

# Adam Cole of TruerMU: Five Things You Need To Write Powerful And Evocative Poetry

An Interview With Heidi Sander



Heidi Sander

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healing activity for you, and I encourage you to do it for that reason, in your journal. If you want to share it, though, you're getting into the realm of art, which has an audience that needs a level of competence to bridge the gap between you and them. You might want to know something about the art of poetry, what's been done, how someone else expressed the same thing you're expressing, how someone solved the problem of a particular poem that you're also facing in yours.

**P**oetry is growing in popularity and millions of people spanning the globe have a renewed passion for embracing the creativity, beauty, and art of poetry. Poetry has the power to heal and we make sense of the world through the human expression of writing and reading. Are you wondering: What does it take to become a successful poet? What is the best medium and venue to release your poetry? What are some techniques to improve or sharpen your skills? In this interview series about how to write powerful and evocative poetry, we are interviewing people who have a love for poetry and want to share their insights, and we will speak with emerging poets who want to learn more about poetry either to improve their own skills or learn how to read and interpret better. Here, we will also meet rising and successful poets who want to share their work or broaden their audience, as well as poetry and literature instructors.

*As a part of this series, I had the pleasure of interviewing Adam Cole.*

*The author of many fiction and nonfiction works, Adam Cole is the Director of Willow Music in Atlanta, GA. On his YouTube Channel, TruerMU, he has interviewed numerous authors, musicians and creatives including Cheap Trick producer Tom Werman, drummer Liberty Devitto, and the band Mother's Finest.*

*A writer since the age of 6, Adam navigated the world of writing over 50 years, starting with his first attempts at novel writing at age 12. While studying English at Oberlin College, he determined that he would fulfill his childhood dream of becoming a successful writer, and he has pursued that passion through careers as a jazz performer and middle-school music teacher. He has penned books of stories and poetry including Hofstadter's Grandchildren, as well as novels such as the dystopian thriller Motherless Child.*

**Thank you so much for joining us in this interview series! Before we dive into the main focus of our interview, our readers would love to “get to know you” a bit better. Can you share a story about what first drew you to poetry?**

I have poetry in my blood. I wrote my first poem at age 7, and my teachers liked it so much they published it in the school yearbook. I had a talent, not so much for poetry, but for “versification,” making up language that flowed and sounded good. This was great when I wanted to write light or humorous verse, but when I tried to get serious, my natural talents proved a disadvantage, as they got in the way of my growth. There’s nothing like thinking you’re really good at something and discovering you’re really bad at it to make you want to find out exactly what’s missing from your toolbox, so I went to college as an English Major to study poetry, and I kept studying it my whole life.

**Can you tell us a bit about the interesting or exciting projects you are working on or wish to create? What are your goals for these projects?**

I just completed a book called *Poems for the Pandemic*. These were written in a new way for me, by combining a lot of shorter poems that I ordinarily would have published by themselves, compiling them into ten longer poems, and editing them so they work as unified pieces. I’ve put the book aside for a while to let it rest, and I hope to further refine them and publish the book.

**Wonderful. Let’s now shift to the main focus of our interview. Let’s begin with a basic definition so that all of us are on the same page. What is your definition of poetry? Can you please share with us what poetry means to you?**

Poetry is an art form that uses words in a way that, if it were rewritten as a story or an essay, would not have the same impact on the reader. However the poem is constructed (with rhyme or without, steady meter or free form, telling a tale or just giving impressions) it must be something that is best as a poem, and a good poet will know when that’s true and how to make it work. Poetry for me is a means of expressing the dream-state, a half-awake world of realizations, and it chronicles and furthers my mental and emotional growth.

**What can writing poetry teach us about ourselves?**

It depends on what we want to learn. At a very basic level, it can teach us whether we are competent with language. Poems often require an efficiency where one word must

take the place of ten or one-hundred, and there's certain expertise involved there.

At a higher level, it can reveal things we dare not admit to others, and in some cases things we cannot admit to ourselves. Sometimes when we think we have written a poem about a flower, we may in fact be chronicling a trauma that we couldn't look at directly.

Poetry is too deliberate a thing to use to lie about ourselves. Anyone that tries to lie with poetry will reveal themselves instead. And the fact that you can spot the lie in the poet that they might not spot themselves is a fascinating thing, even if that poet is you!

### **Who are your favorite poets? Is it their style, the content or something else that resonates with you?**

I tend to read classic poets, and I love a lot of them. Of the old ones, Chaucer was one of my early favorites because he's clearly such a remarkable human being, and it comes across in his work. I came to respect Wordsworth for his contribution to the development of English poetry, and Browning for being so good at it.

Of the twentieth-century poets, I find that e.e.cummings speaks to me as someone that knew how to use words in ways other than how they were designed to be used...as a musician I hear and see actual music in his mad typographical techniques and therefore understand them as more than trickery. Wallace Stevens is another poet with whom I resonate in a spiritual way, as someone that understood what I long to understand, and the same is true of Seamus Heaney.

I really enjoy Anne Sexton's work, though it scares the hell out of me. I love Jean Toomer's book *Cane* which combines prose and poetry, and I love the endless depth of Emily Dickinson whose combination of brevity and profundity can take my breath away. Louise Runyon is a friend whose poetry has influenced me in my own growth, and I owe her a huge debt of gratitude.

### **If you could ask your favourite poet a question, what would it be?**

I'd probably ask Chaucer about all the unfinished Canterbury Tales that he never got to write down!

**Poetry can be transformational. Is there a particular poem that spoke to you and changed your life or altered a perspective you held in some way? Can you share the story?**

I mentioned that I was “talented” as a young person, but that my talents were more about facility than profundity. We had a poetry magazine in high school, and in one issue I saw the work of a fellow student, Gale Harold, and his poetry was everything my work was not: profound, well-constructed, meaningful. It was a wake-up call for me that I couldn’t admit to until years later when, because he became a celebrity, it was no longer possible to thank him.

**Today’s world needs so much healing. Can you help articulate how poetry can help us heal?**

By healing yourself, you can heal the world. If poetry can help us explore and surmount our self-delusions, that can make a difference in the integrity of what we can accomplish and the quality of our relationships with each other. Even to watch someone else surmount their self-delusion is helpful.

Of course, poetry is now a vehicle for social change in a way that it hasn’t been for decades. I don’t write that kind of poetry, nor read or hear it that much, but I’m thrilled that it’s become useful and powerful since I grew up in a time where it was very muted and only for a small segment of the population that was considered “readers.” Watching Amanda Gorman read her poem “The Hill We Climb” at the Biden/Harris Inauguration was a triumphant moment for a lot of people, but for me, as a poet, it had a special resonance!

**We’d like to learn more about your poetry and writing. How would you describe yourself as a poet? Can you please share a specific passage that you think exemplifies your style or main message?**

Because of my facility with words (for good or ill) I tend to be a versatile poet, having tried many styles. In my early years, I was more interested in the challenge of writing poetry than in what I was writing about, and I gravitated towards difficult constructions because I found it stimulating to succeed at them, like jumping hurdles.

In those days I found it difficult to read poetry and tended to bank on what I'd studied in high school and college.

Over the last ten years, I've begun to finally slow my mind down enough to really understand the poetry I've been trying to read for decades, to understand large poetic movements throughout history and why poets have written the way they did at the time they did. That's helped me temper my versatility and brought me more to my own voice and my own time.

Here's a passage from one of my *Pandemic Poems* called "The Beethoven of Mayflies." As I read it now, I see what I didn't see then, that it's as much about my growth from a two-dimensional reader into a more awakened thinker as it is about the character it describes. The self-discovery I take from it makes it a good example of my poetry.

*It took him*

*About a thousand years to notice.*

*He had been expecting heaven when he died.*

*Instead he came to slow awareness*

*Like realizing that the picture he had been looking at*

*Was the young woman as well as the old,*

*that what he thought was silence*

*Included the buzz of the lights*

*that his relationship with her*

*had been parasitic.*

*He was now a large field of grass*

*As significant as a raised smudge of paint on a chapel ceiling*

*And the monotony of it gradually lulled him awake*

*It took a thousand years for him to realize*

*He had been used to caring about everything*

*Between the covers of his book*

*And at the last even when he finally found out*

*He found it didn't matter*

### **What do you hope to achieve with your poetry?**

All I've ever wanted is to find the ten-thousand people who will take something from my work. I feel them when I write, and perhaps someday they'll feel close to me and not alone. It would be wonderful to find them before I die so I can be close to them as well.

### **In your opinion and from your experience, what are 3 things everyone can learn from poetry?**

1. Who the inner person is who wrote the poetry, raised or distilled from their common, sometimes horrible human selves.
2. Another way of looking at something that seemed obvious or straightforward before.
3. The potential of a language to do more than describe.

### **Based on your own experience and success, what are the “five things a poet needs to know to create beautiful and evocative poetry?” If you can, please share a story or example for each.**

1.) A poet needs a real reason to be writing a poem, as opposed to a novel, story, essay, or even a painting or photograph which might be more appropriate. Does it have to be a poem?

There's a funny poem by the great Dr. Samuel Johnson which is an example of something that seems like a poem but really isn't.



*I put my hat upon my head*

*And walked into the Strand*

*And there I met another man*

*Whose hat was in his hand?*

That's it! Starts off telling a story, and there isn't one, and the only reason you'd call it a poem is because of its nice rhythm and rhyme. There are a lot of works out there that seem much more sophisticated and wow you with their poetry tricks, but at their core are just this poem: a lot of noise about nothing at all.

2) A poet needs to know their audience.

A poem doesn't have to be "meaningful" in Western European terms to be great. An audience at a poetry slam may be hearing something that is very specific political, that uses a lot of profanity, that meanders, and if the poet is reaching the audience then it's a success. Poems may be transitory, improvised, not meant to be put in an anthology. It all has to do with the poet and the audience intended for the poem.

If a poet doesn't know their audience, they're setting themselves up for disappointment at best, and failure at worst, failure which may make them reconsider their art and ability. My attempts to read my poetry at live poetry events have not had the impact I wanted them to have because my poems need to be read and contemplated rather than performed. Because I know this, I tend to try to get my poems in front of the right people so I can make an impact and know when I've scored a win.

3) A poet needs to make the most of their language

Little children write *great* poetry. They know *their* language inside and out...the limited vocabulary and grammar is fine because they can push it to the limit of their ability and you feel the power of that. Adults who are not highly educated can also write great poetry if they use the language they have available to them effectively or with devastating effects.

I used a poem by the daughter of one of my friends as the opening to one of my novels. I don't have permission to reveal her name, but I'll share the poem. She was about eight when she wrote it and I think it's great:

## **IF ONLY**

Sometimes I think to myself what

A beautiful world...

If only I could float on the

Blue wavy sea...if only I could

Fly in the beautiful sky like a

Bird...if only I could prance

Over the history of America.

What's ironic is that this wonderful poem was in an elementary school poetry contest and didn't even get an honorable mention. The poems that won were, in my opinion, far inferior to it, but the audience was busy teachers who may not have actually liked poetry, and they chose things that were easier to digest and understand, maybe "cuter." I like "If Only" because the poet really knew her language and hit us hard with the dancing rhymes and the powerful last lines.

4) A poet needs to know why other poets write or wrote the way they do.

One of the biggest problems for students of poetry is to take on a "romantic" style or a "modern" style without any real understanding of why poets wrote like that. Here's one of my favorite poems, "In a Station of the Metro" by Ezra Pound.

*The apparition of these faces in the crowd:*

*Petals on a wet, black bough.*

Pound started with 30 lines and culled the poem down to 2. Does that make it a good poem? A bad poem? Should you do that? Pound was alive at a particular time when

poets were questioning the uses of imagery in poems and eschewing certain means of expression as being decadent or “too easy.” To copy Pound’s style today would be fine, and for that matter copying Chaucer or Shakespeare is also fine, but if you want people to hear *your voice*, you have to understand that by not understanding the reason Shakespeare wrote sonnets, you’re going to be putting a serious filter between you and your audience. At best you’ll sound like a very effective parody of your favorite poet, and at worst you’ll sound like someone who doesn’t know what they’re doing.

It’s a lot of work to understand poetic movements, and a lot of poets don’t bother. You can write great poetry without understanding it, but you’ll be shooting into the dark. You may hit the bullseye, but you may never know *why* you’ve succeeded.

5) A poet needs to read other poets, dead ones at least, and live ones, even friends, at best, and if possible, to *study* other peoples’ poems.

To write poetry without reading it may be a healing activity for you, and I encourage you to do it for that reason, in your journal. If you want to share it, though, you’re getting into the realm of art, which has an audience that needs a level of competence to bridge the gap between you and them. You might want to know something about the art of poetry, what’s been done, how someone else expressed the same thing you’re expressing, how someone solved the problem of a particular poem that you’re also facing in yours.

It’s daunting to go from writing words in a poetic style to writing poems. It’s hard, it’s scary, it may seem like more trouble than it’s worth. But it’s rewarding, it can be fun, and in some cases it may be the most powerful way to express yourself.

**If you were to encourage others to write poetry, what would you tell them?**

If they want to do it, they shouldn’t let anybody stop them, not Mom, not a professional poet, not a creative writing teacher. I’d tell them to find people they trust, deeply trust, to read and listen to their work to help them grow, and to beware of people, especially those who advertise themselves as editors or teachers, who are toxic and who offer you criticism that is more about their ego than your growth.

**How would you finish these three sentences:**

Poetry teaches...us about ourselves, our language and our world.

Poetry heals by... revealing to us what was hidden.

To be a poet, you need to...write, read and share poems.

**We are very blessed that some of the biggest names in Entertainment , Business, VC funding, and Sports read this column. Is there a person in the world, or in the US, with whom you would love to have a private breakfast or lunch, and why? He or she might just see this, especially if we both tag them :-)**

We haven't really talked about songwriting and its relation to poetry. I'm a songwriter too, and the songwriter I find the most poetic is Bruce Springsteen. I would so much like to interview him about his songs, the lyrics to which work as poems before you even hear the beautiful music.

This is also a good place to thank David Shapiro, a successful poet who took the time to encourage me and let me know I was on the right track, something I always longed for but never found from anyone else. We've spoken on the phone several times but never met in person. David, you're wonderful, thank you for your support, and I hope someday we can meet face to face.

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**Thank you for these excellent insights, and we greatly appreciate the time you spent. We wish you continued success.**

Thank you so much for talking with me!

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