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Poet laureate leaves them laughing at OU

By **Mary E. Iorio**, OU writer

America's Poet Laureate Billy Collins sent more than 500 Oakland University students, faculty, staff and visitors through a whirl of emotions Sept. 13, knocking them off their chairs with hilarious sentiments about his dog's freedom from material possessions and leaving them awestruck as they imagined an exquisite moment between a man and woman on a subway train.

"I am so very grateful to Billy Collins for his labor to restore to Congress, to public schools, to radio and television an appreciation of poetry," said one-time OU student and National Book Award nominee Thomas Lynch, as he introduced Collins to a standing-room-only crowd. "His work doesn't require any particular cipher, any particular education, any particular vocation. To enter it, you only require an understanding of language.... He seems determined to add seating at the feast of language that poetry can provide."

Since 2000, when he accepted the post of poet laureate and its accompanying Library of Congress office with its "CNN view of the Capitol," Collins has tried to take poetry back to the people. His **Poetry 180** Web site offers American high schools a poem for each day of the school year. His writings examine details of daily life, in terms that find eloquence even in a quiet 1991 morning when a worker came to paint his front porch.

Collins' visit to Oakland University continues his outreach efforts to popularize the literary style. OU's Department of English; Department of Music, Theatre and Dance; and Office of Academic Affairs jointly sponsored the event as part of the Maurice Brown Memorial Poetry Reading.

"We are honored to have the poet laureate come to our campus," said David Downing, dean of OU's College of Arts and Sciences. "Learning through the arts and about the arts is critically important to understanding life."

During his visit, Collins read more than two dozen poems over an hour, telling stories along the way about how he comes up with his subjects, how he refines each line and how he doesn't mind taking a poem off track.

"They say in composition class to stay on the topic. Poetry class is different. You try to get off the topic quickly, off to something much more interesting than the topic," he said.

Collins breaks the rules of poetry by often addressing the readers as he explains how to understand a poem. Unlike the traditional sonnets of Shakespearean times, Collins' poem "Sonnet" explains its intentions. It begins: "All we need is fourteen lines, well, thirteen now/and after this one just a dozen/to launch a little ship on love's storm-tossed seas."

That ease of language opens his poetry to a wider audience, said parent Dave Mayo of Bloomfield Hills, who came to the reading with his entire family, including a 13-year-old daughter and 9-year-old son.

"We can read his poetry together, and we all get something out of it," Mayo said. "He can write poetry that is as significant for a 9-year-old as it is for an adult."

OU Senior Ted Bolak, an English and linguistics double major, agreed.

"I definitely think there is a deep meaning in his poetry," Bolak said. "But he's not always making you search for it. It seems to bubble out."

Giving hope to aspiring writers, Collins said it took him a long time to find his voice.

"I didn't figure out how to write well until I was 40," he said.

Typically Collins writes his poems in one sitting, but he spends 90 percent of his revision time finding the right cadence or the perfect vowel sound to improve the way a poem sounds to the ear.

He said he constantly analyzes words. He described how he plays games with sounds, regularly losing track of conversations as he tries to count syllables in a daily search for natural haikus.

"Let me admit my obsession with the 17-syllable statement," he said. "They're all over. For example, 'When I find myself in times of trouble, Mother Mary comes to me.' I heard one walking down the hall the other day. Two students were talking and one said, 'When he found out, he was like, 'Oh my God,' and I was like, 'Oh my God,' " Collins deadpanned.

Sometimes referred to as the "stand-up poet," Collins read in rapid-fire succession a series of poems he called "shorties."

"If you don't like them, don't worry," he said. "Another will come along in a minute."

His 11-word poem "Refrigerator Light" ("The minute she slammed the door, I stopped thinking about her.") made the audience laugh so hard, Collins had to pause himself to laugh.

While reading, the tall wiry man put his hands in and out of his pockets, leaned forward to clutch the podium occasionally and slowly eased into a comfortable exchange with the audience, whom he thanked for being vast. "They say if you are outnumbered at these things, you're doing pretty well," he quipped.

Best known for his humorous work, Collins does write more serious words as well. He wrote his most recent poem, "**The Names**," in honor of the victims of 9-11. He read that poem to Congress a few days before the anniversary of the terrorist act. But he chose not to read it on Friday, Sept. 13.

"I didn't write about 9-11 for a long time," he said. "I came up with about seven excuses for why, but the real one is that if you know my poetry, you know I write about smaller things, and this was vast."

Collins wrote the poem just a few days before the Congressional reading in New York. "I think I'll leave it there," he said. "I don't want to profit from it. It won't be part of the act, so to speak. I want it to just be there."

Collins 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.

To learn more about Collins' work as poet laureate, visit the [Library of Congress](#) Web site.

SUMMARY

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