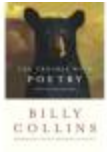


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Tête-à-Tête with Billy

Review of Billy Collins's new book, *The Trouble With Poetry*

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Posted: 10/3/05

Tête-à-tête with Billy

*Reading *The Trouble with Poetry*, the new collection of poems by Billy Collins, must be a close approximation to how it feels to drop in on the poet at his Westchester home and stay for a cup of tea. Collins is very accommodating. Forget that he's been a U.S. Poet Laureate or a Distinguished Professor; with this collection, there's just you, Billy and the afternoon.*

Walk in the kitchen and you'll find the bowl of pears mentioned in the poem "You, Reader," which is placed before the first section as a kind of shrug to acknowledge that, yes indeed, Collins has been at it again. It begins with a thought of us, the audience, and him, "...who got up early/to sit in the kitchen/and mention with a pen/ the rain soaked windows,/ the ivy wallpaper," and places us right at the kitchen table, where he quietly wonders whether the salt and pepper shakers are friends "after all these years." Yet it sets the tone for the coming conversation, where Collins will continue to describe our world at his own pace and show us his unique way of uncovering the profound in what's right under our noses.

His kitchen window appears in many of the poems as the frame from which he sees the whole world; where he tells us in "Monday," he can see "clerks at their desks/ the miners... down in their mines." The window is for Collins "what the oven is to the baker;" a tool, but also a means for reflection and transparency.

Collins shows you his boyhood in "Class Picture, 1954," which describes the Americana town of girls with bangs, boys in sweaters, and bullies just like the ones in Clark Kent's town; so in the photo's background Superman is "....balancing a green car over his head with one hand." In "The Lanyard," his face remains deadpan while he makes the hilarious contrast between his mother's love and his childish token for her. "She nursed me in many a sickroom/ ... and taught me to walk and swim,/ and I, in turn, presented her with a lanyard."

In a darker moment, he relates thoughts about inventing glasses to help block the sight of someone he doesn't care to see passing his window. But his tenderness is obvious when he shares a moment in

"The Order of the Day," where he pauses to appreciate the vision of his wife: "...as I turned a corner/ and beheld you out there on the sunny deck/ lost in exercise, running in place, / knees lifted high, skin glistening-/and that toothy, immortal-looking smile of yours."

This poet seems glad to have a moment to talk to you with soul-baring honesty, to tell you about the beautiful wisdom he has discovered in living an average life. Sometimes he shares a poem that will broach the power of the relentless march of time, or describe how he is affected by ageing. He will wryly speculate about what people do at different hours of the day in other time zones. He waxes sentimental on the legacies of wars that his casual observations spark him to recall. He even assumes the happy-go-lucky persona of a dog, concerned only with the pleasures of eating, sleeping and playing. In the poem "Breathless" he quips about wishing to go to his final sleep in fresh cotton pajamas.

At times the poet seems lost in thought and you consider leaving, but then you turn a page and find a poem like "Flock," where Collins breaks from his leisurely, gentleman-at-home theme with a jolting expression of sarcasm. He includes the trigger for the poem, a quote from an article on printing:

*"'It has been calculated that each copy of/the Gutenberg Bible...required the skins of 300 sheep.' -from an article on printing
I can see them squeezed into the holding pen
behind the stone building
where the printing press is housed,
all of them squirming around
to find a little room/ and looking so much alike
it would be nearly impossible to count them, and there is no telling
which one will carry the news that the Lord is a shepherd, one of the few things they
already know.*

Then sometimes Collins will mesmerize you. He'll chat about his great tactile experience in "Drawing Class," saying,

*I want to draw
four straight lines that will connect me
to the four points of the compass,
to the bright spires of cities,
the overlapping trellises,
the turning spokes of the world.
One day I want to draw freehand
a continuous figure
that will begin with me when the black tip touches the paper
and end with you when it is lifted and set down beside a luminous morning window.*

As he finishes speaking, you find that you've been stirring the tea all this time and, startled to be back in your seat after such a flight of imagination, you quietly lay down your spoon. What a fantastic way to spend a rainy afternoon.

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