to do and something I felt I wished to express quite deeply."
- 3 Gordon met Alison King in 1971, when they were in a play together. They performed together again in another play in 1973 and married a year later. He dabbled with poetry in the 80s, but it was in the early 90s that he began writing daily verses, often tracing his feelings at being separated from his family on tour.
- 4 Alison, who began directing and teaching acting at drama schools in the 90s, was diagnosed with lung cancer in 2014. In 2015, in between cycles of chemotherapy, she performed with Gordon in the play *Love Letters*, directed by their daughter Anna Jordan, a theatre writer and director. Alison died the following year.
- 5 After her death, Gordon began sorting through the thousands of poems left behind, from one written in 1983 that opens "Coming home in the rain / To my home again / My kids, my wife. / The heart of my life," to 2017's 'Spring Without You'. The latter begins: "No, it could never be the same – / And yet the cherry tree two doors down / Exploded in pink as if to drown / Our winter blues and put to shame / Old tears."
- 6 "I realized that I had thousands of these pages knocking about in a big wooden box in a shed at the bottom of the garden and I ought to sort them out, see if they were any good," says Gordon. "I was quite exercised to find out if they were any good. If I was going to do anything vis-à-vis my wife to show my love, my regret that she'd died, I wanted it to be good, so I was going through them with a fine-tooth comb. I felt that some of them might be considered reasonably good. That was what kept me going."
- 7 Around 300 of the poems now form the basis of the website *A Love in Verse*, which has been collated by the couple's daughters, Cassie Davis and Anna Jordan, with help from family friend Lia Burge. It is drawing increasing attention, with friends and actors including Pearl Mackie and Julie Hesmondhalgh recording performances of some of the poems, with the latter taking on 'The Last I Wrote While She Was Still Alive', in which Gordon ponders on his feelings for his wife on a rainy afternoon: "Who minds getting wet when you've got a Rose / A treasure, a pleasure past all dreaming?"
- 8 Jordan says the thing she loved most about the poems was "the hope in them. Even those written after my mum's death – and some of them are really quite devastating – are lifted by the same message: love redeems, even after death. We had to do something with them, to share them with people, and this has been part of the grieving process. I think she'd be very proud of him."
- 9 Gordon is thrilled by the attention the website is receiving. "At my age, suddenly, this has caused a slight stir, and it's very nice," he says. "I always wanted to be a writer. That was my ambition. I never really got around to it, but I find looking back that I had a tendency to write verse almost willy-nilly – it was almost unintentional. It used to get squeezed out of me like a pip."
- 10 He continues to write for Alison but no longer every day. "Only once every so often. Quite frankly, it's difficult because it's quite painful. Her loss is still very keen," he says. "Although there is lots of pain involved, *A Love in Verse* is ultimately a joyful thing – that I committed all of those hours, all those years to, to show my love for her. That expresses it most aptly, I think."

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#### 4 Comprehension check

Choose the best answer according to the text.

1. Why did Peter Gordon start writing poems for his wife?
  - a. because he was out of work
  - b. just for fun
  - c. because she asked him to write a poem for her
2. When did he start writing a poem every day?
  - a. in the 1980s
  - b. in the early 1990s
  - c. when they got married in 1974
3. What kept him going while he was sorting through the thousands of poems he found in his shed?
  - a. his feelings at being separated from his family on tour
  - b. his love for his late wife
  - c. the feeling that some of them might be quite good
4. Why does he find it difficult to continue to write poems now?
  - a. because he still feels her loss quite keenly
  - b. because he is 87 years old and too old to write
  - c. because it's difficult to think of a new topic every day

#### 5 Find the word

Find the following words and phrases in the text. The paragraph numbers are given to help you.

1. a three-word phrase meaning *for enjoyment rather than for any serious purpose* (para 1)
2. a verb meaning *describe what happened in a long process or series of events* (para 3)
3. a three-word prepositional phrase meaning *compared to or relating to someone or something* (para 6)
4. a five-word phrase meaning *very carefully so that you notice or find everything* (para 6)
5. a verb meaning *offset the bad effect of something* (para 8)
6. a three-word verb phrase meaning *create a situation in which a lot of people feel interested or angry* (para 9)
7. a two-word adverb meaning *in a random way, without planning* (para 9)
8. an adverb meaning *suitably or appropriately* (para 10)

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#### 6 Phrasal verbs

Match the phrasal verbs in the left-hand column with the definitions in the right-hand column.

- |                  |   |
|------------------|---|
| 1. get around to | a. spend time in a place waiting or doing nothing                           |
| 2. knock about   | b. continue   |
| 3. carry on      | c. look at a lot of things to find what you want or need                    |
| 4. sort through  | d. be somewhere in a place, although you do not know exactly where          |
| 5. dabble with   | e. do something after you have intended to do it for some time              |
| 6. hang about    | f. be involved in an activity for a short time in a way that is not serious |

#### 7 Expressions with prepositions

Complete the phrases from the text using these prepositions.

at                      by                      on                      with                      to                      of

- \_\_\_\_\_ this day
- \_\_\_\_\_ tour
- diagnosed \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_ the bottom of the garden
- proud \_\_\_\_\_
- thrilled \_\_\_\_\_

#### 8 Discussion

Discuss the statements.

- A good poem should rhyme.
- Poetry is about feelings, and if there are no feelings in a poem, it has no meaning.
- People who write poetry are just showing off.