

The Apple that Astonished Paris

Billy Collins

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In 1988 the University of Arkansas Press published Billy Collins's *The Apple That Astonished Paris*, his "first real book of poems," as he describes it in a new, delightful preface written expressly for this new printing to help celebrate both the Press's twenty-fifth anniversary and this book, one of the Press's all-time best sellers.

In his usual witty and dry style, Collins writes, "I gathered together what I considered my best poems and threw them in the mail." After "what seemed like a very long time" Press director Miller Williams, a poet as well, returned the poems to him in the "familiar self-addressed, stamped envelope." He told Collins that there was good work here but that there was work to be done before he'd have a real collection he and the Press could be proud of: "Williams's words were more encouragement than I had ever gotten before and more than enough to inspire me to begin taking my writing more seriously than I had before."

This collection includes some of Collins's most anthologized poems, including "Introduction to Poetry," "Another Reason Why I Don't Keep a Gun in the House," and "Advice to Writers." Its success over the years is testament to Collins's talent as one of our best poets, and as he writes in the preface, "this new edition . . . is a credit to the sustained vibrancy of the University of Arkansas Press and, I suspect, to the abiding spirit of its former director, my first editorial father."

The Apple that Astonished Paris Details

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From Reader Review The Apple that Astonished Paris for online ebook

Jaffa Kintigh says

This is my second time reading this collection. It is easy to read and clever, though the cleverness is usually cloying. I look for beauty in the poems I read, in particular, the beauty of describing something in a way that transcends the component words. Cleverness does not equal beauty.

The first poem that really got my attention was "Flying to the Funeral." It opens with both a wonderful depiction of what it feels like to look out a plane at the world below and with that aching feeling where all thoughts veer to a friend who's died. ". . . as we inch north at hundreds of miles per hour . . . I see only the places from which he is absent:/suburban diagrams where he is not plunging/into the blue dot of a swimming pool;/checkerboard farms where he is not leading/a horse into the darkness of a barn" The speaker imagines "taverns minus the tune of his voice." This is a haunting beauty that makes the collection.

In "Remembering Dreams," I adore the speaker's description of waking mid-dream: "But the rest of the story vanishes/as if someone had ripped an ancient epic from our hands/leaving us with a fragment, a few hexameters/whose rhythm is drowned out by the beat of daylight." This poem is also more typical of the collection which has many poems based on art, music, dreams and poetry. Typically, I am not a fan of poems about poetry, much like I'm not a fan of songs about singing.

Overall, I would not consider this a dark collection despite the poem "Flying to the Funeral." I mention this because the poem I liked the most was also dark. And short. In its entirety, "Cancer:" "When you need to say the word,/it cowers in back of your vocabulary/behind some outdated slang.//And if you try forcing it into the mouth/it lodges in the throat like a fishbone.//My father cannot say it yet./The old man cannot even hear it./He pretends I am saying 'campfire.'"

Evelyn Ding says

The opening poem, "Vanishing Point", does a great job of capturing the journey this collection is about to take you on. Collins has an incredible imagination, creating heart-wrenching backstories for the most ordinary objects and concepts. My other favorites include "The Blue", "Etymology", "Winter Syntax", and honestly too many more to name.

Bernadette says

<http://rantsravesreviews.homestead.co...>

Jennybeast says

I was looking for language and wry humor and Billy Collins fit the bill. This time and every time, he delivers the sublime and the ridiculous.

Mmars says

Very accomplished early effort. At times they felt a bit like practice poems, but that is a squabble. Few of us could even write one poem in our lifetimes that could come close to anything Collins has written here. Many of these poems relate to things literary - reading, writing, language, etc. Something I enjoyed a lot. It was one of the ars poetica pieces that drew me to the book and as I read I had no idea which one it was. But for me, that was a good thing.

Jackie says

There is no Billy Collins book I do not love.

Kasandra says

I'd been wanting to read this for years, to see if Collins had the touch from the start. Yup. Particularly liked Death, Child Development, The Rival Poet, and My Number. Funny, wry, understated, and often surprising, with fresh perspectives.

Sara Diane says

Billy Collins is, hands-down, the best poet in America at this time. I am never disappointed in his work. I was first introduced to Billy in college (literally, he came to do a reading at my school) and I've been in love ever since. Even if you aren't a fan of poetry, you will find something in Collins' work to love. He writes beautiful, witty and surprising poems.

Brent Legault says

I know it's a little corny (okay, it's *very, very* corny) but I thought I'd try to read a book of poems a day for the next thirty days (on account of it being National Poetry Month). Stupid? Perhaps. (It's a bit like reading The Autobiography of Malcom X in February.)

Anyway, I sponser a lot of poetry, I hawk it in my shop, I listen to it, praise it, nod at it, generally acknowledge its importance, etc. But I rarely just sit down and *read* it. Hypocrite? Probably. But I'm willing to change.

So.

Here's my opening salvo. A book of poems by the U. S. Poet Laureate, 2001- 2003. Funny. I thought, after Bush II was elected, they'd've given up such niceties. (Or given them over to Larry The Cable Guy.) Low blow? You betcha.

Would you like to know my favorite poem within its walls? I'll spell it out for you:

ON CLOSING ANNA KARENINA

*I must have started reading this monster
a decade before Tolstoy was born
but the vodka and the suicide are behind me now,
all the winter farms, ice-skating and horsemanship.*

*It consumed so many evenings and afternoons,
I thought a Russian official would appear
to slip a medal over my lowered head
when I reached the last page.*

*But I found there only the last word,
a useless looking thing, stalled there,
ending its sentence and the whole book at once.*

*With no more plot to nudge along and nothing
to unfold, it is the only word with no future.*

*It stares into space and chants its own name
as a traveler whose road has just vanished
might stare into the dark, vacant fields ahead
knowing he cannot go forward, cannot go back.*

I checked the two translations of Anna Karenina that I had handy and the last word in each is *it*.

Margaret Fisk says

Originally posted on Tales to Tide You Over

I rarely read a book of poetry, and my taste runs more to Rudyard Kipling than most modern poetry. However, when I learned this book included a poem on etymology (something of a pleasure for me), I undertook to explore Billy Collins' poetry.

What I discovered was articulate and evocative description to delight and surprise me. His ability to capture a place, time, or mood is significant, and I believe I enjoyed every one of the poems in the first section "Away," though some connected with me more than others.

The second section, "Home," frustrated me though.

Again, the description is written with a talented hand, the moments firmly captured so they unfold in front of

me. And yet, in this same section is a dismissal of every reader's experience, every moment of connection or understanding, as over-thinking. The poem, titled "Introduction to Poetry," rails against the look for deeper meaning in poetry, a common refrain, and one I can sympathize with even as I reject the premise. But then, this is me finding meaning, so would most likely be dismissed as "beating it with a hose." Or perhaps he'd consider I understood this poem perfectly, while rejecting the other meanings that tore me from his description and broke the connection I'd found.

My issue with several of the poems in "Home" is how they reveal him a result of rather than a commentator on society. "Child Development" is a wonderful, perceptive understanding of both childhood and the strictures put on people in the name of maturity that deny our actual experience or bury it deep where it springs forth in unreasoned anger or self-destructive behavior.

Then, having built that expectation, I get to "Earthling" where, in a few, short stanzas, Collins manages to connect with shared experience and then reject that experience and every person who does not fall into the "norm" who can revel in being perfectly adapted. Sure, it can be interpreted as him saying to be happy with who you are. However, he makes a point of establishing the personal happiness in the context of someone who is "average" while using those descriptive skills to point out the "other than average" nature of those who are not well suited, in his opinion of their opinion, for Earth.

There's no apparent awareness of the underlying message that is weighed down with social convention and denying anyone who stands outside that norm. There are other poems in the collection with the same type of message, so disappointing when so much of the poetry is communal with shared experiences presented vividly.

Ultimately, I'd recommend reading Billy Collins' poetry for his clear understanding of the English language and his ability to paint pictures in so few words by choosing the one detail that the majority of readers will have experienced, if not in the place where Collins' refers to it. That is the strength of his poetry, and well worth experiencing. However, be aware that he is a product of his society, and when not directly intending a commentary, the commentary he offers is one of conformity.

Marsha says

I like Billy Collins. I was reminded to read him again when I recently read *The Wonder Spot*, and narrator Sophie Applebaum read him. "Another Reason Why I Don't Keep a Gun in the House" remains my favorite (and is also Sophie's favorite).

Reed says

Another great poetry collection by Billy Collins. This was his first true book of poetry. As with his other collections, a great opportunity to learn about topics: Hart Crane was a poet who committed suicide; Plight of the Troubadour explains langue d'oc vs langue d'oïl. Other great poems include Vanishing Point; Fur; Bar Time; and Introduction to Poetry. Easy to read and enlightening.

Libras says

Brilliant

It's Billy Collins! It's poetry! In both meanings of the word.

Re-read time and again.

Makes you laugh and think!

Buy, read, enjoy!

Shay Caroline says

There are a million better poets than Billy Collins, and goodness knows there are hundreds of millions of worse ones. His poems have the pleasant oddness of Richard Brautigan, the formulaic sameness of Barry Manilow, and the good old American-ness of a cheeseburger.

While there are maybe four poems in this volume that snapped me out of my drowse for a moment-- "Introduction To Poetry", "Another reason Why I Don't Keep A Gun In The House", "Child Development" and "Earthling"--when compared to somebody who has the kind of gift that stops one in one's tracks, like Lorca or Neruda or Cohen, this stuff just isn't good enough except to while away an hour on the porch on a Sunday afternoon. Not really recommended.

Colin Bailes says

What I learned from Billy Collins as a poet: poetry doesn't always have to be depressing and there is a lighter side to life that is worth taking a look at. Billy Collins' poems do sometimes delve into deep or depressing matters, but his wittiness helps buffer those moments. A poet shouldn't always throw the worst of the world at the reader. Sometimes, we need a poet who makes us laugh.
