

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

Level 2 • Upper intermediate

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. The paragraph numbers are given to help you.

unintentional
grieving

devastating
thrilled

ambition
amused

rhyme

collate
shed

1. If you are _____ by something, you find it funny or entertaining. (para 2)
2. If you are _____, you feel pleased that someone notices and admires you. (para 2)
3. A _____ is a poem that has lines ending in the same sound. (para 2)
4. A _____ is a small building, usually made of wood, in which people store things. (para 5)
5. If you _____ information, you collect it and then arrange it in a sensible order. (para 6)
6. If something is _____, it is very shocking or upsetting. (para 7)
7. _____ is the process of feeling sad after someone has died. (para 7)
8. If you are _____, you are very pleased and excited. (para 8)
9. An _____ is something that you very much want to do, usually something that is difficult to achieve. (para 8)
10. An _____ action is one that you did not plan or want to do. (para 8)

3 Find the information

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

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

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

Level 2 • Upper intermediate

'A joyful thing': the man who wrote his wife a poem every day for 25 years

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 and flattered as I had hoped, and I went on from there to writing 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. "I was out of work sometimes or hanging about in the theatre dressing room, so it was something for me to do and something 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 wrote a bit of poetry in the 80s, but it was in the early 90s that he began writing daily verses, often about 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. "I realized that I had thousands of these pages 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. "If I was going to do anything to show my love for my wife, 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 quite good. That was what kept me going."
- 6 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. It is attracting attention. Friends and actors are recording performances of some of the poems. One poem is 'The Last I Wrote While She Was Still Alive', in which Gordon thinks about 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?"
- 7 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 remains, 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."
- 8 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."
- 9 He continues to write for Alison but no longer every day. "Only once every so often. 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 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."

© Guardian News and Media 2020

First published in *The Guardian*, 21/05/20

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

Level 2 • Upper intermediate

4 Comprehension check

Are these statements true (T) or false (F) according to the text?

1. Peter Gordon wrote his first poem for his wife just for fun.
2. He started writing a poem every day in the 1980s.
3. When he started sorting out the poems, he thought that some of them might be quite good.
4. Anna Jordan likes the feeling of hope in the poems most of all.
5. Peter Gordon never wanted to be a writer.
6. He still writes a poem for his late wife 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 two-word phrasal verb meaning *spend time in a place waiting or doing nothing* (para 2)
2. a two-word phrasal verb meaning *look at a lot of things to find what you want or need* (para 5)
3. a five-word phrase meaning *very carefully so that you notice or find everything* (para 5)
4. a three-word verb phrase meaning *create a situation in which a lot of people feel interested or angry* (para 8)
5. a noun meaning *an attitude or habit that develops in a particular way* (para 8)
6. a two-word adverb meaning *in a random way, without planning* (para 8)
7. an adjective meaning *very strong or intense* (para 9)
8. an adverb meaning *suitably or appropriately* (para 9)

6 Two-word phrases

Match the words in the left-hand column with those in the right-hand column to make expressions from the text.

- | | |
|-------------|------------|
| 1. dressing | a. cancer |
| 2. drama | b. tour |
| 3. lung | c. box |
| 4. wooden | d. process |
| 5. grieving | e. room |
| 6. on | f. school |

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

Level 2 • Upper intermediate

7 Word-building

Complete the table using words from the text.

	noun	adjective
1.	pain	
2.	joy	
3.	rain	
4.	intend	
	verb	noun
5.	perform	
6.	tend	

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.