

Poetry Rocks!

Inspire Your Students with Dazzling Poetry
by Billy Collins

“Poetry can and should be an important part of our daily lives. Poems can inspire and make us think about what it means to be a member of the human race. By just spending a few minutes reading a poem each day, new worlds can be revealed.”—Billy Collins

A few years ago I found myself on a circuit of readings, traveling around the Midwest from podium to podium. One stop was at an enormous high school south of Chicago. Despite its daunting size—picture a row of lockers receding into infinity—the school holds a “Poetry Day” every year featuring an exuberant range of activities, including poems set to music by students and performed by the high school chorus and a ninety-piece orchestra. As featured poet that year, I found myself caught up in the high spirits of the day, which seemed to be coming directly from the students themselves, rather than being faculty-imposed. After reading to a crowded auditorium, I was approached by a student who presented me with a copy of the school newspaper containing an article she had written about poetry. In that article, I found a memorable summary of the discomfort so many people seem to experience with poetry. “Whenever I read a modern poem,” this teenage girl wrote, “it’s like my brother has his foot on the back of my neck in the swimming pool.”

Poetry 180 was inspired by the desire to remove poetry far from such scenes of torment. The idea behind this printed collection, which is a version of the Library of Congress “180” website, was to assemble a generous selection of short, clear, contemporary poems which any listener could basically “get” on first hearing—poems whose injection of pleasure is immediate. The original website, which

continues to be up and running strong, www.loc.gov/poetry/180, is part of a national initiative I developed shortly after being appointed United States Poet Laureate in 2001. The program is called “Poetry 180: A Poem a Day for American High Schools.” In creating it, I had hoped the program would suggest to young people the notion that poetry can be a part of everyday life as well as a subject to be studied in the classroom. On the website, I ask high school teachers and administrators to adopt the program by having a new poem read every day—one for each of the roughly 180 days of the school year—as part of the public announcements. Whether the poems are read over a PA system or at the end of a school assembly, students can hear poetry on a daily basis without feeling any pressure to respond. I wanted teachers to refrain from commenting on the poems or asking students “literary” questions about them. No discussion, no explication, no quiz, no midterm, no seven-page paper—just listen to a poem every morning and off you go to your first class.

High school is the focus of my program because all too often it is the place where poetry goes to die. While poetry offers us the possibility of modulating our pace, adolescence is commonly driven by the wish to accelerate, to get from zero to sixty in a heartbeat or in a speed-shop Honda. And despite the sometimes heroic efforts of dedicated teachers, many adolescents find poetry—to use their term of ultimate condemnation—boring. What some students experience when they are made to confront a poem might be summed up in a frustrating syllogism:

I understand English.

This poem is written in English.

I have no idea what this poem is saying.

What is “the misfit witch blocks my quantum path?” a reader might well ask. What’s up with “a waveform leaps in my belly”? What’s a reader to do in the face of such unyielding obtuseness?

But let us hear from the other side of the room. If there is no room in poetry for difficulty, where is difficulty to go? Just as poetry provides a home for ambiguity, it offers difficulty a place to be dramatized if not solved. “Even in our games,” asserts John Ciardi, “we demand difficulty.” Which explains why hockey is played on ice and why chess involves more than two warring queens chasing each other around the board. During the heyday of Pound, Eliot, Stevens, and Crane—that Mount Rushmore of modernism—difficulty became a criterion for appraising poetic value. The difficulty of composition was extended to the compass of the reader’s experience. Opacity became so closely associated with modernist poetry that readers fled in droves into the waiting arms of novelists, where they could relax in the familiar surroundings of social realism. Of course, the conceptual demands some poems make on their reader can provide an essential pleasure, but this is hardly a recommended starting place for readers interested in reclaiming their connection to poetry. Lacking the experience to distinguish between legitimate difficulty and obscurity for its own sake, some readers give up entirely. Randall Jarrell said that poetry was so difficult to write, why should it be difficult to read. Clarity is the real risk in poetry. To be clear means opening yourself up to judgment. The willfully obscure poem is a hiding place where the poet can elude the reader and thus make appraisal impossible, irrelevant—a bourgeois intrusion upon the poem. Which is why much of the commentary on obscure poetry produces the same kind of headache as the poems themselves.

Of course, the more difficult the poem, the more dependent students are on their teachers. Knotty poems give teachers more to explain; but the classroom emphasis on what a poem means can work effectively to kill the poetry spirit. Too often the hunt for Meaning becomes the only approach; literary devices form a field of barbed wire that students must crawl under to get to “what the poet is trying to say,” a regrettable phrase which implies that every poem is a failed act of communication. Explication may dominate the teaching of poetry, but there are other ways to increase a reader’s intimacy with a poem. A reader can write the poem out, just as Keats or Frost did, or learn how to say a poem out loud, or even

internalize a poem by memorizing it. The problem is that none of these activities requires the presence of a teacher. Ideally, interpretation should be one of the pleasures poetry offers. Unfortunately, too often it overshadows the other pleasures of meter, sound, metaphor, and imaginative travel, to name a few.

POETRY 180 WAS ALSO MEANT TO EXPOSE HIGH SCHOOL students to the new voices in contemporary poetry. Even if teachers try to keep up with the poetry of the day, textbooks and anthologies typically lag behind the times. My rough count of one popular introductory text has dead authors beating out living ones at a ratio of nine to one. And oddly enough, many of the poems that are still presented as examples of “modern” poetry—Eliot’s “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” or Williams’s “The Red Wheelbarrow”—were written more than seventy-five years ago. With a few exceptions, the poems selected for the Poetry 180 website and this book were chosen with the idea of catching the sounds, rhythms, and attitudes of poetry written much more recently. Some of the poems culled from literary magazines are no more than a year or two old. I ruled out any poem that had become a standard offering in textbooks and anthologies. I wanted also to include voices that were not well known. Quite a few of these poems were written by poets I had not heard of before I started scouting for the poems that would suit the purposes of Poetry 180. Assembling this anthology gave me a chance to further the cause of some of my favorite poems and also to discover poets who were new to me. The more I searched for poems, the more I became convinced that regardless of what other kinds of poems will be written in years to come, clear, reader-conscious poems are the ones that will broaden the audience of poetry beyond the precincts of its practitioners.

FOR MY OWN PART, POETRY 180 HAS BEEN A PLEASURE and a challenge. Finding the first one hundred poems was fairly easy. I just spun my mental Rolodex of contemporary poems that I liked well enough to remember. Locating the remaining eighty was harder, which might say something about the narrow bounds of my taste or the limited store of smart, clear, contemporary poems. I experienced the privilege of any anthologizer of being in control of the selections

and thus being able to express through publication the kind of poetry I favor. With its original focus on high school audiences, Poetry 180 has a public service ring to it, but it is also, admittedly, a big bouquet of poems that I happen to like. To borrow Fran Liebowitz's musical aesthetics: good poems are poems I like and bad poems are poems I don't like. Putting that egocentric position aside, welcome to Poetry 180. Flip through the book and pick a poem, any poem. I know every one is an ace, or at least a face card, because I personally rigged the deck.

Visit the official website of the Poetry 180 project at

<http://www.loc.gov/poetry/180/>

For a FREE Poetry Teacher's Guide, write to highschool@randomhouse.com

Excerpts from POETRY 180: A Turning Back to Poetry,
edited by Billy Collins, Random House | TR | 978-0-8129-6887-3 | 352 pp. |
\$13.95/\$21.00 Can.

WINNER 2006 - New York Public Library Books for the Teen Age

The Hand

Mary Ruefle

The teacher asks a question.
You know the answer, you suspect
you are the only one in the classroom
who knows the answer, because the person
in question is yourself, and on that
you are the greatest living authority,
but you don't raise your hand.

You raise the top of your desk
and take out an apple.

You look out the window.

You don't raise your hand and there is
some essential beauty in your fingers,
which aren't even drumming, but lie
flat and peaceful.

The teacher repeats the question.

Outside the window, on an overhanging branch,
a robin is ruffling its feathers
and spring is in the air.

RAIN

Naomi Shihab Nye

A teacher asked Paul
what he would remember
from third grade, and he sat
a long time before writing
"this year somebody titched me
on the sholder"
and turned his paper in.
Later she showed it to me
as an example of her wasted life.
The words he wrote were large

as houses in a landscape.
He wanted to go inside them
and live, he could fill in
the windows of "o" and "d"
and be safe while outside
birds building nests in drainpipes
knew nothing of the coming rain.

The Student Theme

Ronald Wallace

The adjectives all ganged up on the nouns,
insistent, loud, demanding, inexact,
their Latinate constructions flashing. The pronouns
lost their referents: They were dangling, lacked
the stamina to follow the prepositions' lead
in, on, into, to, toward, for, or from.
They were beset by passive voices and dead
metaphors, conjunctions shouting But! or And!
The active verbs were all routinely modified
by adverbs, that endlessly and colorlessly ran
into trouble with the participles sitting
on the margins knitting their brows like gerunds
(dangling was their problem, too). The author
was nowhere to be seen; was off somewhere.

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Poetry 180

A Turning Back to Poetry

Edited by Billy Collins

[[Burst somewhere:]]

WINNER 2006 - New York Public Library Books for the Teen Age

Introduction by Billy Collins. A 180-degree turn implies a turning back—in this case, to poetry. A collection of 180 poems by the most exciting poets at work today, *Poetry 180* represents the richness and diversity of the form, and is designed to appeal to students with a selection of poems that are new and contemporary, yet also very accessible. Inspired by Billy Collins's poem-a-day program with the Library of Congress, *Poetry 180* is the perfect anthology for students who remain resolutely unconvinced about the value of poetry.

Random House | TR | 978-0-8129-6887-3 | 352 pp. | \$13.95/\$21.00 Can.

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Edited by Billy Collins

Inspired by Billy Collins's poem-a-day program with the Library of Congress, the original *Poetry 180: A Turning Back to Poetry* was a gathering of clear, contemporary poems aimed at a wide audience. In *180 More*, Collins continues his ambitious mission of exposing readers of all ages to the best of today's poetry.

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Read by Billy Collins

Introduction by Bill Murray

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