

Billy Collins Named U.S. Poet Laureate

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Poet Billy Collins, a professor of English at Lehman College of The City University of New York, has been named by the Librarian of Congress as the new Poet Laureate of the United States. His term will run for one year

At the same time, the CUNY Board of Trustees appointed Dr. Collins as a Distinguished Professor. This selective faculty rank is reserved for a very small group of highly influential scholars and artists. Dr. Collins is CUNY's first Poet Laureate.

"These twin accolades indicate the esteem with which Billy Collins is held within both the academic and literary worlds," said Dr. Ricardo R. Fernández, president of Lehman. "Few poets have bridged those worlds with such popular success and critical acclaim while also remaining a superb undergraduate teacher. His students and colleagues at Lehman applaud and cele-

brate these achievements, especially because of his valued commitment to the classroom, which has remained a constant in his life and that of our College."

"The naming of our own Billy Collins as poet laureate is especially heartwarming to me, because poets are seldom afforded such recognition. In these times, when the corporate model is being imposed on the university and accountability, productivity, and measurable assessment are the buzzwords, it is truly refreshing to celebrate the human spirit in all its unpredictability and resilience," said Dr. Marlene Gottlieb, Dean of Arts and Humanities. "Billy's poetry does precisely that. It is the essence of the humanities and reminds us of the true goals of a liberal arts education. To paraphrase from one of his poems, it provides a parenthesis, a space away from the turmoil of everyday existence. It invites readers to participate in a conscious awareness and possible understanding of themselves and their surroundings."

Dr. Jack Kligerman, chair of Lehman's English Department, who has known Billy Collins since the poet first began teaching at the College, described him as "a meditative poet. His magic is to take the most ordinary, common experiences of life, turn

them over and around in his poems, and find the meanings that are present within. His language, in the best Wordsworthian sense, is the 'real' language of men and women. He cares for his reader and takes him or her along with him on his poetical journeys. That is, his poetry is accessible to all willing to follow him. Nothing in Billy Collins' world is without meaning: not the barking of a neighbor's dog nor the reading of his students' essays. His poetry has deepened and been enriched as he has matured."

Speaking at the Lehman Convocation in October 2000, Dr. Collins used the occasion to speak of the changes in the student body he had witnessed over the years and how the need to teach more courses in basic writing had, in the end, supported his aspirations as a poet. He discovered, he said, that there was "a place for poetry" even in the most basic composition courses, which led him then to see the broader connections between poetry and learning.

Both poetry and education, he noted, require "a slowing down," which he saw as an important advantage in our age of speeded-up information.

"Let the speed-bumps of university life," he said, "act as a check to the often mindless speed of contemporary life. Let us slow

back down from the computer to the television, to the newspaper, to the essay, to the novel, and finally to poetry. This supersonic, digital age demands rapidity. But poetry can slow us down to the speed of sound, and university life can slow us down to the speed of thought, the leisurely pace of deliberation."

For many years, writing was a sidelight in Dr. Collins' teaching career at Lehman, which is a senior CUNY college in the Bronx. His early poems appeared in poetry journals and university publications. Two years after his first book was published by the University of Arkansas, his manuscript "Questions About Angels" was selected by the poet Edward Hirsch as a winner of the annual National Poetry Series competition. It was published by Morrow and that began to establish Dr. Collins's literary reputation.

The University of Pittsburgh Press published his next three books: "The Art of Drowning" (1995), "Picnic, Lightning" (1998) and "Questions About Angels" (reprinted from Morrow). Together, these books have sold more than 90,000 copies—virtually unheard of for a poet. His CD "The Best Cigarette" sold out in its first pressing.

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