



UNI-VERSES: SPACE POETRY

ABOVE:

An infrared image of the edge of a nearby, young, star-forming region called NGC 3324 in the Carina Nebula, captured by NASA's James Webb Space Telescope

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It is difficult for a layperson to truly appreciate the nature of the universe through facts alone. How can anyone conceptualise the differences in size between a sun, a solar system and a galactic supercluster? How would a human experience the pressure and heat of Venus? Perhaps poetry can help?

With a team of eight award-winning poets and Imperial College London space scientists, the Uni-Verses Space Poetry workshops at the Great Exhibition Road Festival 2023 aimed to help close this experiential gap for attendees by communicating core space research and encouraging them to write original space-themed poetry. By the end of the two-day festival, members of the public had written more than 700 poems.

The Great Exhibition Road Festival is a free annual celebration of science and the arts each summer in South Kensington. Having previously worked with cosmonaut Dr Helen Sharman on delivering live Zero Pressure podcast episodes at the festival as part of my role at Imperial College London, I knew how enthusiastic and open attendees were to learning and trying new things. This year's festival seemed like the perfect opportunity to combine my passions for poetry and public engagement in a science-themed poetry workshop.

In 2022, the Research & Public History team commissioned me to celebrate the legacy of Czech immunologist and poet Miroslav Holub by writing new poems for a performance at a Science Museum Lates event. My experience of this project was nothing but positive and I knew the team were very supportive of

activities that used the arts for science communication, so I saw them as natural partners for the science-themed poetry workshop. I also wanted to draw from the expertise of Science Museum curators when developing the workshop activities, who the team could connect me to. I proposed and delivered the activity for the 2023 festival under a dual Imperial College London and Science Museum banner.

I organised the workshop along seven areas of space science with relevance to the Science Museum Group's collections and Imperial College London's research: galaxies, stars and star formation, Mars and the Curiosity Rover, Jupiter and the Jupiter Icy Moons Explorer, Dr Helen Sharman and her time on the Mir space station, the Moon and the Apollo missions, and Venus.

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Out here its so ~~dark~~ ^{big}! Its ginormous! Lu! an ☺
 The dark is really enormous.
 Even the stars! They form us!
 The meteorites! ~~They form us~~ ^{They can't hurt us!}
 The atmosphere with its heat protects us!
 Shh! Its so dark but the glittery galaxy
 can be used as a light source,
 ✨ Its Timelux.

ABOVE:

From the Uni-Verses Space Poetry workshop at the Great Exhibition Road Festival 2023

Attendees would walk into a spacious marquee on Imperial College Road and be approached by one of our resident space scientists. After choosing the area of space science that most interested them, the scientist would give them the lowdown on core facts and the latest research, being sure to emphasise facts that related to the (theoretical) human experience.

For instance, the acoustic properties of a carbon dioxide-dominated atmosphere means you wouldn't be able to hear high-pitched sounds like birdsong on Mars unless you were standing right next to the sound source. An immense dust cloud at the centre of our galaxy might taste like raspberries and smell like rum, due to the presence of ethyl formate!

These were very much two-way conversations: the scientists weren't following strict scripts. We wanted attendees to feel empowered to direct the conversation to where they were interested, and to feel comfortable asking any and all questions.

Attendees would then be directed to a seated area, where poets guided them through approachable writing exercises on the subject area that they had just discussed with their scientist. These exercises would slowly build attendees up from writing a single metaphor to an entire poem. While most exercises were geared towards young families (the festival's primary target audience), advanced exercises were available for confident writers.

Attendees were encouraged to write their poems on postcards printed specially for the workshop, which were then hung on washing lines that spanned the marquee's roof. Before the end of the second day, every inch of these washing lines was taken by original science poems.

Working with STEM organisations such as the Science Museum is a fantastic way to engage people with the arts. Many of our attendees were at the festival because they already had an interest in science: by grounding poetry activities in space science,

people who might have found poetry uninteresting or intimidating otherwise dived straight in. I lost count of how many people said they'd just written their first poem since school or their first poem ever. I even saw one or two adults get emotional that they'd written a poem, having always seen poetry as an inaccessible, lofty artform that couldn't accommodate them.

More than 700 people learned about the cutting edge of space science and took the plunge into creative writing due to the work of the volunteers, Imperial College London and the Science Museum. A successful two days!

Jack Cooper is Communications and Policy Outreach Officer at Imperial College London and an internationally published poet who received the Eric Gregory Award in 2022. Discover more of his work at www.jackcooperpoet.com

“An immense dust cloud at the centre of our galaxy might taste like raspberries and smell like rum, due to the presence of ethyl formate!”

THE DARK IS REALLY ENORMOUS

Crowdsourced poem by Jack Cooper that uses lines from 12 young poets, including Ruby (8), Aiqi (8), Antonina (12), and Lui ain.

The Earth looks like a big blue ball on the outside, decorated with green splodges, but on the inside, it is teeming with life.

The stars, the sun, the planets and galaxies that surround it are so big, you might not find your way around it.

It's ginormous! The dark is really enormous.

The stars sparkle in the dark blue sky like little shining flies, floating like bright feathers, tiny specks of light.

We are related aren't we? Somewhere in the distant past, your supernova formed me. And in the Carina Nebula, new stars form today.

It's ginormous! The dark is really enormous.

The Carina Nebula: A tumbling stardust sand storm crashing against itself, making whirling eddies of light out of darkness and silence.

The Carina Nebula: Glistening like a disco ball in a humungous party, a swirling, glittering sand dune.

It's ginormous! The dark is really enormous.

2.5 million light years away, Andromeda watches the Milky Way, a piercing eye cutting through me like a sigh.

Andromeda is like a spiral of fireflies. Andromeda swirls like a shoal of tuna in a dark stormy sea, our closest friend, our future foe.

Andromeda is a painting of light on the infinite black canvas.

How many pieces of art are hidden from us in the ginormous, really enormous dark?

An image of the Andromeda galaxy taken by NASA's Galaxy Evolution Explorer telescope in ultraviolet light
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