



Picnic, Lightning

Billy Collins

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Winner of the 1999 Paterson Poetry Prize

Over the past decade, Billy Collins has emerged as the most beloved American poet since Robert Frost, garnering critical acclaim and broad popular appeal. Annie Proulx admits, "I have never before felt possessive about a poet, but I am fiercely glad that Billy Collins is ours." John Updike proclaims his poems "consistently startling, more serious than they seem, they describe all the worlds that are and were and some others besides."

This special, limited edition celebrates Billy Collins's years as U.S. Poet Laureate. *Picnic, Lightning*--one of the books that helped establish and secure his reputation and popularity during the 1990s--combines humor and seriousness, wit and sublimity. His poems touch on a wide range of subjects, from jazz to death, from weather to sex, but share common ground where the mind and heart can meet. Whether reading him for the first time or the fiftieth, this collector's edition is a must-have for anyone interested in the poet the *New York Times* calls simply "the real thing."

Picnic, Lightning Details

Date : Published 1998 by University of Pittsburgh Press

ISBN : 9780822956709

Author : Billy Collins

Format : Paperback 104 pages

Genre : Poetry, Contemporary, Fiction, Adult, Literature, American

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From Reader Review Picnic, Lightning for online ebook

Tam G says

I only expect to like one or two (or if I really like the writer 5 or 6) poems in a book of poetry. Poetry can be a very individual thing and it takes a lot of focus to really catch what a writer is trying to throw.

After the first few I thought this book would fit that pattern. I was surprised when I deeply enjoyed the next dozen, and several more after that.

Not overly long, obsessed with large words, or plumbing the depths. Often fairly simple. Neat little surprise images in almost every poem. Some humor. Usually no more than 2 pages a poem.

A homerun of a poetry book, really. A good place to give poetry a try.

J.j. says

I'll say this up front and with all due respect. If you do not care for poetry, don't review it with one star. Simply don't review it at all. I don't know the first thing about engineering; I don't take the time to read engineering books, then drone on about how dull and inexplicable their content is and pan them.

That being said - I know a lot of contemporary poets tend to rail against Collins for what I can only assume is the fact that he is popular and they are not. I find his work hit-or-miss; however, this collection on the whole is his best, in my opinion.

The best of Billy Collins is in here - tenderness, love of nature, wry observations about the past (our shared history and his own). Along with Mark Strand and a few others, Collins is (like him or not) one of the must-read poets of this generation.

Andrew Blok says

I'm reading more poetry! At least slowly over the last few months. Now, I've jumped into a collection of Billy Collins' own poems, of which I own several, but haven't read through any yet. From the poems I've read (it's hard to take high school English for four years and teach it for three and not read Billy Collins), I thought Collins was interesting, clever, but basic. I feel ashamed of that now.

Reading through *Picnic, Lightning*, I understand that Billy Collins is a master. One of the better answers I've heard to the question "what's the point of poetry?" is "to see things in a new way." Billy Collins is a master of this. A rainy day reveals something new about the nature of loss. An empty house raises questions of the centrality of humanity to existence. A snake on the highway makes a grand point about the connectedness of everything. Billy Collins is undoubtedly clever and speaks with his tongue in his cheek a lot of the time, but he sees the world in a fresh way. He perceives the world in ways different from most. He writes it down better than most. His collection was a breath of fresh air.

If nothing else, reading this book was a reminder that thinking you know someone after reading three of their poems, you're probably wrong, to your own detriment.

Stephen M says

Some Days

Some days I put the people in their places at the table,
bend their legs at the knees,
if they come with that feature,
and fix them into the tiny wooden chairs.

All afternoon they face one another,
the man in the brown suit,
the woman in the blue dress,
perfectly motionless, perfectly behaved.

But other days, I am the one
who is lifted up by the ribs,
then lowered into the dining room of a dollhouse
to sit with the others at the long table.

Very funny,
but how would you like it
if you never knew from one day to the next
if you were going to spend it

striding around like a vivid god,
your shoulders in the clouds,
or sitting down there amidst the wallpaper,
staring straight ahead with your little plastic face?

Rachel says

There are some really good poems in this book, MAYBE one or two great ones... but the good stuff to filler ratio seems skewed to the negative.

T. says

Here's one of my favourite poems from this collection:

Marginalia

Billy Collins

Sometimes the notes are ferocious,
skirmishes against the author
raging along the borders of every page

in tiny black script.
If I could just get my hands on you,
Kierkegaard, or Conor Cruise O'Brien,
they seem to say,
I would bolt the door and beat some logic into your head.

Other comments are more offhand, dismissive -
"Nonsense." "Please!" "HA!!" -
that kind of thing.
I remember once looking up from my reading,
my thumb as a bookmark,
trying to imagine what the person must look like
why wrote "Don't be a ninny"
alongside a paragraph in *The Life of Emily Dickinson*.

Students are more modest
needing to leave only their splayed footprints
along the shore of the page.
One scrawls "Metaphor" next to a stanza of Eliot's.
Another notes the presence of "Irony"
fifty times outside the paragraphs of *A Modest Proposal*.

Or they are fans who cheer from the empty bleachers,
Hands cupped around their mouths.
"Absolutely," they shout
to Duns Scotus and James Baldwin.
"Yes." "Bull's-eye." "My man!"
Check marks, asterisks, and exclamation points
rain down along the sidelines.

And if you have managed to graduate from college
without ever having written "Man vs. Nature"
in a margin, perhaps now
is the time to take one step forward.

We have all seized the white perimeter as our own
and reached for a pen if only to show
we did not just laze in an armchair turning pages;
we pressed a thought into the wayside,
planted an impression along the verge.

Even Irish monks in their cold scriptoria
jotted along the borders of the Gospels
brief asides about the pains of copying,
a bird signing near their window,
or the sunlight that illuminated their page-
anonymous men catching a ride into the future
on a vessel more lasting than themselves.

And you have not read Joshua Reynolds,
they say, until you have read him
enwreathed with Blake's furious scribbling.

Yet the one I think of most often,
the one that dangles from me like a locket,
was written in the copy of *Catcher in the Rye*
I borrowed from the local library
one slow, hot summer.
I was just beginning high school then,
reading books on a davenport in my parents' living room,
and I cannot tell you
how vastly my loneliness was deepened,
how poignant and amplified the world before me seemed,
when I found on one page

A few greasy looking smears
and next to them, written in soft pencil-
by a beautiful girl, I could tell,
whom I would never meet-
"Pardon the egg salad stains, but I'm in love."

Cover art is Martin Johnson Heade's Salt Marsh Hay (1865).

/ Written 30 September 2011

I am currently house-sitting for a relative, and I have hauled a lot of my books with me (mostly for rereading). I have turned one of the rooms into a 'writing room,' and it's nice to be able to write and read in silence.

/ First read 28 August 2004.

/ Reread on 17 February 2010.

/ Reread on 3 October 2011.

Fox says

Picnic, Lightning is a collection of poetry by the two time Poet Laureate Billy Collins. This book came highly recommended to me by my dear friend Carolyn, as indeed did all of the poetry books that have lately been filling my GoodReads shelves. This one in particular she said she had a feeling I'd like, and indeed I fell for it from the first the moment she explained the title to me. How was I to know the very contents of the book would not only live up to the intrigue of the title, but in many ways surpass it?

Billy Collins has a wonderful poetic voice. His poetic power lies in the observation, which I'm fast discovering is just the sort of poetry I love. The wonder that is found in the every day, and the way the ordinary becomes extraordinary by virtue of a small shift in the way we look at things. The contents are delightful, amusing, and often just a bit surprising. They're something to be cherished, and something I'm sure I'll carry with me for some time.

I can't recommend this book of poetry enough. It's won a spot on my favorites shelf for the way it delighted me.

Megan Baxter says

I still don't know very much about poetry. I don't know where to go to find new poets. I have little sense of the time and effort it takes to craft a poem. All I do know is that ever since I was introduced to Billy Collins' poetry, I have loved it very, very much. I've written reviews for two of his books of poetry previously, and I'm not really sure what new to say, except that *Picnic, Lightning* (a reference to Nabokov's *Lolita*) is similarly marvellous.

Note: The rest of this review has been withheld due to the changes in Goodreads policy and enforcement. You can read why I came to this decision [here](#).

In the meantime, you can read the entire review at [Smorgasbook](#)

HBalikov says

Billy Collins is a national treasure. He is a poet who communicates without artifice. His poems are pleasures to read.

"It was after dinner.
You were talking to me across the table
about something or other,
a greyhound you had seen that day
or a song you liked.

"and I was looking past you
over your bare shoulder at the three oranges lying
on the kitchen counter
next to the small electric bean grinder,
which was also orange,
and the orange and white cruets for vinegar and oil.

"All of which converged
into a random still life,
so fastened together by the hasp of color,
and so fixed behind the animated
foreground of your
talking and smiling,
gesturing and pouring wine,
and the camber of your shoulders

"that I could feel it being painted within me,
brushed on the wall of my skull,
while the tone of your voice
lifted and fell in its flight,
and the three oranges
remained fixed on the counter
the way stars are said
to be fixed in the universe.

"Then all the moments of the past
began to line up behind that moment
and all the moments to come
assembled in front of it in a long row,
giving me a reason to believe
that this was a moment I had rescued
from the millions that rush out of sight
into a darkness behind the eyes.

"Even after I have forgotten what year it is,
my middle name,
and the meaning of money,
I will still carry in my pocket
the small coin of that moment,
minted in the kingdom
that we pace through every day."

Collins elevates the commonplace and calls our attention to the details of life. He "rescues" these "from the millions that rush out of sight." For me, that is a very special gift.

Andrea says

Didn't mean to re-read this whole book, but picked it up to read while my niece was reading, and couldn't put it back down. There are so many favorites in this book, so many that send chills of recognition with the last line, and others that make me laugh, and even more often, the chill-sending lines, and funny lines, come right after each other. Every time I laughed, my niece asked me what was funny, and so I read her poems, and bits of poems, and sometimes she got the humor, and sometimes she didn't. And when I tucked her in and told her good night, I read her that "It is time to float on the waters of the night./Time to wrap my arms around this book,/and press it to my chest, life preserver" and that she understood. She said, in the clarity of a child's literal mind, that she didn't want to hug her book to sleep, because her stuffed animal was better for that, but she also understood and liked the idea of floating on the waters of the night with the stories from the books she read as her life preservers. A very good image indeed.

S.B. Wright says

Collins was U.S. Poet Laureate from 2001-2003, and still is one of America's most loved and successful contemporary poets both in monetary and critical terms.

I am, as I have stated before, attracted to formalist poetry, to fairly distinct and repetitive rhyme and rhythm. My enjoyment of Collins then, came as a bit of a surprise.

Picnic, Lightning is a collection of everyday musings in poetic form and from what I can ascertain, this is standard for Collins' kind of poetry. Indeed his poem In the Room of a Thousand Miles presents us with a manifesto. Though perhaps that's too strong a word:

In the Room of a Thousand Miles

I like writing about where I am,
where I happen to be sitting,
the humidity or the clouds,
the scene outside the window—
a pink tree in bloom,
a neighbor walking his small, nervous dog.

And if I am drinking
a cup of tea at the time
or a small glass of whiskey,
I will find a line to put it on.

My wife hands these poems back to me
with a sigh.

She thinks I ought to be opening up
my aperture to let in
the wild rhododendrons of Ireland,
the sun-blached stadiums of Rome,
that waterclock in Bruges—
the world beyond my inkwell.

...

This focus on the everyday, the mundane, the “suburban” as Collins himself calls it, has led some to view his work as a bit bland. For sure, you won’t find rage here or angst. You might find humour, wit and playfulness though and perhaps that puts people off that think poetry should be about important things (as If laughter and lightness aren’t important) or about “plumbing the depths of one’s soul”. Collins is far more contemplative.

Personally I get the same sort of feeling reading Collins that I might reading Japanese forms like Haiku and Tanka, in that they are often very particular observations of the ordinary and yet more than that as well. The diction and syntax is fairly straight forward, enhancing his general appeal and accessibility. The poems tend to seep in under your defences and a poem that first is about returning to the house for a book, walks you gently into a meditation on alternate possibilities/realities.

Readers of speculative fiction might not view the following as all that strange but if you are fairly linear in

your thinking, then this poem opens up possibilities:

I Go Back to the House for a Book

I turn around on the gravel
and go back to the house for a book,
something to read at the doctor's office,
and while I am inside, running the finger
of inquisition along a shelf,

another me that did not bother
to go back to the house for a book
heads out on his own,
rolls down the driveway,
and swings left toward town,

a ghost in his ghost car,
another knot in the string of time,
a good three minutes ahead of me—
a spacing that will now continue
for the rest of my life.

...

I enjoyed Picnic, Lightning for its relatively easy “entrance exam”, almost any lover of good written words could pick Picnic, Lightning up and enjoy it. Many of the poems could have been formatted as prose, as flash fiction, but there is something to be gained by the arrangement of line breaks, in drawing your eye and pacing your reading. Collins draws your attention to the ordinary and most of the time finds for us the extraordinary. It’s his consistency in delivering this to the reader, I suspect, that grants him success.

Death and pain are big themes in poetry but sometimes we need to be reminded of the extraordinariness of

life.

Reed says

Another great poetry collection from Billy Collins. His writing style involves accessible storytelling, typically linking two disparate domains (e.g jazz and nature), often with underlying humor. I'm a huge fan of this. My two fave standouts from this collection:

Marginalia-- the pleasures of writing and reading notes along the page margins of books

The Many Faces of Jazz-- the conversion of jazz into facial reaction. A musical/facial version of synesthesia.

Madelyne says

The clearest deciding factor for a poet, for me, is accessibility. After that it is the sense of refreshing, regardless of the subject (be it sad or happy), that envelopes me as close the book to pick it up another day. It isn't often I find a modern poet I'm so willing to immediately pick up again and again. I have more of Billy Collins collections waiting for me at home and I suppose some part of me is saying I should hold off and savor his words for another time...obviously, though, it is poetry month and I'm going to do whatever I damn well please. And it pleases me to read more of his work!

Annie says

Billy Collins is my favorite poet. Reading his books are truly an incredible experience. He transforms simple, common occurrences and images into a quiet, vivid, transcending experience. His works give you a deep appreciation for life--all you have experienced and all you have yet to. I LOVE HIS COLLECTION!

Sara Klem says

Why did it take me this long to read Billy Collins? I devoured this.
