



Book Club

Reviews and recommendations from critic Ron Charles.



By [Ron Charles](#)

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Yucef Merhi created three poetry-generating lamps for this year's O, Miami festival in Miami, Fla. (Courtesy of O, Miami)

O, Miami, what will you think of next? Every year since 2011, a nonprofit organization called O, Miami works to make sure everybody in the city encounters poetry during the month of April. Of course, there are workshops, readings and other public events, but the group always devises more unusual schemes, too.

For instance, you might be bummed to find a **parking ticket** on your car only to discover it's actually a poem! Poems will also appear on public transportation, on those little stickers attached to fresh produce in the grocery store and even on cans of ale.

And this year, O, Miami has announced its first Technically Poetic commission: It's a fantastical intersection of electronics, poetics and serendipity called **Wish-a-Poem**. This interactive project involves three libraries in Miami. At each library, patrons will see a magic lamp on a white pedestal. When they rub that lamp, phrases of a new poem appear simultaneously on screens at all three libraries.

This installation recalls "The Arabian Nights," but the genie in this case is Yucef Merhi, who studied philosophy, physics and interactive telecommunications. To create the language behind Wish-a-Poem, he built a database of phrases drawn from the poetry archive of O, Miami and generated by artificial intelligence.

"I see poetry as a living matter," Merhi tells me, "as something that is constantly changing and transforming. Every time you rub the lamp, you get a new poem, and the combinations or the poetry combinations that you can get are in the number of thousands."

While some of us are alarmed about the potentially deleterious effects of AI, Merhi hopes to celebrate its creative applications. "Trying to make this 10 years ago was science fiction," he says. "Now we have the ability to do things that were dreams in the past. AI can be an amazing tool for expanding our possibilities, expanding our desire to create."

"We need to understand that we've been developing the reality that we are experiencing now for millennia. If you look at the 17th and 18th centuries, you

will see the incredible advances on technologies, like the automata in Vienna and several cities in Europe that were able to make music and write and dance. This is just part of history that connects art, technology and science.”

Aladdin’s lamp holds special meaning to Merhi because it represents an ancient metaphor of non-Western technology that brought dreams to life. “We’ve been trying to replicate non-human intelligence for many, many centuries,” he notes. “But instead of asking for fortune or objects of desire, you are asking, in this case, for a poem.”

“One of the ideas behind Wish-a-Poem is that people can create community, they can feel togetherness through technology, through time and space, but also that they can *experience* poetry, not only read poetry.” There’s the rub.

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