



Questions About Angels

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Billy Collins can pack the house. Funny and laid-back, his clear, often brief poems are easy to understand and enjoy -- which is why his readings are sometimes standing-room-only affairs. Collins may be a college professor and NEA-grant recipient, but he's not above using a disinfectant ad as an epigraph.

"Public restrooms give me the willies," reads the epigraph to a poem appropriately titled "The Willies." That man-on-the-street brand of humor, utterly stripped of academic pretense, is trademark Collins.

QUESTIONS ABOUT ANGELS, a reissue of Collins's fourth volume of poems, offers 70 pages of well-formed, very American verse that -- not surprisingly -- doesn't require a shelf of dictionaries. In fact, just as he laughs at epigraphs, Collins gleefully pokes fun at the very concept of dictionaries. Here, for example, are the opening lines to "The Hunt," which initially offer the flowing, dreamy verse many expect from a poet:

Somewhere in the rolling hills and farm country

that lie beyond speech

Noah Webster and his assistants are moving

across the landscape tracking down a new word.

Then Collins really gets going, letting his claws dig in. In the next stanza, that trademark humor really shows:

It is a small noun about the size of a mouse,

one that will seldom be used by anyone,

like a synonym for isthmus

but they are pursuing the creature zealously

Collins could be talking about poetry itself, a form "zealously pursued" but too often "seldom used." Despite the deadpan tone, these are poems that are aware of poetic tradition. QUESTIONS ABOUT ANGELS opens with a poem called "American Sonnet," which announces that "We do not speak like Petrarch or wear a hat like Spenser." Collins seems to believe that his particular American landscape and culture requires a variation on the standard forms of Western tradition. This country, he seems to say, demands a rethinking of it all.

Part of that rethinking is a probe of the whole idea of a "poet." Collins asks the questions his students would love to ask, if they only had the guts. How, he asks, do you know for sure if a poet is contemporary? This, of course, is a twist on the earlier, unspoken-but-understood question of "What makes a sonnet a sonnet, anyway?" addressed in the first poem.

Just as he produced an American "sonnet" that rolls off the tongue with the ease of banter, Collins comes up with an American, can-do answer to the "who's a contemporary poet?" question:

It is easy to find out if a poet is a contemporary poet
and thus avoid the imbroglio of calling him Victorian
or worse, Elizabethan, or worse, medieval.

If you look him up in The Norton Anthology of English Literature
and the year of his birth is followed only by a dash
and a small space for the numerals only spirits know,
then it is safe to say that he is probably alive

Though clothed in simple words and humor, Collins is actually taking a pretty sophisticated jab in these two stanzas, which are the first part of the appropriately titled poem "The Norton Anthology of English Literature." Is a poet worthy simply because he is in the anthology? And do these omnipresent anthologies really define periods and countries? Coming just a few pages after the Noah Webster reference, Collins may also be pushing his readers to wonder about the anthologizers' research processes.

Collins loves to mix poems to history's overachievers with odes to underachievers or family pets who never seemed to have much, if any, ambition. In one of the book's sweeter poems, Collins offers praise of a character named Riley. Here's the last stanza of the very brief poem "The Life of Riley: A Definitive Biography," where yet again, Collins mixes the quotidian and the poetic, letting his linguistic ability peep through the everyman persona at key moments:

He never had a job, a family or a sore throat.
He never mowed a lawn.
Passersby would always stop to remind him
whose life it was he was living.

He died in a hammock weighing a cloud.

In a book that mentions weighing a dog and stripping layers of clothing off as he writes, it makes sense that this poet doesn't flinch from depicting the weighing of a cloud. Like the character who never had a sore throat, Collins writes glitch-free poems that are both a breeze and a blast to read.

--*Aviya Kushner*

Questions About Angels Details

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Alan says

Never be ashamed of kindergarten—
it is the alphabet's only temple.
—"Instructions to the Artist," pp.54-55

Billy Collins is apparently something of a big deal. Poet Laureate of the United States, from 2001 to 2003. Frequent guest on Garrison Keillor's *Prairie Home Companion*. Subject of a documentary film in 2003 as well. Even so, I can't recall ever having run into Collins' work before reading Questions about Angels. Of course, I must also concede, and not for the first time, that poetry isn't really my thing, even though I've committed a verse or two myself—poetry (especially modern poetry) is almost always too allusive, too elusive, to engage me fully, and sometimes, when I actually see how the trick was done, I feel a little cheated anyway. But my friend Kim passed this book on to me, so I thought I would at least give it a try.

I read Questions about Angels slowly, with pauses for reflection between each piece. This book lends itself well to such a reading. The individual poems, having no overarching theme, resonated best for me when each had its own space.

I did have some questions about Questions about Angels, and a few quibbles. One issue was structural: the physical format of this volume just doesn't mesh well with the lengths of the works within it. Many of Collins' poems end up being about a page and a half long, and are printed so they spill over from the front of the page to its back—like pouring too many words into too small a bucket, needlessly breaking up their flow and sometimes making it unclear where a poem ends.

The poems themselves are also sometimes... unreflective about gender, let's say, in a way that I think was already becoming difficult to sustain even as far back as 1999, when this edition of Questions about Angels was published. The pronouns Collins uses in "**The Norton Anthology of English Literature**" (pp.17-18), for example, are uniformly masculine, until the final stanza, when "History"—a personage to whom no specific works of English Literature may be attributed—is allowed to appear, "holding her allegorical tools" while in "immaculate" garments. (Admittedly, much of this masculine musk is just what's wafting from the subject—the "Major Authors Edition" that I just looked through to check features *not one* female author in its 2,653 pages.) But that does not explain why the prehistoric geniuses in "**The First Genius**" (pp.31-32) are all "Gaunt, tall and bearded, as you might expect," nor why they go around "wondering what to do with their wisdom/like young girls wonder what to do with their hair." Nor is it clear why "**Going out for Cigarettes**" (pp. 37-38) stays so silent about the family its subject left behind. To me, today, these choices seem myopic.

As a quibbler by nature, I also noticed a few word choices (only a few, though!) with which I would argue. In "**A History of Weather**" (pp.5-6), Collins writes of "candid sunlight/elucidating the air"—where "elucidating" seems both needlessly elevated and too on-the-nose, the kind of choice I (no Poet Laureate) might make. And why say, in "**The Last Man on Earth**" (p.51), "in the style/of dirigibles"? The polysyllabic ungainliness of "in the style of" does not seem to be needed for its syllable count.

On the other hand, I really liked the phrase "argument of corridors" from the penultimate poem, "**English Country House**" (pp.88-89).

Overall, the works in *Questions about Angels* (with a few exceptions, mostly later in the book) came across as staid and unadventurous to me—prosaic, even. But "**Forgetfulness**" (pp.20-21), though, the one that ends the first section—that one hit home: "The name of the author is the first to go"...

The shorter poems impressed me more, in general. "**The Dead**", for example, who "are looking down through the glass-bottom boats of heaven" (p.35). "**Field Guide**" (p.44), as it wonders about a pretty purple flower. "**The Man in the Moon**" (p.47). "**Memento Mori**" (p.50), which evoked in my mind the animate appliances from Thomas M. Disch's brilliant little fable, *The Brave Little Toaster*. The circumstances in which I read "**Weighing the Dog**" (p.56) added some impact, I'm sure—I was actually sitting in a veterinarian's office while Collins reminded me that the best way to weigh a wriggling animal is this: hold the animal and step on the scales yourself, then weigh yourself *without* the pet, and subtract. "**The Life of Riley: A Definitive Biography**" (p.67) lived up to its wry title. And I remember the feverish dream of "**Saturday Morning**" (p.71) from my own childhood illnesses.

There were some exceptions to that "shorter is better" impression, too. The palpable panic in "**The Wires of the Night**" (pp.58-59) affected me much as it must have affected a sleepless Collins. The well-meaning censorship in "**The History Teacher**" (pp.77-78), teaching children that "The War of the Roses took place in a garden," was a chilling indictment. And "**The Willies**" (pp.83-84) really was playful—antic, even—in its exploration of synonyms for those creepy feelings of unease that everyone gets, now and then.

So... in retrospect, Collins' poems do seem to have given me a lot to say, after all. It would appear that they have done their jobs—however much of a job we can ask any hard-working poem to hold down.

Julie Ehlers says

I find the newer collections by Billy Collins are rather preoccupied with mortality, which is understandable but not always fun to read about, so it was nice to go back to this earlier collection, first published in 1991, to find him in high spirits and still trying to figure out women. Favorites: "The Wires of the Night" (haunting poem about death; I realize this is ironic given what I just said a few lines ago), the wonderful "Nostalgia," and the title poem.

Allison says

I like Collins as a conceptual poet (which I suspect he might hate). I think he does plainspoken, funny, and quirky well. I appreciate his accessibility. That said . . . is this poetry? I know it is, but it doesn't always feel like poetry to me. It lacks the lines that seize you, that create those "stop and process" moments--or perhaps it just delivers them in such offhand, shrugging tones that it almost makes the messages more inaccessible because they don't pull you in, make you think, make you notice. When I read Collins, it's like he's doing his thing and I'm not really invited; I feel more like an observer than a participant. I like to wander through a poem, and the poems in *Questions About Angels* don't seem to want me to do that--they just sidle along past me. I did like the work for its novelty of subject matter (the skeleton with a penis is a highlight) and a few choice lines and thoughts--I just wish those lines and thoughts had left more of a lasting impression so that I could remember what they are now.

Brent says

Big fun!
Recommended.

Paul says

Collins has a singular voice, that manages to be beautiful and humorous with simple language which expresses complex ideas. His reading voice is also terrific. He seems like a guy you would meet in a bar and strike up a conversation with, and he would seem nice and normal, and then he would just start dropping pointed pearls out of nowhere and you would damn well buy that man another beer.

mwpm says

The cover and the title of this collection are both misleading. Very misleading. The collection is divided into four parts. Of the four parts, only one (the second part) reflects what the cover and title would suggest - that is, a poetry collection dealing with religious themes. And even in the second part, these religious themes are minimal. Poems with titles like "Questions About Angels", "A Wonder of the World", "The Afterlife", and "The Dead" are likewise misleading.

"Questions About Angels" is a poem that pokes fun at the question of how many angels could fit on the head of a pin, elaborating on the question and asking why we don't ask other questions about angels...

What about their sleeping habits, the fabric of their robes,
their diet of unfiltered divine light?
What goes on inside their luminous heads? Is there a wall
these tall presences can look over and see hell?
(pg. 25)

(Granted, the religious themes are evident in this passage, but this is about as religious as it gets - which is not a fair representation of the overall text.)

"A Wonder of the World" is a poem that is all set-up and no pay-off. Collins builds the reader's anticipation, describing without revealing the so-called "Wonder of the World"...

It looks different than it does in photographs
and it is nothing like what you had imagined,
but there it is, motionless, unavoidable, real.
(pg. 27)

"The Afterlife" does not commit to any one interpretation of the afterlife, but rather suggests that every person is sent to a personal afterlife "according to (their) own private beliefs"...

Some are being shot into a funnel of flashing colors

into a zone of light, white as a January sun.
Others are standing naked before a forbidding judge who sits
with a golden ladder on one side, a coal chute on the other.

Some have already joined the celestial choir
and are singing as if they have been doing this forever,
while the less inventive find themselves stuck
in a big air conditioned room full of food and chorus girls.
(pg. 33)

Collins breaks from poems of Angels and Death and the Afterlife by ending the second part with "Going Out for Cigarettes", a poem that explores a familiar scenario...

one evening a man says he is going out for cigarettes,
closes the door behind him and is never heard from again,
not one phone call, not even a postcard from Rio.

The fourth part follows a similar continuity, with poems that sometimes lapse into parody - poems such as "Metamorphosis", "Wolf", and "Rip Van Winkle".

"Metamorphosis", perhaps my favourite of the poems from the fourth part (in part because I admire Kafka), asks of the synonymous author...

If Kafka could turn a man into an insect in one sentence
perhaps he could transform me into something new,
a slow willful river running through a forest,
or simply the German word for river, a handful of letters
hidden in the dark alphabetical order of a dictionary.
(pg. 70)

"Wolf" is a play on the wolves of fairy tales, in which the poet describes a wolf, not the anthropomorphic wolf of cartoons but a real wold on all fours, reading a book of fairy tales. Not surprisingly, the poems ends...

Later that night, lost in a town of pigs,
he knocks over houses with his breath.
(pg. 76)

"Rip Van Winkle" is a simple rumination on the familiar story. Collins contemplates the real-life implications of Rip Van Winkle's decades-long slumber, and muses somewhat aimlessly...

Here reclines the patron saint of sleep.
He has sawed enough logs to heat the Land of Nod.
His dreams are longer than all of homer.
And the Z above his head looks anchored in the air.

These aren't bad poems, but overall the second and fourth part of the collections contained my least favourite poems. The first and third part, however, compensate for any shortcoming in the second and fourth. Herein the poet had accumulated some of his best poems, including "The Death of Allegory", "The Norton Anthology of English Literature", "Purity", "Come Running", "Weighing the Dog", and "Vade Mecum" -

here is the poet at his best: his humour is most potent, his wit is most striking, and his structure is more refined.

"The Death of Allegory" is a poem that literalizes the allegorical figures of Renaissance paintings and asks what became of them...

Truth cantering on a powerful horse,
Chastity, eyes downcast, fluttering with veils.
Each one was marble come to life, a thought in a coat,
Courtesy bowing with one hand always extended,

Villainy sharpening an instrument behind a wall,
Reason with her crown and Constancy alert behind a helm.
They are all retired now, consigned to a Florida for tropes.
Justice is there standing by an open refrigerator.

Valor lies in bed listening to the rain.
Even Death has nothing to do but mend his cloak and hood,
and all their props are locked away in a warehouse,
hourglasses, globes, blindfolds and shackles.
(pg. 13)

"The Norton Anthology of English Literature" is a satirical response to the standards by which a poet is categorized within an era (be it Victorian, Elizabethan, medieval, etc...), deconstructing the apparent relevance of the poet's birth and death, and then departing completely...

Did you know that it is possible if you read a poem
enough times, if you read it over and over without stopping,
that you can make the author begin to spin gently,
even affectionately, in his grave?
(pg. 17)

"Purity" is a demonstration of the poet's humour, in which he claims to remove his skin and organs as part of his writing ritual (the humour is in his suggestion that sometimes he neglects to remove his penis)...

I am concentration itself: I exist in a universe
where there is nothing but sex, death, and typewriting.
(pg. 42)

"Come Running" appeals to me personally for its use of abstraction. It is an abstraction the reader will recognize from other poems, in which an idea becomes an object - in this case, the poet's name becomes an object that is stolen by the neighbor's dog...

Perhaps the dog was never given a name
and is not eating mine with pleasure
under a porch in the cool, lattice-shadowed dirt.

Perhaps late tonight I will hear the voice
of my neighbor as she stands at her back door,

hands cupped around her mouth, calling my name,
and I will leap the hedge and come running.
(pg. 52)

"Weighing the Dog" is a narrative reminiscent of Raymond Carver, a narrative that begins with an occurrence that is simultaneously uncommon and commonplace (so uncommon that it is believably commonplace). Ultimately, this occurrence tells us something about the character's life, and the circumstances surrounding this small otherwise trivial occurrence...

It is awkward for me and bewildering for him
as I hold him in my arms in the small bathroom,
balancing our weight on the shaky blue scale,

but this is the way to weigh a dog and easier
than training him to sit obediently on one spot
with his tongue out, waiting for the cookie.

With pencil and paper I subtract my weight
from our total to find out the remainder that is his,
and I start to wonder if there is an analogy here.

It could not have to do with my leaving you
though I never figured out what you amounted to
until I subtracted myself from our combination.

You held me in your arms more than I held you
through all those awkward and bewildering months
and now we are both lost in strange and distant neighborhoods.
(pg. 56)

"Vade Mecum" is a short poem (the shortest in the collection) but one that is disarming in its simplicity and sentimentality...

I want the scissors to be sharp
and the table to be perfectly level
when you cut me out of my life
and paste me in that book you always carry.
(pg. 61)

Who doesn't want to be carried in this book? Reading this poem I feel sentimental for a person I haven't met, sentimental for a book I haven't seen.

Ashley says

This superb poetry collection has been the fourth I've read from my favourite poet Billy Collins. Looking forward to reading more of his collections.

Alexander Rolfe says

I liked Forgetfulness best, but also The Willies, and Weighing the Dog. And I liked the thought of kindergarten being the alphabet's only temple.

Krista Stevens says

So many favorites...

"The Norton Anthology of English Literature" - reference to History - Paula S.

"Questions About Angels"

"The First Geniuses"

"They have yet to discover fire, much less invent the wheel,/so they wander a world mostly dark and motionless/wondering what to do with their wisdom, like young girls wonder what to do with their hair."

"The Afterlife"

"They wish they could wake in the morning like you/and stand at a window examining the winter trees,/every branch traced with the ghost writing of snow."

"Field Guide"

"Then as if he were giving me the time of day, a passenger/looks up from his magazine and says 'wisteria'"

"Weighing the Dog"

"...and now we are both lost in strange and distant neighborhoods"

"The History Teacher" - again, P. Sampson

Michael Reed Davison says

I haven't been into reading poetry since I outgrew Shel Silverstein. Billy Collins is fun! Here's my favorite excerpt:

Of all the questions you might want to ask
about angels, the only one you ever hear
is how many can dance on the head of a pin...

It is designed to make us think in millions,
billions, to make us run out of numbers and collapse
into infinity, but perhaps the answer is simply one:
one female angel dancing alone in her stocking feet,
a small jazz combo working in the background.

She sways like a branch in the wind, her beautiful eyes closed, and the tall thin bassist leans over to glance at his watch because she has been dancing forever, and now it is very late, even for musicians.

Leland says

If you were gifted enough to experience language like you experience a sunset in a new and amazing landscape, you would probably find Collins' mix of language and experience unexceptional and uninspiring. For the rest of us, it's a fascinating revelation.

Liz Gray says

I picked up this book of early (1991) Billy Collins poems in a used bookstore in Provincetown this summer, and have been savoring it for a couple of weeks. It includes some of my favorite Collins poems—"Forgetfulness" and "The Death of Allegory"—and introduced me to many new ones. His writing is thoughtful, relatable, and often humorous. I like the way he thinks about the world and his place in it.

Rachel Watson says

I can't say enough about how much I loved this poetry anthology. Collins pulls you in with his wit and then spins deep truth about ordinary, simple-on-the-surface concepts. His playfulness and humor permeate every poem, and his creativity and imagination are seemingly boundless.

If you haven't read this already, I highly recommend it!

Erin says

I decided to try out Billy Collins after I enjoyed one of his poems in *Good Poems for Hard Times*. I wish my poetry journey had started here, I really do. Why do teachers make young learners struggle with John Donne and George Herbert when there is something accessible and relatable right here? It's like starting kids off with *The Metamorphosis* instead of *The Cat in the Hat* and then being surprised you don't have lifelong readers.

Ranting aside, I found Collins' poetry to be in very accessible language while still managing to be very moving. This is a thing that still startles me about poetry, the abrupt evocation of feelings. In just a few lines Collins can express a feeling you've struggled to pin down for years.

Some of the light-hearted poems got a genuine laugh out of me (*The Hunt*, *The Discovery of Scat*), and one even squeezed some tears out of something I thought I was ok with (*The Wires of the Night*). Another had me eagerly googling self-portraits of dead European painters (*Candle Hat*). All this variety from one volume. I loved it.

My other favorites:

First Reader

Forgetfulness

Mappamundi

The Afterlife

Purity

Memento Mori

Weighing the Dog

James Murphy says

Whimsy is a good word to apply to Collins' work. The world amuses him. He wallows in life's innumerable twists and turns. I think I've mentioned before how much charm his sense of humor lends to his poetry. It's this that makes the reader smile with pleasure at reading a poem about a jazz combo impatient at the lateness of the hour as an angel is intent on dancing on the head of a pin forever. I laughed at Jack's wish to write his love a letter of apology from the top of the beanstalk. His imagining what it'd be like if Kafka changed him into the New York Public Library made me smile. Collins is deceptively unadorned. These little whimsies seem slight but lead you to reflection or to revelation. His work seems personal but its solicitudes include the reader in its poetic embrace to say we're all in this together, we see it the same way, we sing the same song. The poetry of Billy Collins never fails to make my day brighter.
