

## *Book Notes*

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By Jefferson Scholar-in-Residence  
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### *Readers' Favorite Poems: Part Two*



[1]

Today, in this second *Book Notes* exploring readers suggestions about poets and poems we might enjoy, we will look into the poetry of Billy Collins.

Billy Collins is Leo Durocher's living rebuff.

Durocher – “Leo the Lip” – famously (infamously?) said, “Nice guys finish last.” Generational fact-check for those under, oh, let’s say 60, certainly for those under 50. Legendary for his pugnacity, competitive, take-no-prisoners spirit and frequent vulgarity, Durocher was a major figure in early and mid-20th century Major League Baseball. First as a shortstop for the Brooklyn Dodgers and the St. Louis Cardinals’ “Gashouse Gang” teams of the 1930s, then as a manager for both the Dodgers and New York Giants, Durocher was a twitter-troll before there was Twitter.

Interestingly, he might never have uttered the wisecrack for which he is famous. In July 1946 while managing the Dodgers, before a game with the Giants while defending his combative team, he allegedly said, “The nice guys are all over

there, in seventh place.” *The Sporting News*, which in those days focused solely on baseball and nicknamed “the bible of baseball,” headlined in its next issue “Nice Guys Wind Up in Last Place, Scoffs Lippy.” [2] Over time, the quip crystallized into the enduring “Nice guys finish last.”

Well, as my colleague Pat Cuneo will remind me, having successfully buried the lead, back to Billy Collins. Last week, I said I have never caught the “Billy Collins Bug.” I remarked that I found him facile. I tended to agree with Ben Wilkinson, who in a review of *Aimless Love* for *The Guardian*, said Collins “writes lines that are more serious than they seem, though by how much, you’d be hard pressed to say.” [8]

Which is wrong. As readers of *Book Notes* whose opinions I respect have helped me to discover, Collins is worth the read. Why? I’ll come back to that in a moment, but first who is Billy Collins?

Billy Collins is the nice guy of contemporary American poetry. Neither by popularity nor merit, however, is he, in baseball slang, a tailender. As long ago as 1999, Bruce Weber in *The New York Times*, said “It can be argued that with his books selling briskly and his readings packing them in, Mr. Collins is the most popular poet in America.” [3]

The occasion for the *Times* article was an argument between Random House, which wanted to produce a selection of Collins’ poems, and the University of Pittsburgh Poetry Press, which had originally published them. The University of Pittsburgh initially refused to release the rights, noting that Collins’ books sold and made a slight profit for the university press. A genuine rarity in poetry publishing. Even rarer was the six-figure advance Random House gave Collins. As you probably have already guessed, to paraphrase Dana Goia, “Money talks,” and when it does, people listen. [4] Random House prevailed, although it had to wait until 2001 to publish *Sailing Alone Around the Room*, which became, by poetry standards, a bestseller.

Collins’ popularity continues to today. He still outsells all other poets; his readings and lectures continue to draw large crowds. He has twice been U.S. Poet Laureate; *Poetry* magazine has awarded him multiple prizes in recognition of his poems they have published; numerous other accolades have come his way; and he is the recipient of multiple grants. [5] As U.S. Poet Laureate, he was asked to write a poem commemorating the first anniversary of the attack on the Twin Towers. He read his poem, “Names,” before a joint session of Congress. [6]

Like many contemporary poets, Collins is an academic, but his poetry is not academic, which is a good thing. A graduate of the College of the Holy Cross, Collins holds both an M.A. and a Ph.D. in English from the University of California-Riverside. He has taught at Columbia, Sarah Lawrence, and Lehman College of the City University of New York, at which he is a Distinguished Professor. Among other postings, he is currently a faculty member at the State University of New York-Stonybrook. [7]

His academic credentials aside, Collins’ poetry is not academic, in the sense that his verse is not turgid, clotted, and determined to show us how much the poet knows. In short, his poems are not high-minded, lofty, and written for other academics. He rejects academic analysis, in which a poem is dissected in pursuit of its meaning, as if it were some sort of word puzzle to solve; the kind of analysis that can lead to the expression, “the operation was a success but the patient died”

as in his:

### Introduction to Poetry

I ask them to take a poem  
and hold it up to the light  
like a color slide

or press an ear against its hive.

I say drop a mouse into a poem  
and watch him probe his way out,

or walk inside the poem's room  
and feel the walls for a light switch.

I want them to waterski  
across the surface of a poem  
waving at the author's name on the shore.

But all they want to do  
is tie the poem to a chair with rope  
and torture a confession out of it.

They begin beating it with a hose  
to find out what it really means. [9]

No, Collins is not a self-absorbed academic, although he does at times dwell too much upon himself as a poet, as in

*from* The First Line of a Poem

Before it flutters into my mouth,  
I might spend days squinting  
into the wind  
like an old man  
trying to thread a needle  
by a window  
in the dying light of late afternoon. [10]

Collins' poetry exhibits the two traits I most highly value in a poet. First, his poems are written in a clear and lucid diction – the language people actually speak. They are transparent and easily accessible. They include no, or very few, obscure references intended to validate the poet's perception and to dazzle readers with the poet's erudition. Nor are they so solipsistic that one can't penetrate the clotted diction to grasp what the poet is trying to say. Collins writes in a clear, clean English easily accessible to the attentive reader.

If, as I happen to believe, the poet's mission is to help readers be more attentive, more attuned, more *present-to-the-present*, then Collins' sharp eye finds epiphanies in the commonplace. His poems deal with life's banalities and subtleties. In many ways, Collins is a reporter of the ordinary sharing with his readers his joy (and sometimes sorrow) at the discovery of the magical in the everyday. As in his

from Dharma

The way the dog trots out the front door  
every morning  
without a hat or an umbrella,  
without any money  
or the keys to her dog house  
never fails to fill the saucer of my heart  
with milky admiration. [11]

That he is not completely clueless, Collins demonstrates later in the poem as he regrets the way the dog shoves aside the cat and too eagerly seeks the poet's welcoming rub behind the ears.

If there is a criticism of Collins, it is, as in '*Dharma*,' that he is too transparent, too light; in short, a lightweight. While at times he can be maddeningly superficial or undercut his observation with a perhaps too cute concluding comment, upon a second or even third look one realizes that the mild gentle manner of his style leads the reader into a deeper understanding and perception of our world. As in

### Aimless Love

This morning as I walked along the lake shore,  
I fell in love with a wren  
and later in the day with a mouse  
the cat had dropped under the dining room table.

In the shadows of an autumn evening,  
I fell for a seamstress  
still at her machine in the tailor's window,  
and later for a bowl of broth,  
steam rising like smoke from a naval battle.

This is the best kind of love, I thought,  
without recompense, without gifts,  
or unkind words, without suspicion,  
or silence on the telephone.

The love of the chestnut,  
the jazz cap and one hand on the wheel.

No lust, no slam of the door—  
the love of the miniature orange tree,  
the clean white shirt, the hot evening shower,  
the highway that cuts across Florida.

No waiting, no huffiness, or rancor—  
just a twinge every now and then

for the wren who had built her nest  
on a low branch overhanging the water  
and for the dead mouse,  
still dressed in its light brown suit.

But my heart is always propped up  
in a field on its tripod,  
ready for the next arrow.

After I carried the mouse by the tail  
to a pile of leaves in the woods,  
I found myself standing at the bathroom sink  
gazing down affectionately at the soap,

so patient and soluble,  
so at home in its pale green soap dish.  
I could feel myself falling again  
as I felt its turning in my wet hands  
and caught the scent of lavender and stone. [12]

Collins demonstrates again and again that you don't have to be melancholy or morose to be profound. In fact, I think it is his good spirits, his simple joy at being that causes some readers to miss his insights. He is genuinely happy. He loves writing poetry. He loves sharing it with his readers. In that writing and sharing, Collins finds joy.

A Collins poem I particularly enjoyed was one recommended by Roz. Roz is a former colleague of mine from Cleveland. To say she is a world traveler is an understatement. I think she has been on every continent. My wife Judy and I traveled with her and a group on two occasions. Our trip to Israel in 2011 remains one of the best if not the best trips we have ever taken. One of my few regrets is that we did not go to China with her when the opportunity arose. Regardless, Roz suggested Collins' "Consolation," whose sentiment any weary traveler will recognize:

### Consolation

How agreeable it is not to be touring Italy this summer,  
wandering her cities and ascending her torrid hilltowns.  
How much better to cruise these local, familiar streets,  
fully grasping the meaning of every roadsign and billboard  
and all the sudden hand gestures of my compatriots.

There are no abbeys here, no crumbling frescoes or famous  
domes and there is no need to memorize a succession  
of kings or tour the dripping corners of a dungeon.  
No need to stand around a sarcophagus, see Napoleon's  
little bed on Elba, or view the bones of a saint under glass.

How much better to command the simple precinct of home  
than be dwarfed by pillar, arch, and basilica.  
Why hide my head in phrase books and wrinkled maps?  
Why feed scenery into a hungry, one-eyes camera  
eager to eat the world one monument at a time?

Instead of slouching in a café ignorant of the word for ice,  
I will head down to the coffee shop and the waitress  
known as Dot. I will slide into the flow of the morning

paper, all language barriers down,  
rivers of idiom running freely, eggs over easy on the way.

And after breakfast, I will not have to find someone  
willing to photograph me with my arm around the owner.  
I will not puzzle over the bill or record in a journal  
what I had to eat and how the sun came in the window.  
It is enough to climb back into the car

as if it were the great car of English itself  
and sounding my loud vernacular horn, speed off  
down a road that will never lead to Rome, not even Bologna. [13]

Chuck suggested "*The Lanyard*," an oft anthologized Collins offering about the  
radical imbalance between a mother's love and a child's gratitude, which  
imbalance the poet recalls in adulthood having chanced upon the word lanyard in  
a dictionary. That chance encounter, like Proust's madeleines, evoked:

from *The Lanyard*

She gave me life and milk from her breasts,  
and I gave her a lanyard.  
She nursed me in many a sick room,  
lifted spoons of medicine to my lips,  
laid cold facecloths on my forehead,  
and then led me out into the airy light

and taught me to walk and swim,  
and I, in turn, presented her with a lanyard.  
Here are thousands of meals, she said,  
and here is clothing and a good education.  
And here is your lanyard, I replied,  
which I made with a little help from a counselor. [14]

Ben suggested "*Nightclub*" and "*Names*." "*Names*" commemorates the first  
anniversary of 9/11. It's recitation of the victims' "names" still resonates. A video  
of Collins reading "*Names*" can be found [here](#). "*Nightclub*" illustrates Collins' ability  
to find the poem in the ordinary:

from *Nightclub*

You are so beautiful and I am a fool  
to be in love with you  
is a theme that keeps coming up  
in songs and poems.  
There seems to be no room for variation.  
I have never heard anyone sing  
I am so beautiful  
and you are a fool to be in love with me,  
even though this notion has surely  
crossed the minds of women and men alike.  
You are so beautiful, too bad you are a fool  
is another one you don't hear.  
Or, you are a fool to consider me beautiful.

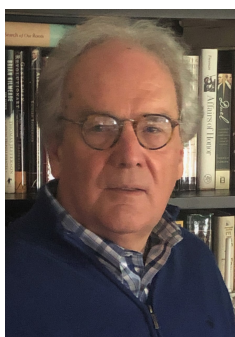
That one you will never hear, guaranteed. [15]

So, thank you *Book Notes* readers for your suggestions. You reminded me of some old favorites, introduced me to some I had not known, and caused me to rethink my opinion of Billy Collins. Regarding Collins, I now realize there is more to his poetry than first meets the eye, but I still occasionally cringe at some cloying lines, like

from Cheerios

One bright morning in a restaurant in Chicago  
as I waited for my eggs and toast,  
I opened the *Tribune* only to discover  
that I was the same age as Cheerios. [16]

Still, thank you readers for leading to Billy Collins – the everyday poet finding the magical in the banal.



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#### End Notes

1. *Poetry Wordle: Terry Elliott* at <https://www.flickr.com/photos/tellio/4968880402/in/photostream/> <https://www.flickr.com/photos/tellio/4967681955>
2. *"Nice Guys Wind Up in Last Place, Scoffs Lippy,"* **The Sporting News**, July 17, 1946 cited in *"Leo Durocher"* at **Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia** available at [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Leo\\_Durocher#cite\\_note-14](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Leo_Durocher#cite_note-14) accessed April 7, 2021.
3. Weber, Bruce. *"On a Literary Bridge, Poet Hits a Roadblock,"* in **The New York Times** (December 19, 1999) available at <https://www.nytimes.com/1999/12/19/us/on-literary-bridge-poet-hits-a-roadblock.html> accessed April 7, 2021.
4. An inexact paraphrase – Goia's poem actually says "Money. You don't know where it's been,/but you put it where your mouth is./And it talks." See Goia, Dana. *"Money"* at **Your Daily Poem** available at [http://www.yourdailypoem.com/listpoem.jsp?poem\\_id=118](http://www.yourdailypoem.com/listpoem.jsp?poem_id=118) accessed April 7, 2021.
5. *"Billy Collins"*, in **Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia** available at [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Billy\\_Collins](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Billy_Collins) accessed April 7, 2021.
6. *"Billy Collins"*, at the **Poetry Foundation** available at <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/billy-collins> accessed April 7, 2021.
7. Ibid.
8. Wilkinson, Ben. *"Aimless Love by Billy Collins review – whimsical and moving,"* in **The Guardian** (June 29, 2018) available at <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2018/jun/29/billy-collins-aimless-love-america-poet> accessed April 7, 2021.
9. Collins, Billy. *"Introduction to Poetry"* at **Poetry Foundation** available at <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/46712/introduction-to-poetry> accessed April 7, 2021.
10. \_\_\_\_\_. *"The First Line of a Poem"* at **Poetry Foundation** available at <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/browse?contentId=39847> accessed April 7, 2021.
11. \_\_\_\_\_. *"Dharma"* at **Poetry Foundation** available at <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/browse?contentId=40285> accessed April 7, 2021.
12. \_\_\_\_\_. *"Aimless Love"* at **Elizabeth Ū** available at <https://www.elizabethu.com/2018/08/09/aimless-love/> accessed April 7, 2021.
13. \_\_\_\_\_. *"Consolation"* at **PoemHunter.com** available at <https://www.poemhunter.com/poem/consolation/> accessed April 7, 2021.
14. \_\_\_\_\_. *"The Lanyard"* at **Poetry Foundation** available at <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/50975/the-lanyard> accessed April 7, 2021.
15. \_\_\_\_\_. *"Nightclub"* at **PoemHunter.com** available

at <https://www.poemhunter.com/poem/nostalgia/#content> accessed April 7, 2021.

16. \_\_\_\_\_. "Cheerios" at **Poetry Foundation** available at <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/poems/55737/cheerios> accessed April 7, 2021.

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[Bay Rat Marketing: Pour a Koehler Collar](#) written by Jefferson Scholar-in-Residence, Dr. David Frew.

[Jefferson and Lincoln on Good Friday](#) written by Jefferson Scholar-in-Residence Rev. Charles Brock

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