

Billy Collins

Female Speaker:

From the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C.

Isabella Huen [spelled phonetically]:

Hello, this is Isabella Huen of the Library of Congress. Saturday, August 30th will mark the 14th year that book lovers of all ages have gathered in Washington, D.C. to celebrate the written word at the Library of Congress National Book Festival. The festival, which is free and open to the public, will hold evening hours for the first time. It will also be in a new location, the Walter E. Washington Convention Center, in Washington, D.C. The book festival's hours will be from 10:00 a.m. to 10:00 p.m. For more details visit our website, which is at www.loc.gov/bookfest. And now it's my pleasure to introduce former poet laureate Billy Collins, whose recent books are "Voyage" and "Aimless Love: New and Selected Poems". Billy, thank you for joining us today.

Billy Collins:

Well, you're very welcome.

Isabella Huen:

So first question, what was your childhood like? When and how did you get into poetry?

Billy Collins:

Well -- yeah, those are somewhat related. I -- I was thinking about that just before we talked, because I was looking at this children's book I did called "Voyage," and I was reminded by it of what a happy childhood I had, but of course, I didn't know it then. I don't think you know it when you're a child, because you're looking forward to these greater pleasures of maturity, and then you realize that the greater pleasures aren't as great as the pleasures of childhood, so you spend the rest of your life in a state of nostalgic [unintelligible] longing.

So I had -- with me and my childhood and poetry, I got exposed to it very early, because my mother was a reciter of poetry, not a poet and not a literary person particularly, but she learned a lot of poetry when she was a school girl, and -- in rural Ontario, Canada. And she would slip quotations from Shakespeare or Kipling, or some of the other kind of popular poets into her conversation. And so I knew that my mother had these two ways of talking. She had a regular way, and then this better way. And it was like listening to switching from AM to FM, you know, I'd say. And I knew I liked FM better, and I -- much later I realized that that was poetry.

Isabella Huen:

Okay, great. So you mentioned Kipling and others. So do you have any influences or a favorite poet that -- in poetry or other --?

Billy Collins:

I'll tell you, everything I read is an influence, either positive or negative. I mean, in positive terms, if I read something terrific, I try to learn from it and appropriate it. And that's why when I'm been

reading bad poetry, I'm reminded again of what not to do. Plus, you know, when I got out of -- I went to graduate school and I got a PhD in English, so I've been teaching college English for a good part of my life, and that -- what that happens -- what that gives you is a constant return to all the great poets. So for decades and decades I've revisited Thomas Hardy, and Emily Dickinson, and John Dunn, and Wordsworth, and Coleridge. So that's formed a kind of rolodex of familiarity with English poetry. And even though poetry is a very solitary act, it's something you do completely by yourself; you're always accompanied by the poets that you have read and the poets that you favor. And so it's -- I think if I had to talk about how creative work gets down, it's basically boils down to one word, and that word is 'influence.'

Isabella Huen:

And how important is subject matter to your poetry, and where do you get the ideas for your poems?

Billy Collins:

Well, I have very little subject matter, and I'm not sure I've ever had an idea in my life. I mean, I consider like relativity an idea, or maybe gravity, but I don't think I've ever had one of those. I don't -- the subject matter of poetry tends to be limited to just a few -- a few subjects. You can count them on one hand, or you don't even need one hand. There's love, there's death, there's separation, there's reunion, there's celebration, maybe; maybe a few others, but it's all about finding new metaphors, new ways into these old topics. It's like there's five or six of these big houses and you have to find like a new window or a new door into the house to make your poetry fresh. But you can't -- you don't need to make up new subject matter. It's waiting there for you. It's the subject matter of poetry.

Isabella Huen:

You are known as sort of the class clown of American poetry, and your work is often indented by its humor. How important is humor to your poetry?

Billy Collins:

Well, according to you, it's very important. When I'm writing it I am in no way trying to be funny. I simply have a comic way of looking at the world and that gets into my poetry. I think it stands out, perhaps, because a lot of poets seem to take misery as their content, and I've got enough of that. But as far as a strategy in poetry, I think poetry is supposed to give pleasure, and you know, there are many ways to give pleasure in poetry and humor is simply one of them.

Isabella Huen:

So your latest book "Aimless Love: New and Selected Poems" made the New York Times best seller list. Tell us more about that book and about how it came about for you.

Billy Collins:

About the book, well, the book is -- it's a type of poetry book called the new and selected book. So what it does is it gathers kind of the 'best of,' according to me and my editor, the best of poems from four

previous volumes, and then usually you add a handful of new poems. In this case we added 50 new poems, 5-0, which was just quite substantial; almost another -- almost a book in itself almost a fifth book. So it's a very -- it's big book for a book of poetry. But every once in a while when one has four or five books in the past it's time for one of these summits of gatherings that are called new and selected poems. So that's sort of how the book came into being.

Isabella Huen:

I noticed that you close your book with your poem "The Names." This is your first book where you have allowed "The Names" to be published after over 10 years of an initial reluctance to do so. So tell us about how you made that decision and about that poem in general.

Billy Collins:

Well, the decision not to include "The Names" in the previous book, and not to read it as part of my, you know, public readings was based on my feeling that the poem belonged in its time. You know, I -- it was commissioned by Congress to read it in front a giant session of Congress. And I thought that was such an important summoning forth of poetry for this occasion that it should -- the poem should be kept connected to the event of 9/11 and to the memorial service of Congress, and not just taken out and become another poem that I read at a reading. So I thought there was something special, if not sacred about it; however, when this newest book was in the works I don't know if I'll ever have another new and selected book of poems, so I thought, well, maybe this is time to, 10 years later, to -- or more, actually -- to include that poem. And I put it at the end, because I still think of it as having a special place in my poetry.

Isabella Huen:

So what advice would you give to other aspiring poets out there?

Billy Collins:

Well, they just have to read poetry until it's falling out of their ears. There's no obvious preparation for poetry, and I mean to say, if you wanted to play the trumpet, well, there's an obvious way to do that. You buy a trumpet and you take a lot of lessons, and you begin with the scales, right? Or you want to be an oil painter you learn how to move turpentine and linseed oil around and you -- just a lot of stuff you have to learn to go paint something [unintelligible]. A lot of people pick up a pen and just pour their hearts out on a piece of paper without any instruction. That's why there's so much bad poetry. My guess is there's a lot of bad trumpet playing too, but -- so you know, my advice is simply, read. Read all the poetry you can. It's not all good, but find the poets that really help you, listen to the great conversation that is poetry, and then see if you have something to add. It's all about reading. If you took, you know, 10,000 hours of ballet lessons or obo lessons, you should read poetry for 10,000 hours.

Isabella Huen:

So that's --

Billy Collins:

Doesn't sound like much fun, I know, but --

Isabella Huen:

Yeah.

Billy Collins:

[laughs] just take it hour by hour, or poem by poem.

Isabella Huen:

Well, last question. As you may know, this year's National Book Festival theme is Stay Up with a Good Book. So in keeping with the theme, what book have you read recently that you've enjoyed staying up reading?

Billy Collins:

Well, I think the last -- the last book I read was a book by Andre Dubus III called "Dirty Love," of all titles. It's a sort of series of [unintelligible] novellas, and it's really not for children as my book "Voyage" is, but it's -- he's a powerful storyteller and there's lots of local [unintelligible] along the way. But for the younger set, this is my first children's book, the one called "Voyage." I think it's beautifully illustrated. It's about a boyhood, and it's about the imaginative transformations that reading can complete in a child. And in the end we bring in the wind and the moon and the sea and nature, and it all somehow comes together.

Isabella Huen:

We've been talking with author Billy Collins, who will appear Saturday, August 30th at the National Book Festival at the Washington Convention Center at both the Children's and Poetry and Prose Pavilions. Billy, thank you very much.

Billy Collins:

Well, thank you very much, dear. I enjoyed talking with you.

Isabella Huen:

Thank you.

Female Speaker:

This has been a presentation of the Library of Congress. Visit us at loc --

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