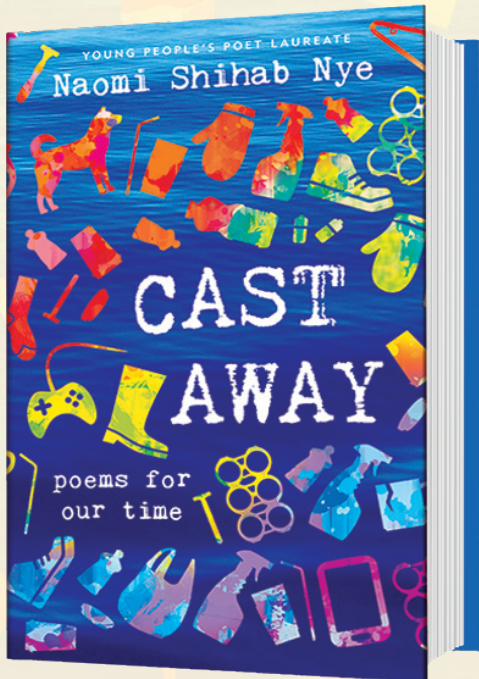


Cast Away: Poems for Our Time

By Naomi Shihab Nye

Young People's Poet Laureate 2019-2021

Discussion Guide



BOOKTALK

Have you ever picked up a penny off the sidewalk? Seen a plastic bag fly across a parking lot? Maybe wondered who lost a single mitten at the playground? Poet Naomi Shihab Nye has spent years picking up trash, wondering about it, and writing poetry about what all this trash might mean. In this thoughtful collection of poems, we are challenged to expand the definition of “trash,” and to think about what we are doing to our world and how we might change our landscape full of trash. She writes that problems can be “pivots” and “Trash tells its story. Who you are, / how you spend your days” (p. 142). She gives us simple suggestions, provocative ideas, powerful anecdotes, clever biographical sketches, challenging questions, and plenty of “trash talk”—all in lyrical language full of insightful observations and palpable emotions. She proclaims: “It’s everyone’s problem. / Don’t pretend you’re exempt” (p. 142) and then gives us inspiration and motivation to act.

WHY TEACH POETRY?

Poetry is primal: it speaks to a fundamental human need for self-expression and is made from the basic building blocks of language. For young readers, poetry:

- reinforces word sounds
- introduces new vocabulary and figurative language
- is rich in imagery
- offers an emotional connection
- demonstrates a context for mechanical conventions
- is accessible to a wide range of abilities

Poetry also has pedagogical uses across the curriculum for building science concepts, reinforcing historical themes, and adding motivation to math lessons—all with brevity and distilled focus.



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QUESTIONS FOR GROUP DISCUSSION

1. In the introduction, poet Naomi Shihab Nye writes, "It's shocking how much trash we make. What does that say about us?" (p. 3). Look around you and notice the trash, discarded items, and litter you see in your classroom, school, and community. What does that say about your surroundings and the people in them? What would you like your environment to say?
2. Would you consider coins and money that you find on the ground as trash? Why or why not? How is lost paper money different from discarded paper wrappers? Who decides which has more value? When does something lost become trash?
3. The poet asks, "Is regret its own kind of trash?" (p. 111). What does she mean by that? What can we do about regret? Can it be recycled or composted or made into something useful?
4. In the poem, "Why Are We So Messy," Naomi Shihab Nye remarks, "Being a trash collector definitely changes/ how you look at the world" (pp. 121–22). Why would one be changed by collecting trash? How might trash collecting change how you look at the world?
5. What is it like to see a place with absolutely no trash, such as described in "Vero Beach Revival"? How does the poet describe such a place? What makes a place beautiful? Describe a place you have seen that was clean and clear of all trash.
6. Is there such a thing as digital trash ("Lately the Moon," pp. 146–47)? What does the poet suggest digital trash might be? Can emails, texts, and videos become "trash"? What can we do about it?
7. How does a poem express distress in a way that prose or narrative does not? How might a poet express frustration and anger through poetry?
8. Most of the poems in *Cast Away* are non-rhyming free verse. What is appealing about writing poems that don't rhyme? What is challenging? How do you decide when what you're writing is a poem, if it doesn't rhyme?
9. What do you think makes a poet want to write about trash? What makes a poet want to write about anything? What would make you want to try writing a poem?
10. Naomi Shihab Nye is the 2019–2021 Young People's Poet Laureate, chosen by the Poetry Foundation. Why do you think they chose her for this honor? What do you learn about her from reading her poems in this book?



WRITING PROMPTS

1. **Haiku.** Naomi Shihab Nye includes a haiku in this poetry collection ("College Town," p. 57) and also writes about a poet who often drafted his poems on junk mail envelopes ("Junk Mail," p. 95). Following the rules of haiku (three lines with a 5-7-5 syllable structure), try writing some haiku drafts on used envelopes or other discarded paper. Does using discarded paper help you stop worrying about being perfect? Does it change anything about your writing? Collaborate with others to create a display of trash-haiku drafts.
2. **Found Poems.** In the poem, "Read All about It!" (pp. 58–59), Naomi Shihab Nye writes about her nostalgia for newspapers and uses newspaper headlines to create a kind of "found" poem stanza. Creating "found" poetry involves using pre-existing text (from newspapers, magazines, boxes, wrappers, and other sources), selecting words or phrases from these items, and then arranging and rearranging them to create a poem. Look for sources of print and text around you in items that are discarded or trashed. Using only these materials, create your own poem. You can cut and paste those actual materials or simply select the words, phrases, or lines you want to use and write them—on discarded or scrap paper, if possible.
3. **List Poems.** One way to gain confidence in writing poetry is to imitate or emulate a poem you admire. Using Nye's poem, "Things I Found Today" (pp. 101–102) as a model, create your own list poem based on trash items you gather at home, on the bus, in the parking lot, in the hallway, from a trash can, etc. First, list all the items you found, describing them carefully; then rearrange those items on your list in a way that feels interesting. End your poem with the item that might seem most like a "treasure" and suggest why. Consider taking a photo of your pile of trash items to accompany your poem.
4. **Personification or Mask Poems.** In the poems "The Potato" (p. 143) and "Red Ribbon on the Walk" (pp. 53–54), Naomi Shihab Nye speculates on the life and origin of a single trashed object: old French fries and a red ribbon. Where did they come from? How did they end up there? To whom did they belong? What might they be thinking and wishing? Select one item of trash you've found. Write a poem giving it a life story, speculating about its inner feelings, or considering its original owner. You can take the point of view of the item (in a "mask" poem) or simply give your object thoughts and feelings of its own (with personification).



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EXTENSION ACTIVITIES

1. Turning Trash into Art

The line between trash and art can be a blurry one. Think about Andy Warhol's famous painting of a Campbell's soup can and the soup label you discard (or recycle) when you open a can of soup to cook and eat. In three different poems, "Georgia O'Keeffe on Location" (pp. 31–32), "Back Streets of Ledbury, Herefordshire, England" (pp. 118–120) and "Trash Walk 1331" (p. 136), Naomi Shihab Nye writes about how materials discarded by printers, artists, and art classes can be beautiful and inviting. If possible, gather the discards and trash from an art class or a craft or art supplies store. See what artistic composition you can create using only these items that were designated as trash (plus glue or tape, if needed). Give your composition a title and display it.

2. Eco-activism

Commit yourself to at least one week of picking up trash wherever you walk (at school, at home, around your community.) Naomi Shihab Nye encourages us to be ready with trash bags, tongs, and cotton garden gloves, if possible (pp. 5, 149). You can save or photograph some of these items for poem-writing activities, too. Challenge your classmates, friends, and family to join you in this commitment, or better yet, do a "trash walk"

together. Make note of the places you find the most trash (and what kind of trash) and investigate what might be needed to improve that situation. Then act together to try to solve that problem. That's a beginning!

3. Random Notes of Kindness

Look to the poem, "Three Blank Index Cards" (p. 114) for inspiration to promote kindness and compassion. If possible, gather index cards or create simple cards out of discarded paper. Then write a line or note of encouragement on each card (e.g., "You are not alone" or "Free joy in the sky/ Look up!") and leave each one in a different place for a friend or neighbor or stranger to discover. Keep this anonymous, of course!

4. Thinking Big

Form a group or collaborate with an established organization to plan a school-wide event to address the trash that is found in and around your school, community, or a designated park or other site. Plan an event in April in celebration of Earth Day (<https://www.earthday.org>) or in November for America Recycles Day (<https://americarecyclesday.org>).

ADDITIONAL RELEVANT WEBSITES FOR CAST AWAY

Great Pacific Garbage Patch (p. 2)

<https://theoceancleanup.com/great-pacific-garbage-patch/>

The Seabin Project (p. 2)

<https://seabinproject.com>

"Plogging" (p. 5) (jogging + trash collecting)

<https://kab.org/programs/plogging/>

Documentary film, "Trash Dance" made by Allison Orr and Andrew Garrison (p. 5)

<http://trashdancemovie.com>

Basura Bash (a trash collecting event in San Antonio, TX) (p. 6)

<https://basurabash.org>

The Other John Updike Archive (by Paul Moran) (p. 6)

<https://johnupdikeyarchive.com>

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Naomi Shihab Nye describes herself as a "wandering poet." She has spent 40 years traveling the country and the world to lead writing workshops, inspiring students of all ages. She was born to a Palestinian father and an American mother and grew up in St. Louis, Jerusalem, and San Antonio. Drawing on her Palestinian American heritage, the cultural diversity of her home in Texas, and her experiences traveling in Asia, Europe, Canada, Mexico, and the Middle East, Naomi Shihab Nye uses her writing to attest to our shared humanity.



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