

## A season of televised poetry on the BBC

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Television and cinema love a good book. From Vikas Swarup's *Q&A*, which morphed into *Slumdog Millionaire*, to Jane Austen's eternally adaptable *Pride and Prejudice*, literature is constantly feeding stories and ideas to the screen arts.

But in the rush towards the dramatised version, television directors and producers rarely pause to glance at books or authors themselves. The BBC has no proper books programme on television; only *The Book Quiz*, hosted by Kirsty Wark, and the odd novel that features on *Newsnight Review*. On SkyArts, Mariella Frostrup compères *The Book Show*. Compared, say, with the languorous literary salons televised in France, the British are positively phobic about discussing books on the small screen.



Owen Sheers presents 'A Poet's Guide to Britain'

Owen Sheers, Welsh poet, novelist and until last year fellow of the New York Public Library, is set to change these attitudes. He is the star of an unusual project for the BBC, one that takes not just writing, but poetry, as its subject. *A Poet's Guide to Britain* is a brave voyage into an art form that most people assume they don't understand. Using six different poems of place for six half-hour episodes, Sheers cleverly shows how writers respond to landscape for a number of complex reasons.

"We wanted to use the poems as a door into the stories that lay behind them, because obviously TV needs stories, it needs narrative," Sheers says. "The most ambitious element was to follow threads of association from these poets to contemporary writers who shared some kind of territory, geographical or thematic."

*A Poet's Guide* is part of a pan-BBC season of poetry, with one-off TV shows such as Simon Schama on John Donne, an *Arena* special on TS Eliot, and Armando Iannucci on "Satan's Spin Doctor" Milton. There is more planned for radio and the web. But to have an entire series devoted to poetry nevertheless seems bold.

"The producer [Fiona Morris] I worked with on an oratorio for the Proms heard that the BBC were doing a channel-wide poetry season – which did seem pretty incredible," Sheers says. "We went with director Rupert Edwards and pitched [the idea] to Janice Hadlow [then controller of BBC4] and she said yes there and then."

Edwards' previous work for the BBC includes last year's *Imagine* episode "A Wild Sheep Chase in Search of Haruki Murakami", in which Alan Yentob interviewed the cult Japanese writer. The format for this film was described by the BBC as "impressionistic"; a style that seems favoured over simple talking heads.

In the first *Poet's Guide* episode, on Wordsworth, the format is suitably loose. Sheers' desire to break the stereotypes of each chosen poet is neatly satisfied by the programme's opening scenes of London. The Lake District's famous wandering clouds, daffodils and looming hills are ignored in favour of a wistful scene of early-morning Thames, as Sheers investigates the sonnet "Composed Upon Westminster Bridge".

As Sheers says, television needs narrative, and this poem has a good story to tell. Wordsworth was about to get married, but needed the blessing of a past lover who had borne him a child. The woman, Annette Vallon, had met the poet during his sojourn in France, where he had moved to observe the drama of the French revolution. The sonnet, Sheers suggests, might have arisen from Wordsworth's journey to Calais to meet his illegitimate family; on the way his sister Dorothy, who accompanied him, rhapsodises in her journal about the view from Westminster Bridge.

As well as a line-by-line recital of the poem performed by a passing chorus of commuters crossing the bridge as the crew filmed, the episode takes in the analysis of other poets such as Simon Armitage, and offers a brief but adroit lesson in textual analysis – the sounds, structure and rhythm that make the poem work.

Sheers says: "Rupert [the director] was very experienced in TV narrative so every time I wanted to go into what I thought was fascinating detail he'd say remember we have to carry along the general audience."

The other instalments of *A Poet's Guide* examine Matthew Arnold, Sylvia Plath, Louis MacNeice and George Mackay Brown. Sheers has also a personal victory in the episode on Lynette Roberts, a Welsh poet who "even most poets haven't heard of, let alone readers".

"You often hear the poetry scene is dying, no one is reading poetry, all that kind of stuff. Of course I know that isn't the case. There are some absolutely wonderful poets out there."

'A Poet's Guide to Britain' is on BBC4, May 4, 8.30pm;