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POETLAUREATE
OF JAMAICA

Highlights

Awards Ceremony
2026 Poet
Laureate Prizes
for Poetry



The National Library of Jamaica (NLJ) hosted the Awards Ceremony for the 2026 Poet Laureate Prizes for Poetry on World Poetry Day, March 21, 2026, at the Edna Manley College of the Visual and Performing Arts. The ceremony celebrated the richness of Jamaica's poetic arts and its ongoing evolution and vitality. The evening brought together poets, literary enthusiasts, and cultural stakeholders in a shared tribute to the power of language and creative expression.

Twenty shortlisted poets were recognized at the ceremony, from which first, second, and third place winners were announced across the following four (4) categories: the Louise Bennett-Coverley Prize for Poetry, the Michael Cooke Prize for Poetry, the Edward Baugh Prize for Poetry, and the Young Writer's Prize for Poetry. A new category, the NLJ JNC-UNESCO Social Media People's Choice Award, was also introduced this year, adding a dynamic and engaging dimension to the Awards.

WORLD POETRY DAY CELEBRATION 2026

Theme: Replenishment: New Jamaican Poetry

EVENT PROGRAMME

Poetry Piece

An excerpt from *Replenishment: A Prayer After Melissa*

National Anthem

Welcome

Ms. Joy Douglas, OD

Chairman of the Board of Management, NLJ

Remarks

Mr. Everton Hannam

Secretary General, Jamaica National Commission for UNESCO

Poetry Reading

Dr. Olive Senior, CD

Former Poet Laureate of Jamaica, 2021-2024

Celebrating Our Poets

A Tribute to Neville Dawes, MA (Oxon)

Commemorating his Centenary 1926-2026

Novelist, Poet, Critic, Director of the Institute of Jamaica

Remarks

Professor Kwame Dawes, CD

Poet Laureate of Jamaica 2025-2028

Poetry Reading

Ms. Yashika Graham

Jamaican Poet/ 2023 University of Iowa
International Writing Program Fellow

AWARDS CEREMONY- POET LAUREATE PRIZES FOR POETRY COMPETITION

The Winning Word

Poetry Readings from the Prize Winners

Keynote Address

Mr. DeanRoy Bernard

Permanent Secretary,

Minister of Culture, Gender, Entertainment and Sport

REPRESENTING

The Hon. Olivia Grange, OJ, CD, MP

Minister of Culture, Gender, Entertainment and Sport

Special Musical Item

Dr. Kathy Bown

Jamaican Pianist

Poetry Performance

Mr. Owen Blakka Ellis

Jamaican Actor, Writer and Educator

Vote of Thanks

Ms. Francina Francis

Director of Special Programmes, NLJ

Closing Remarks

Ms. Dahlia Harris

Master of Ceremonies

Refreshments and Networking

Remarks and
Poetry
Readings

2026 World Poetry Day Celebration



Ms. Joy Douglas, OD, Chairman of the Board of Management, National Library of Jamaica

“World Poetry Day, established by UNESCO over 20 years ago, reminds us of the enduring power of poetry as one of humanity’s most profound forms of expression. Poetry allows us to record our histories. It gives voice to our experiences and reflects on the social and cultural realities that shape our lives. In Jamaica, poetry has long held a special place in our cultural heritage and expression of self. Today, as we celebrate the power and beauty of poetry, it is profoundly fitting that we recognize excellence in the craft through the Poet Laureate Prizes for Poetry Competition.

This year's (World Poetry Day) theme, ‘*Replenishment: New Jamaican Poetry*’, invites us to reflect on renewal, restoration, and the sustaining force of creative expression. Poetry, at its core, has the remarkable ability to replenish the human spirit. It restores language to us in moments when words seem difficult to find and it allows communities to record and process their collective experiences.

In a time when our nation continues to reflect on the challenges brought about by events such as Hurricane Melissa, the theme of *Replenishment* is especially meaningful. Poetry becomes a space where the stories of resilience, recovery, and hope can be documented and shared through the voices of poets, both emerging and established. We are reminded that creativity can help us to rebuild, reconnect, and re-imagine the future.

We often think of historians as the ones who record a nation's story. But as the present Poet Laureate, Professor Kwame Dawes reminds us, historians chronicle events, the dates, the policies and accounts of the happenings. Poets, however, chronicle the sentiment of the times. They tell us how it felt to be alive during those events.”

(an excerpt)

2026 World Poetry Day Celebration



Professor Kwame Dawes, CD
Poet Laureate of Jamaica 2025-2028

“One of the exciting things about this contest is that you get a chance to read what people are thinking about and what people are writing about in Jamaica. So I've learned a number of things from this exercise and these are truths that are valuable. The first is that Jamaicans are still writing poetry and I don't take that for granted and I don't take that lightly. The second thing is, there are still people who believe that language and the use of language to articulate feeling, thought and experience remain valid and necessary and that was demonstrated in the work that we saw.

The other thing I noticed, too, through this process, is a certain level of audacity. The audacity to say, ‘you know what’, I’m going in a competition to try to win it and for a poet, there has to be a smattering of audacity in the midst of all the insecurities that you might have and there's certainly that level of audacity that has come through; in the fact that these poets have entered.

One of the things that we're committed to, is to keep encouraging people to write poetry, because we believe that, apart from its benefits to the individual, it has the benefit of reminding us as a society that there are sentiments and feelings of the moment that need to be articulated and that need to be expressed.

I'll say this, that if we can continue to create a space for writers to write about those difficult things and to give voice to them, so that we can heighten the conscience and the capacity for empathy in our society, we will be doing a good thing. This is one of the reasons why this contest should continue.”

(an excerpt)

2026 World Poetry Day Celebration



Mr. DeanRoy Bernard, Permanent Secretary,
Ministry of Culture, Gender, Entertainment
and Sport

“We are very happy to see what is happening here today. Jamaica stands proud. When I look at the shortlisted poets, they're all young people. And when I hear them and I see how they move and how they write, I know that Jamaica is in good and safe hands.

The theme *Replenishment*, ladies and gentlemen, reminds us of water, the most elemental force of renewal. And just as water restores the land, creative expression restores the human spirit. Poetry becomes a wellspring through which communities process pain, honour survival, and imagine a future beyond devastation. In recent times, our nation has once again been reminded of the delicate balance between destruction and renewal.

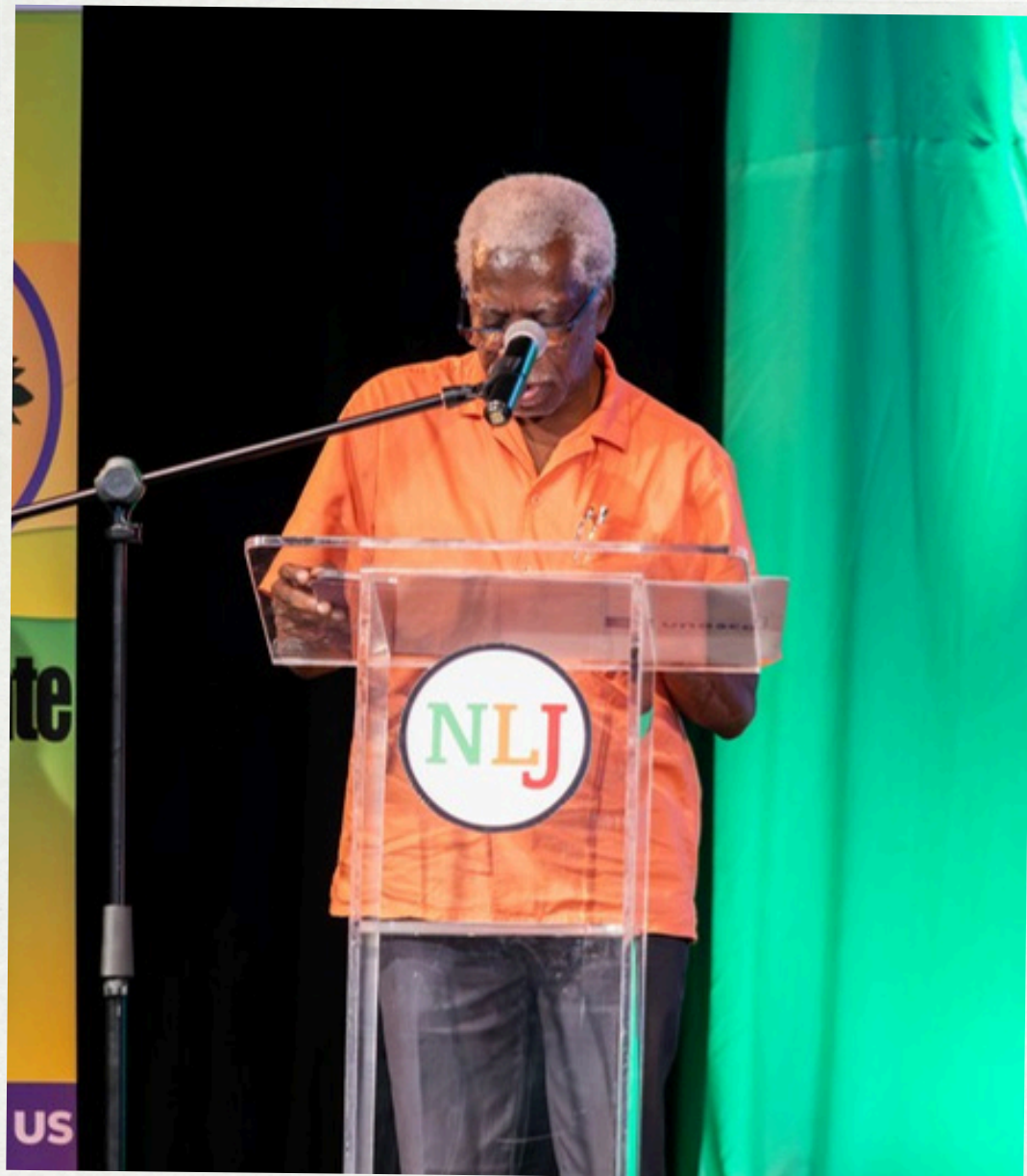
The aftermath of Hurricane Melissa has tested communities across the island, especially those in the West. Yet, as Jamaicans (we) have done time and time again, we respond not with surrender, but with resilience. Like rivers turn into their course, our people rise again. It is within the spirit of renewal and restoration that the Ministry of Culture, Gender, Entertainment, and Sport continues its commitment to nurturing Jamaica's vibrant literary and artistic landscape.

We remain steadfast in ensuring that our nation's poetic voices, emerging and established alike, have the platforms and support necessary to flourish. The National Library of Jamaica, through the Poet Laureate of Jamaica Programme, continues to safeguard and promote Jamaica's literary heritage.”

(an excerpt)

2026

World Poetry Day Celebration



Mr. Everton Hannam, Secretary General,
Jamaica National Commission for UNESCO

“Poetry has travelled with humanity across every continent and through every era in a few carefully chosen words. It captures the beauty, tensions, and emotions of life, transmitting values, bridging cultures, and giving voice to those who might otherwise go unheard. This is precisely why UNESCO has celebrated World Poetry Day every year since 1999.

This commitment runs deeper than a single day; indeed, protecting poetry means ensuring that the voices, values, and sensibilities of past generations continue to speak to new ones.

In 2025, UNESCO’s Memory of the World Programme inscribed the writings of Hamzah Fansuri, a foundational figure of Malay literature; the works of Katherine Mansfield, New Zealand’s most internationally recognized writer; and the Archives de La Parole, a French initiative dedicated to preserving languages in their spoken form. At the same time, UNESCO safeguards poetic traditions on the Intangible Cultural Heritage List, such as Lebanese Al-Zajal, Mongolian Tuuli, and the Mauritian Epic of Samba Gueladio.

Protecting poetry also means safeguarding linguistic diversity. Poetry keeps languages alive not only on the page, but in voice, imagination, and collective memory. In this way, it plays a vital role in sustaining endangered languages—a mission central to the International Decade of Indigenous Languages (2022–2032).

Finally, protecting poetry also means protecting freedom of expression. At a time when conflict and crisis are multiplying, poets and writers are increasingly threatened, censored, or silenced. UNESCO’s Aschberg Programme works to defend those who create and to preserve the cultural space where artistic voices can speak freely.”

(an excerpt)

2026
World Poetry Day Celebration



Ms. Dahlia Harris, Master of Ceremonies



Dr. Olive Senior, Jamaican Author and
Former Poet Laureate of Jamaica 2021-2024



Ms. Yashika Graham, Jamaican Poet/ 2023
University of Iowa International Writing
Program Fellow

2026
World Poetry Day Celebration



Mr. Alwyn Scott, Jamaican Writer and Poet



Mr. Owen 'Blakka Ellis', Jamaican Actor,
Writer and Educator



Dr. Kathy Bown, Jamaican Pianist



Ms. Francina Francis, Director of Special
Programmes, NLJ

Awards Ceremony





L-R: **Zoe Duncan**, 1st place winner of the 2026 Young Writer's Prize for Poetry, receives her award from Professor Kwame Dawes, CD, Poet Laureate of Jamaica 2025-2028.

1ST PLACE WINNER

**YOUNG WRITER'S
PRIZE FOR POETRY**

(Zoe Duncan)

*Title of Poem: 'After the Storm,
Black River'*





R-L: **Rashaun Stewart**, 2nd place winner of the 2026 Young Writer's Prize for Poetry, receives his award from Professor Kwame Dawes, CD, Poet Laureate of Jamaica 2025-2028.

2ND PLACE WINNER

**YOUNG WRITER'S
PRIZE FOR POETRY**

(Rashaun Stewart)

*Title of Poem: 'After The
Roaring'*





1ST PLACE WINNER

**MICHAEL COOKE
PRIZE FOR POETRY**

(Gabrielle Campbell)

Title of Poem: 'An Ode to Puke'



L-R: **Gabrielle Campbell**, 1st place winner of the 2026 Michael Cooke Prize for Poetry, receives her award from Mr. DeanRoy Bernard, Permanent Secretary in the Ministry of Culture, Gender, Entertainment and Sport.



2ND PLACE WINNER

**MICHAEL COOKE
PRIZE FOR POETRY**

(Sherol Small)

Title of Poem: 'Sixteen'



L-R: **Sherol Small**, 2nd place winner of the 2026 Michael Cooke Prize for Poetry, receives her award from Mr. DeanRoy Bernard, Permanent Secretary in the Ministry of Culture, Gender, Entertainment and Sport.



L-R: **Sean Easy**, 1st place winner of the 2026 Louise Bennett Coverley Prize for Poetry, receives his award from Ms. Joy Douglas OD, Chairman of the Board of Management, NLJ.

1ST PLACE WINNER

THE LOUISE BENNETT COVERLEY PRIZE FOR POETRY

(Sean Easy)

*Title of Poem: 'Stone Mash
Glass, Eventually'*





2ND PLACE WINNER

THE LOUISE BENNETT
COVERLEY PRIZE FOR
POETRY

(Britton Wright)

Title of Poem: 'Bird Shooting'



L-R: Marlon Thompson collects the award on behalf of **Britton Wright**, 2nd place winner of the 2026 Louise Bennett Coverley Prize for Poetry. He receives the award from Ms. Joy Douglas OD, Chairman of the Board of Management, NLJ.



3RD PLACE WINNER

THE LOUISE BENNETT
COVERLEY PRIZE FOR
POETRY

(Veronia Jackson)

Title of Poem: 'Where the Grass is Greener'



L-R: Jurrolia Jemmieson collects the award on behalf of **Veronia Jackson**, 3rd place winner of the 2026 Louise Bennett Coverley Prize for Poetry. She receives the award from Ms. Joy Douglas OD, Chairman of the Board of Management, NLJ.



L-R: **Shaquille Brown**, 1st place winner of the 2026 Edward Baugh Prize for Poetry, receives his award from Mrs. Shelia Baugh, Wife of the late Professor Edward Baugh.

1ST PLACE WINNER

**THE EDWARD BAUGH
PRIZE FOR POETRY**

(Shaquille Brown)

*Title of Poem: 'How to Fold A
Paper Boat'*





L-R: **Jomo Dixon**, 2nd place winner of the 2026 Edward Baugh Prize for Poetry, receives his award from Mrs. Shelia Baugh, Wife of the late Professor Edward Baugh.

2ND PLACE WINNER

**THE EDWARD BAUGH
PRIZE FOR POETRY**

(Jomo Dixon)

Title of Poem: 'Fish'





L-R: **Kevin Pinnock**, 3rd place winner of the 2026 Edward Baugh Prize for Poetry, receives his award from Mrs. Shelia Baugh, Wife of the late Professor Edward Baugh.

3RD PLACE WINNER

**THE EDWARD BAUGH
PRIZE FOR POETRY**

(Kevin Pinnock)

*Title of Poem: 'After the Chair
Emptied'*





L-R: **Rashaun Stewart**, winner of the 2026 NLJ, JNC-UNESCO Social Media People's Choice Award, receives a trophy from Mr. Everton Hannam, Secretary General, Jamaica National Commission for UNESCO.

WINNER

**SOCIAL MEDIA
PEOPLE'S CHOICE
AWARD**

(Rashaun Stewart)

*Title of Poem: 'After The
Roaring'*



HONOURABLE MENTIONS

Name of Poet

Romekie Pike

Jameika Johnson

Inca Brady

Paul Codner

Natalie Drummond

Shannon Chen See

Allencia Lyn

Doniella Jones

Title of Poem

Where Love Learns My Body

Elegy for the Drunken Man

Population Decline

Inherit the Dream

What the House Remembered

Act of Penitence

Perfect Pandemonium

The Day After

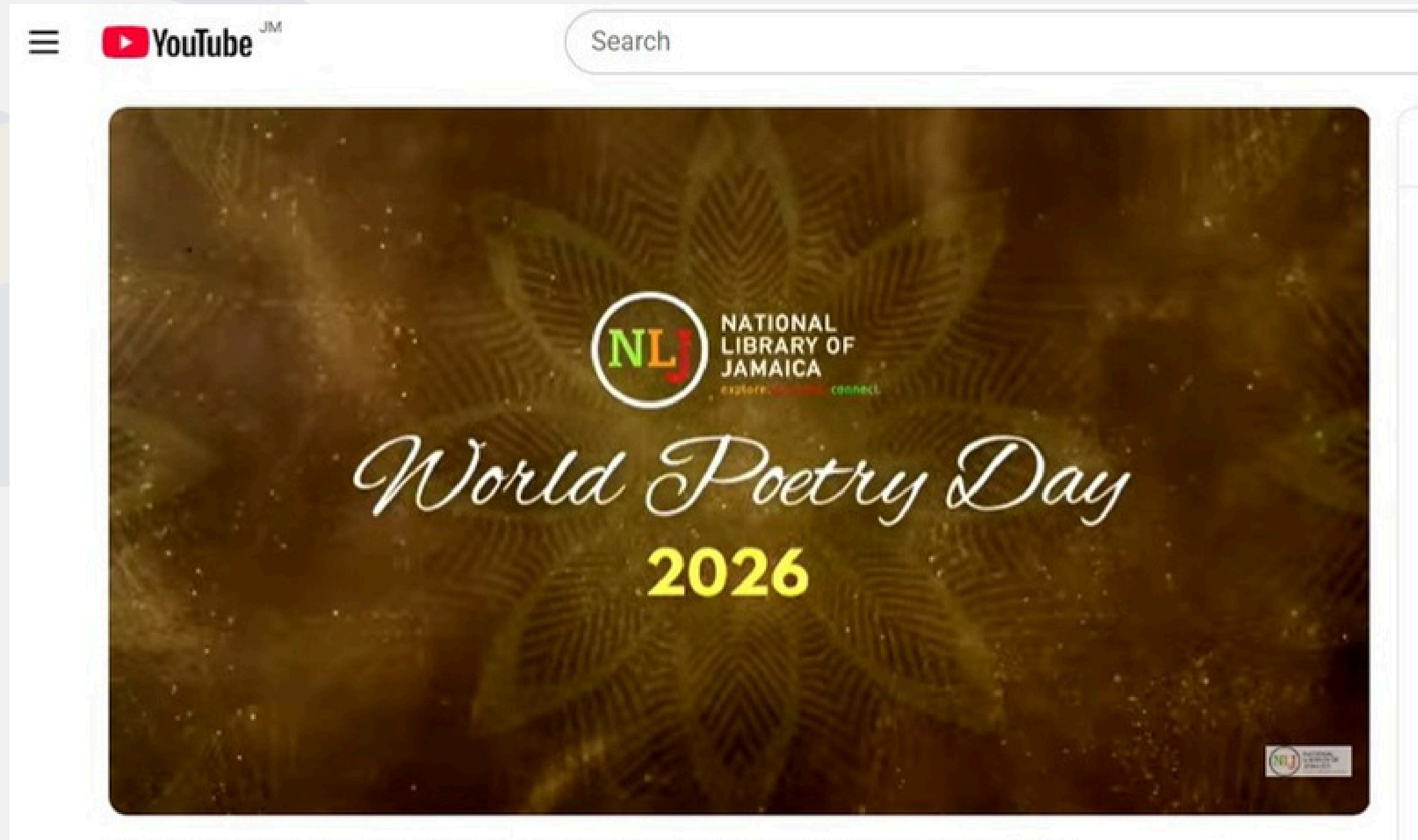




MORE HIGHLIGHTS



2026
World Poetry Day Celebration



If you missed the Awards Ceremony, you can watch highlights via the NLJ's YouTube Channel.

Link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6HiSK9UvM-8&t=1527s>

*Thank You for Celebrating
World Poetry Day 2026
With Us.*

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