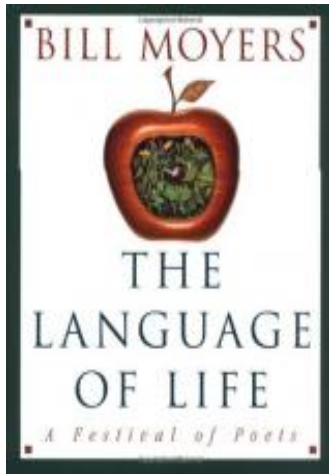


# The Language of Life

by Bill Moyers

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## About the Book

"Poets live the lives all of us live," says Bill Moyers, "with one big difference. They have the power--the power of the word--to create a world of thoughts and emotions other can share. We only have to learn to listen."

In a series of fascinating conversations with thirty-four American poets, *The Language Of Life* celebrates language in its "most exalted, wrenching, delighted, and concentrated form," and its unique power to re-create the human experience: falling in love, facing death, leaving home, playing basketball, losing faith, finding God. Listening to Linda McCarriston's award-winning poems about a child trapped in a violent home, or to Jimmy Santiago Baca explaining how words changed his life in prison, or to David Mura describing his Japanese American grandfather's experience in relocation camps, or to Sekou Sundiata stitching the magic of his childhood church in Harlem to the African tradition of storytelling, or to Gary Snyder invoking the natural wonder of mountains and rivers, or to Adrienne Rich calling for honesty in human relations, all testify to the necessity and clarity of the poet's voice, and all give hope that from such a wide variety of racial, ethnic, and religious threads we might yet weave a new American fabric.

"Listen," said the storytellers of old, "listen and you shall *hear*," explains Bill Moyers. *The Language Of Life* is a joyous, life-affirming invitation to listen, learn, and experience the exhilarating power of the spoken word.

## Discussion Guide

1. James Autry wrote a poem called "On Firing a Salesman." What in your business or public life would you think a poem could be written about? Would you write a poem about closing a deal? Being tortured by an ethical business dilemma? A business lunch? Losing or winning a promotion? Are such things worth writing about? What could be the value of recognizing the emotional content of such experiences?
2. James Autry expresses regret about the loss of the vernacular language in his community in Mississippi. Name some

phrases and kinds of language from your own past that are being lost. Is this loss a natural development, or should such language be preserved? How might it be?

**3.** Jimmy Santiago Baca says that poetry saved his life. How did it help transform his rage and the violence he lived with into self affirmation? Are there other instances you know of in which art has helped transform a life? How can this happen?

**4.** What is the connection between poet and translator? What are the connections between Coleman Barks and Rumi? To translate a poet, must one be a poet? Must one share the same view of the world and sense of language in order to translate a poet?

**5.** In his interview with Bill Moyers, Robert Bly talks about letting many parts of you speak when you write poetry. How does his poem "A Dream of Retarded Children" relate to that idea?

**6.** What has been lost through assimilation in Marilyn Chin's poem "How I Got That Name?" What has been gained?

**7.** How does Lucille Clifton's poem "Climbing" exemplify her idea that "poetry will get past any of the artificial boundaries which separate us"?

**8.** In Lucille Clifton's poem "At the Cemetery, Walnut Grove Plantation, South Carolina, 1989," Lucille Clifton asks slaves who are long dead to "tell me your names..." Why is "naming names" such an important human activity?

**9.** Stanley Kunitz says that poetry can "consume and recycle almost anything." What experiences has he transformed in the poems "Three Floors" and "The Portrait?" Think of a painful experience--it could be your own or something you've read about (the recent deaths in Rwanda, for example). How does poetry "recycle" such experiences so that stating them in poems helps bring about some kind of redemption?

**10.** In discussing her poem "Quilt of Rights," how does Sandra McPherson relate the process of writing poetry to quilt making? Do you see any connection with Robert Bly's dream of retarded children?

**11.** In her interview with Bill Moyers, Sandra McPherson talks about the process of establishing identity through names. How does her sense of the importance of names and naming relate to that of Lucille Clifton, above?

**12.** David Mura says that if poetry doesn't acknowledge "the darkness of history--then the life goes out of poetry, and it becomes an escape." What are the "darknesses of history" (both personal and political) in "From the Colors of Desire" that Mura has chosen for his subjects? Does his poetry transform them into beauty? How does poetry help us resolve our personal darkness?

**13.** How does David Mura's poetry help him to confront conflicting ideas and feelings about race and sexual desire?

**14.** According to Naomi Shihab Nye, what is "the wisdom that . . . small things have to teach?" Find it in the poem "The Man Who Makes Brooms." Why does she say that such poems, about people working, are political poems?

**15.** How and why does Adrienne Rich believe poetry is growing from "points of stress" in our society? How can poetry

help us to see and to survive such stress?

**16.** Gerald Stern observes that his poem, "Behaving Like a Jew," is "well-liked, but to a certain degree it's a failure for me because all the things I'm talking about don't seem available in it." Discuss whether, even if the allusions behind the poem may not be known to the reader, the poem still carries an impact, and may even lead the reader to an understanding which was not intended by the poet.

**17.** What are the sources of Sekou Sundiata's art?

**18.** How is Sekou Sundiata's poetry like improvisational jazz?

**19.** Read the poem "Dijerrido," first to yourself silently; then read it aloud. What is the difference in its impact on you? After reading it aloud, do you understand it differently? How?

**20.** In the poem "Dijerrido," Sundiata says "What you dream up is deeper than what you know." Talking about the poem, Sundiata says he is talking about a person's power. What power is he referring to?

**21.** James Autry speaks of a strong sense of "connectedness" with his Mississippi roots. Compare his sense of community with that of Claribel Alegría, who was born in Nicaragua, grew up in El Salvador, and lived in exile under the threat of death. Where is Alegria's community, and how does it compare with his? Compare their sense of community with that of Jimmy Santiago Baca, who says that he grew up wearing "the mantle of an outcast."

**22.** Many of the poets in *The Language of Life* (James Autry, Gary Snyder, and Stanley Kunitz, for example) talk about the importance of reading their work aloud to an audience. What communal function can poetry play?

**23.** Stanley Kunitz says we all keep asking Gauguin's set of questions: "Where do we come from? Who are we? Where are we going?" How are these questions answered by Kunitz? by David Mura? by Sandra McPherson?

**24.** How does writing poetry help people survive and even thrive under life's most difficult circumstances? Consider Mary TallMountain, Linda McCarriston, Jimmy Baca Santiago.

**25.** In "I Went Into The Maverick Bar," Gary Snyder says he came back "To the real work, to what is to be done." What is the "real work"? For Snyder? For Adrienne Rich?

**26.** According to Adrienne Rich, the "culture of poetry" has changed over the 40s and 50s, and a rich poetry culture is developing. Marilyn Chin says, "We're breaking new ground...My voice is one of the many voices of America." How do the poets in *The Language of Life* exemplify the new poetry culture?

**27.** How can you help support or create a culture of poetry in your community? Check your local library, senior centers, book stores, coffee shops, and local schools or colleges to see if they hold poetry readings. Or, you may wish to encourage a culture of poetry by inviting people over to read poems they've written and/or poems they love.

**28.** Why is it that in America, novelists, painters, and even television journalists can be stars, and yet poets remain unknown? Daisy Zamora and Claribel Alegría say that poetry is part of the fiber of their countrymen's lives. Why has

poetry been seen as a rare, acquired taste in America?

29. Which single poem in *The Language of Life* speaks for you at this point in your life? Which poem would have spoken for you ten years ago? Which poem would you like to speak for you in five years?

## Author Bio

During his 25 years in broadcasting, Bill Moyers has pursued a broad spectrum of journalism for which he has received many major awards, including over 30 Emmys; the Erik Barnouw Award from the Organization of American Historians; the George Foster Peabody Award for political reporting and international coverage; and the prestigious Gold Baton which is the highest honor of the Alfred I. duPont/Columbia University Award. Columbia University President Michael Sovern has called him "a unique voice, still seeking new frontiers in television, daring to assume that viewing audiences are willing to think and learn." He was one of the first three persons to be awarded the Honorary Doctor of Fine Arts by the American Film Institute.

Since establishing Public Affairs Television as an independent production company in 1986, Moyers has produced more than 200 programming hours including: *Facing Evil*; *In Search of the Constitution*; *The Secret Government*; *The Constitution in Crisis*; *God and Politics*; *Joseph Campbell and the Power of Myth*; *A World of Ideas*; *The Public Mind*; *A Gathering of Men with Robert Bly*; *Amazing Grace*; *The Songs Are Free with Bernice Johnson Reagon*; *Project Censored*; *Sports for Sale*; *The Arab World*; *All Our Children*; *The Power of the Word*; *Beyond Hate*; *The Home Front*; *Spirit and Nature*; *Special Report: After the War*; *20 years of Listening to America*; *Circle of Recovery*; *Facing Hate with Elie Wiesel*; *Minimum Wage*; *Hate on Trial*; *Families First*; *Listening to America with Bill Moyers, an election-year series*; *Healing and the Mind*; and, most recently, *What Can We Do About Violence?*

A survey of television critics by the official journal of The National Academy of Television Arts and Sciences placed Moyers among the ten journalists who have had the most significant influence on television news. He is widely respected for his work at PBS, CBS News, and NBC News.

Moyers served as Deputy Director of the Peace Corps in the Kennedy Administration and Special Assistant to President Lyndon B. Johnson from 1963-1967; he left the White House to become publisher of *Newsday*. For 12 years, he was a trustee of the Rockefeller Foundation and now serves as president of The Florence and John Schumann Foundation.

Five of Moyers's books based on his television series have become bestsellers, including *Listening to America*, *The Power of Myth*, and *Healing and the Mind*.

Born in Oklahoma and raised in Texas, Moyers began his varied career as a cub reporter on the Marshall News Messenger at age 16. He and his wife, Judith Davidson Moyers, have three grown children.

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