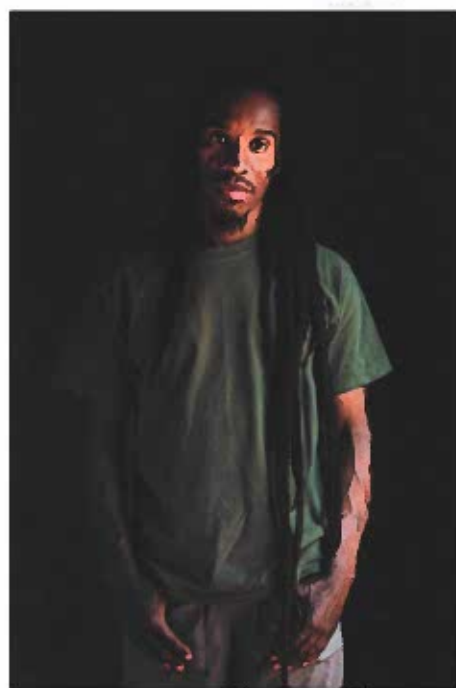


## 'YOUNG AND DYSLEXIC? YOU'VE GOT IT GOING ON' BENJAMIN ZEPHANIAH

### BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

Benjamin Zephaniah has earned widespread respect for his ability to overcome spite, prejudice and ridicule. Because of his difficulties with reading, his teachers dismissed him as unintelligent and not worthy of their attention. Rejected by a number of schools, he was unable to read when he left education at the age of 13. Unusually and bravely, he refused to give in to despair, acknowledged his difficulties and joined an adult reading class. Since then, he has taken an imaginative and constructive approach to life's challenges.

In this article from *The Guardian* newspaper, Zephaniah explains how this happened, from his early difficulties in school to his determination to write. He performed some of his early work in church at the age of 11, but found himself with a criminal record two years later. Despite this troubled period, he has gone on to become a successful poet and writer. His publication within a well-regarded national newspaper can be seen as an ironic contrast to his earlier life.



▲ Poet Benjamin Zephaniah

### BEFORE YOU START READING

- 1 Find out more about the author and his very unusual background before he became a highly regarded poet and author. Find out what you can about borstals, reform schools and life in poor inner-city areas of Britain. Write down your thoughts and highlight what you think makes a typical writer. Is Zephaniah what you would consider to be a 'traditional' writer?
- 2 Read the following example of Zephaniah's poetry, entitled *White Comedy*. Look at the way that Zephaniah uses the words 'white' and 'black' and the way that they affect other words. Look at some other examples of his poetry. What common themes can you identify within his poems?

I waz whitemailed	People called me white jack
By a white witch,	Some hailed me as a white wog,
Wid white magic	So I joined de white watch
An white lies,	Trained as a white guard
Branded by a white sheep	Lived off the white economy.
I slaved as a whitesmith	Caught and beaten by de
Near a white spot	whiteshirts
Where I suffered whitewater fever.	I waz condemned to a white mass,
Whitelisted as a whiteleg	Don't worry,
I waz in de white book	I shall be writing to de Black
As a master of white art,	House.
It waz like white death.	