

Why is Rumi the Best-selling Poet in the US?

Rūmī, in full **Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī**, (1207-1273), the greatest [Sufi](#) mystic and poet in the [Persian language](#), famous for his lyrics and for his [didactic](#) epic [Maṣnavī-yi Ma'navī](#) (“Spiritual Couplets”), which widely influenced mystical thought and literature throughout the [Muslim world](#).

Rūmī used Persian, Arabic, Turkish and Greek languages in his [poetry](#). The influence of his writings have influence on Indian subcontinent also. By the end of the 20th century, his popularity had become a global phenomenon, with his poetry achieving a wide circulation in western Europe and the [United States](#).

His ecstatic poems have made him the most popular poet in the US.

His fans are legion (in large number) globally

“He’s this compelling figure in all cultures,” says Brad Gooch, who is writing a biography of Rumi.

“The map of Rumi’s life covers 2,500 miles,” says Gooch, who has traveled from Rumi’s birthplace in Vakhsh, a small village what is now Tajikistan, to Samarkand in Uzbekistan, to Iran and to Syria, where Rumi studied at Damascus and Aleppo in his twenties. His final stop was Konya, in Turkey, where Rumi spent the last 50 years of his life. Today Rumi’s tomb draws reverent followers and heads of state each year on 17 December, the anniversary of his death.

The transformative moment in Rumi’s life came in 1244, when he met a wandering mystic known as Shams of Tabriz. “The two of them have this electric friendship for three years. Rumi became a mystic. After three years Shams disappeared – “possibly murdered by a jealous son of Rumi, possibly teaching Rumi an important lesson in separation.” “Most of his poetry comes from age 37 to 67. He wrote 3,000 [love songs] to Shams, the prophet Muhammad and God. He wrote 2,000 rubayat, four-line quatrains. He wrote in couplets a six-volume spiritual epic, The Masnavi.”

Rumi incorporated poetry, music and dance into religious practice. Centuries after his death, Rumi’s work is recited, chanted, set to music and used as inspiration for novels, poems, music, films.

The inward eye

“He’s a poet of joy and of love,” says Gooch. “His work comes out of dealing with the separation from Shams and from love and the source of creation, and out of facing death. Rumi’s message cuts through and communicates.

“Rumi is a very mysterious and provocative poet and figure for our time, as we grapple with understanding the Sufi tradition [and] understanding the nature of ecstasy and devotion and the power of poetry.

“Across time, place and culture, Rumi's poems articulate what it feels like to be alive,” says Lee Briccetti, executive director of Poets House, co-sponsor of a national library series in the US that features Rumi. “And they help us understand our own search for love and the ecstatic in the coil of daily life.” She compares Rumi’s work to Shakespeare’s for its “resonance and beauty”.

Coleman Barks, the translator whose work sparked an American Rumi renaissance and made Rumi the best-selling poet in the US, ticks off the reasons Rumi endures: “His startling imaginative freshness. The deep longing that we feel coming through. His sense of humour. There's always a playfulness [mixed] in with the wisdom.”

In 1976 the poet Robert Bly handed Barks a copy of Cambridge don AJ Arberry’s translation of Rumi and said, “These poems need to be released from their cages.” Barks transformed them from stiff academic language into American-style free verse. Since then, Barks’ translations have yielded 22 volumes in 33 years: The Essential Rumi, A Year with Rumi, Rumi: The Big Red Book and Rumi’s father’s spiritual diary, The Drowned Book. They have sold more than 2m copies worldwide and have been translated into 23 languages.

It is said that people of all religions came to Rumi's funeral in 1273. Because, they said, he deepens our faith wherever we are.

“Rumi was an experimental innovator among the Persian poets and he was a Sufi master,” says Jawid Mojaddedi, a scholar of early and medieval Sufism at Rutgers University and an award-winning Rumi translator. “This combination of mystical richness and bold adaptations of poetic forms is the key to his popularity today.”

The first of Rumi’s four main innovations is his direct address to readers.

Second is his urge to teach: “Readers of ‘inspirational’ literature are drawn to Rumi’s poetry.”

Third, “his use of everyday imagery.” And fourth, “his optimism of the attainment of union within his lyrical love ghazals.

Mojaddedi has completed his translation of three of the six volumes of Rumi’s masterwork, The Masnavi. It is also arguably the second most influential text in the Islamic world after the Qu’ran

As new translations come into print, and his work continues to resonate, Rumi’s influence will continue. His inspiring words remind us how poetry can be a sustaining part of everyday life.