



Friday, September 6, 2002

Poet Laureate to read at Oakland

America's Poet Laureate Billy Collins, who movingly recalled the victims of 9-11 by reading a poem before a joint session of Congress on Sept. 6, will share his work with Oakland University during a public reading at 4 p.m. Friday, Sept. 13, in Varner Recital Hall.

He arrives at Oakland just two days after the anniversary of the Sept. 11 attacks, an event that sent people searching for ways to convey their grief.

"I think we always turn to poetry in times of great tragedy or great joy," said Bruce Mann, chair of OU's English Department. "We need eloquent, concise words, and poetry provides that."

Collins' work addresses the simple details of every day life. It has been called accessible, hospitable, gentle and constantly startling. Despite the weightiness of his Sept. 11 memorial, "**The Names**," Collins is better known for his humorous examination of the world.

"Luring his readers into the poem with humor, Mr. Collins leads them unwittingly into deeper, more serious places," says the New York Times, "a kind of journey from the familiar or quirky to unexpected territory, sometimes tender, often profound."

His poems imagine dogs performing barking solos written by Beethoven ("Another Reason I Don't Keep a Gun in the House") or heaven as a glass-bottom boat from which the dead watch the living ("The Dead"). But Collins is quick to suggest that these are tools in service to a bigger project.

"Poetry is my cheap means of transportation," he told the New York Times. "By the end of the poem, the reader should be in a different place from where he started. I would like him to be slightly disoriented at the end, like I drove him outside of town at night and dropped him off in a cornfield."

Collins' appearance at Oakland offers literary fans with a double treat when one-time OU student and National Book Award finalist Thomas Lynch introduces him. Like Collins, Lynch is a poet as well as an essayist. His collection, *The Undertaking*, earned critical acclaim.

Collins was appointed poet laureate in 2001 after shocking the poetry world with record-breaking sales figures for three recent collections of poetry, "Questions about Angels" (1991), "The Art of Drowning" (1995), and "Picnic, Lightning" (1998), which all sold in the tens of thousands. Appearances on National Public Radio's "Prairie Home Companion" and "Fresh Air" boosted his popularity even further. His collection of new and selected poems, "Sailing Alone around the Room," provoked a publishing battle almost never seen for a poet's work, pitting giant Random House against the scholarly Pittsburgh Press. When all was settled, Random House published the book last year. It will be released in paperback this month.

OU students in Associate Professor Rob Anderson's Modern Literature class are among those with copies in their hands. They'll read it prior to Collins' visit and try to understand his style, language and deeper themes.

"His work is accessible in that people can read it and get something out of it immediately," Anderson said. "If they take the time to delve even further into the poems, they'll find more meaning. I think students in early classes are afraid of poetry. These poems help them find a way in."

"I suspect we'll be 'tying the poems to a chair and beating them with a rubber hose,'" Anderson continued, paraphrasing a Collins' piece that ridicules efforts to analyze a poem's every word. "I'm afraid to do what he mocks, but that's how you learn about poetry."

Encouraging people to learn about poetry, read it, write it and appreciate it are among Collins' duties as poet laureate. He picks up where previous poet laureates, from Robert Frost to Robert Penn Warren, left off. Collins developed a school-based program called Poetry 180, which recommends reading a poem aloud each day after the morning announcements. "One-eighty stands for the 180 days of the school year, approximately," he has said. "But it also implies a kind of turning to poetry."

Anderson requires his students to memorize and recite aloud at least 14 lines of poetry each semester.

"I think it's absolutely essential to read poetry out loud," Anderson said. "Poetry creates a kind of non-verbal sensual quality from the rhythms and sounds. When you read things out loud, you pay more attention. You notice things."

The OU reading won't be Collins' first appearance before a college crowd. He graduated from Holy Cross College in Worcester, Mass., then earned his doctorate in Romantic poetry at the University of California, Riverside. From 1969 until last year, he taught at Lehman College. This fall he begins an appointment as professor of English at Sarah Lawrence College.

As a preview to Collins' visit, members of the OU English Department, including Professors Gladys Cardiff, Catherine Cuccinella, Brian Connery and Nancy Joseph, will offer "Reading Billy Collins," presenting several of their favorite Collins poems and commenting briefly on his career, the laureateship and Poetry 180. The preview will be held on Monday, Sept. 9, at 4 p.m. in Meadow Brook Art Gallery.

Associate Professor of English Brian Connery arranged Collins' appearance at OU as part of the annual Maurice Brown Memorial Poetry Reading. The reading is free and open to the public. A book signing and reception will follow. The event is sponsored by the Department of English with support from the College of Arts and Sciences and the Office of Academic Affairs. Information on both events is available from the Department of English at (248) 370-2250.

OU Writer Mary E. Iorio and English Professor Brian Connery contributed to this article.

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