**Under embargo until 00:01 Tuesday 9th November 2021**

\*\*\*Photos available on request\*\*\*

**“Poetry has power” says John Agard, the first poet to be awarded BookTrust’s prestigious Lifetime Achievement Award**

Tuesday 9th November 2021 – today, BookTrust, the UK’s largest children’s reading charity, has presented its Lifetime Achievement Award to the playwright, poet, and children's writer John Agard. John is the first poet to receive the prestigious award for his outstanding contribution to children’s literature.

John has published more than 50 books, including poetry for all ages, stories, and non-fiction. In 2012, he was presented with the Queen’s Gold Medal for poetry and has seen his poems *Half Caste* and *Checking Out Me History* studied by thousands of students as part of their GCSE curriculum.

Growing up in Guyana, John developed a love for language from the cricket commentary on the radio to the Caribbean Creole he heard at the market. He worked in jobs surrounded by books and language – including in a library, as a teacher and writing for a newspaper – before moving to England in 1977, where he became a touring lecturer for the Commonwealth Institute to promote a better understanding of Caribbean culture. Over the course of the next eight years, he visited 2,500 schools and realised poetry was a way to connect and inspire the children he met. Now, his poems and stories are read, studied and adored by children and adults across the world.

The [BookTrust Lifetime Achievement Award](https://www.booktrust.org.uk/lifetime-achievement-award) celebrates the body of work of an author and/or illustrator who has made an outstanding contribution to children's literature. The judges highlighted John’s persistence and creativity in championing and challenging the language norms that too often dominate literature and the curriculum as well as his ability to connect with children today and inspire them to reach for their goals and aspirations, whatever they may be.

**On being recognised for the Lifetime Achievement Award, John said:** “It means a lot to be given this award by BookTrust – an organisation which treasures books and tries to make them part of a life-enhancing experience for a child. It excites me that I’m the first poet to win. I feel happy that I’ve stuck with this craft since I was 16-year-old boy writing in a classroom in a Caribbean ex-colony. It’s not just me receiving this award, but all the people that inspired me. People like my teacher Father Maxwell, the people who published my books, those who contributed to my journey way back in the Caribbean, and John Arlott, the legendary cricket commentator who inspired me with his words.

“This thing called poetry has power and I still get excitement from language. I find joy in standing in front of people and reading a poem. I know this thing connects. This thing could touch a soul. This thing doesn't have to be didactic; I don't have to preach to people. My whole brain is on a tidal wave of delight.”

**Diana Gerald, CEO of BookTrust said:** “John’s incredible words have caught the imagination of a whole generation of children. Over the years, teachers, school librarians and students have talked about how John’s poetry captivated their classes, whether they have seen him perform in person, or have simply read the poem aloud to themselves. Poems, such as *Half Caste* and *Checking Out Me History,* have no doubt challenged and changed how poetry is studied and enjoyed in the classroom and demonstrated that it is a modern and relevant medium with the ability to connect with children, whatever their background.

“I’m particularly thrilled that this year’s award is going to someone who explores and experiments with different ideas and genres, showing children and adults everywhere just what language can do and demonstrating the power of an authentic voice when it comes to storytelling - important messages that children today, whatever their background need to see, experience and have access to.”

**Nicolette Jones, Chair of the judging panel, said: “**John Agard has helped to change the scope of children’s literature.  He revels in a range of language from the everyday to the specialist, embracing the possibilities of English, and bringing sources we might think of as rarefied – Dante, the Greek myths, scientific terminology – into the experience of all youngsters. As a performer and as a writer, he has spread his enthusiasm and his joyous delight in words and stories to his audiences for decades and opened doors for them all as readers and writers. His work is full of fun, but it also tells young people that nothing is too ambitious for them to engage with.”

The judges for the 2021 BookTrust Lifetime Achievement Award were journalist Nicolette Jones (chairing), CEO of BookTrust Diana Gerald, children’s author Piers Torday, screenwriter and novelist Frank Cottrell-Boyce, Teaching Fellow at UCL Institute of Education Darren Chetty and Candy Gourlay, award winning author of *Tall Story* and *Shine.*

The prize is managed by BookTrust and comes with an Honorarium of £5,000 provided by Arts Council England.

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**Notes to Editors**

**About BookTrust:**

BookTrust is dedicated to getting children reading because we know that children who read are happier, healthier, more empathetic and more creative. Their early language development is supported and they also do better at school.

We are the UK’s largest children’s reading charity; each year we reach **3.9 million children** across the UK with books, resources and support to help develop a love of reading, because we know that reading can transform lives.

We work with a variety of partners to get children excited about books, rhymes and stories, because if reading is fun, children will want to do it. Our books are delivered via health, library, schools and early years practitioners, and are supported with guidance, advice and resources to encourage the reading habit.

[www.booktrust.org.uk](http://www.booktrust.org.uk) @Booktrust #LifetimeAchievementAward

**About the BookTrust Lifetime Achievement Award**

Previous winners of the Lifetime Achievement Award include David McKee, Shirley Hughes, the late Judith Kerr, Raymond Briggs, Helen Oxenbury and the late John Burningham, who were awarded the first ever double prize in 2018 and Jan Pieńkowski, the award-winning Polish-born author and illustrator, famous for his iconic *Meg and Mog* books.

Social media tags:

@booktrust

#LifeTimeAchievementAward

**Quotes from judges and other prominent authors**

**Piers Torday, Lifetime Achievement Award 2021 judge said,** "John Agard is not just one of our greatest poet and writers for children, but one of our greatest writers period. With every word, every line, he reinvents the form and challenges readers to see the world afresh, whilst always inviting them in at the same time. For over forty years, he has championed poetry in schools - sometimes a lonely path - and made us sing and dance with joy along the way.  He is a master of his art, a superb communicator and a born storyteller - his contribution to children's love of literature in this country is immeasurable and this recognition is long overdue."

**Candy Gourlay, LAA 2021 judge and author, said: “**John Agard is the national treasure that, shamefully, many of us have never heard of. His work has been quietly infusing the nation's creative spaces for decades, inspiring and challenging, questioning and questing, visiting themes and ways of being that tend to be left unexamined, unexplored, underestimated by an undiverse publishing industry. The man has persisted though, physically delivering his work from door to door, from school to school, from stage to stage. Like him, his writings PERSIST. In short print runs and small collections and independent publishings, always fighting to be heard, always rising, a one-man revolution. He makes us laugh and makes us think, he plays with language, attacks it, makes it his own. He can be subversive, explosive, at the same time wise, thoughtful, moving. It seems John Agard has been on the National Curriculum forever, but that work is just a tiny glimpse of the worlds he has in store for young readers.”

**Frank Cottrell-Boyce, LAA 2021 judge and author said, “**We are the stories we tell. John Agard has been telling stories that need to be told and singing songs that need to be sung beautifully and faithfully for decades.  It’s great to have this chance to tell his tale and sing his praises.”

**Darren Chetty, LAA 2021 judge, teacher** said: “John Agard is a wonderful writer and performer with that rare ability to write for a wide age range and to connect with his audience both on page and in person. His work explores language and culture with curiosity, criticality and humour, resisting neat categorisation for something richer and altogether more interesting. For many people in the UK, in the 1970s and 1980s, John was one of the only writers from the Caribbean that they encountered at school. His linguistic dexterity is in sharp contrast to the language codes enforced on many children. Many of today’s young poets grew up reading John at school and following in his footsteps - sometimes literally, as they tour schools in the way that he has done for decades.”