

Taking a Moment for a Poem

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I know you may not buy this book. It's called "The Rain in Portugal," and I only came across it a few weeks ago when I was browsing through new books at the library.

It's a book of poetry by someone named Billy Collins. This is his 12th book of poetry, and I suspect not that many people may have even purchased the earlier volumes.

But since this is holiday, gift-giving season, maybe I can become a one-man sales team for Billy Collins.

I'll start by telling you what not to expect when you read the poems in this new volume. Don't expect the spookiness of a Stephen King novel. No thriller here either in the style of John Grisham or Sue Grafton.

The good news, however, is that reading this book of poetry won't take as long as reading a novel. You can probably go through the poetry in not much more than half an hour.

But here's the best part about poetry. Even if you get through this volume or almost any other collection of poems pretty quickly, good poetry may surprise you by insisting that it go through you!

I mean poetry works because it doesn't just roll over you. It works because it sinks in to you and leaves you wondering, sometimes smiling, and often thinking twice about the simplest things in life. Poetry touches your imagination.

So here's my recommendation. Once you have the Billy Collins book in your hands (more on that, in a moment), don't rush. If you get the book on a Tuesday or Wednesday, leave it aside until the weekend arrives. Saturday or Sunday after your errands is poetry time. You need to sit down in a comfortable place. Get yourself settled. Pour yourself a glass of wine. Or if that's not your style, try cider or anything else you enjoy sipping.

Now you're ready to open the book and read a poem. Not two. Just start with one. Breathe. Since the language of a poem isn't always straightforward, consider reading the poem a second time. And enjoy. Let your mind follow the images. See how the poem doesn't quite walk a straight line from a to b. Its language takes you on an unexpected journey that makes you think and maybe rethink what you've probably never said out loud.

Try Collins' poem about being an only child. He tells us how he loved being the center of the universe. "Whenever I played a game on the floor of my bedroom, it was always my turn!"

But when his parents entered their 90's, Collins says he longed for a sister who would be a nurse named Mary. She would stand by him when mom and dad grew old. They would have coffee together and reminisce. "I would gaze into her

green eyes and see my parents. My mother looking out of Mary's right eye and my father staring out of her left." Best of all, after Mary and he shared a pastry, he would pay the bill and walk her home.

It's tender and quiet. Makes you think about your family and so many other relationships.

Onward for a smile. Collins offers a poem imagining what it might be like to fly over England with William Shakespeare in the seat next to you. It's a delicious romp as you consider how the Bard might react to his homeland from 35,000 feet in the air.

Next up - Join Collins walking through an art gallery, marveling at the creativity of so many great artists, until he stops in front of one portrait. He wonders what artist left this work behind. Bending close to catch the details, he tells us, "It was a portrait of an anonymous Dutch family by an anonymous Dutch artist."

So much for legacy and fame!

To tell you the truth, my favorite Billy Collins poem sneaks into my memory from an earlier publication. The poem is called DAYS. As the days grow shorter and we prepare for the holidays, Collins reminds us to treasure what we have in life.

He writes, "Each [day] is a gift, no doubt, mysteriously placed in your waking hand..." Your job is to imagine "all the days of the past stacked high like the impossible tower of dishes entertainers used to build on stage." See yourself "perched on the top of a tall ladder hoping to add one more. Just another Wednesday, you whisper, then holding your breath, place the cup on yesterday's saucer without the slightest clink."

Love life. Treasure each day.

Make Billy Collins part of a beautiful day by visiting your library or a local bookstore owned by people who share life with us right here in our community. The Broadside Bookshop and Booklink Booksellers are in Northampton. Odyssey Bookshop is in South Hadley. Each of them is a perfect setting for encountering the curious, whimsical, inspiring world of poetry.

P.S. Billy Collins is a recipient of fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts and the Guggenheim Foundation. He is a Distinguished Professor of English at Lehman College of the City University of New York and a visiting writer at Sarah Lawrence College. He was Poet Laureate of the United States for 2001-2002.