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Poet Billy Collins, winner Helmerich Distinguished Author Award, talked to students Friday

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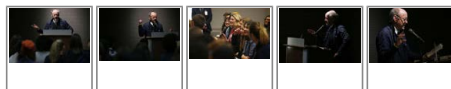
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Poet Billy Collins, winner of the Helmerich Distinguished Author Award, speaks to a group of students about poetry at Central Library on Friday. JAMES GIBBARD/Tulsa World

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By James D. Watts Jr. Tulsa World | 0 comments

The most important emotion an aspiring poet can have, according to Billy Collins, is jealousy.

“When you read a really good poem, it should drive you crazy that you didn’t write that poem,” Collins said. “That’s what you’re doing when you read poetry as a poet — you’re looking for poems to be jealous of, to make you write your own poems better. Professors call that ‘influence,’ but it’s really jealousy.”

Collins, former U.S. Poet Laureate, is in Tulsa this weekend as the recipient of the 2016 Peggy V. Helmerich Distinguished Author Award.

He spoke Friday morning in Central Library’s Aaronson Auditorium to an audience of high school students from Union Public Schools, Tulsa School of Arts and Sciences, Cascia Hall, Holland Hall and Metro Christian Academy. Most had been assigned to read Collins’ 2005 collection, “The Trouble with Poetry and Other Poems.”

“I feel right at home with high school students,” Collins told the crowd. “I haven’t

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really matured all that much. And I still worry if I'm cool or not. I hate to tell you, but that worry doesn't go away."

Collins spoke about the program he founded as Poet Laureate, Poetry 180, that brought poetry into schools.

"The idea was that a poem would be read each school day, maybe over the loudspeaker or at an assembly," he said. "And I stressed that there should be no quizzes, no analyses, no discussions of the poem read. The real pleasures of poetry — the music of the language, those magic moments when a poem shifts in tone or place or attitude — those aren't teachable things. They are only things you can experience."

Collins led the students through how several of his poems came to be, such as "Monday," which begins as a kind of satire on poetry as a job but ends with an image that blends love and death — "all that good, gritty stuff," he said.

"For me, the pen is not a recording device but an instrument of discovery," he said. "I never foresee the end of a poem. I never think about what a poem means when I'm working on it. I just keep nudging it along. And if the poem is really rolling, if it seems to be traveling somewhere, then I'm happy to follow it to the point where I don't have anything more I want to say, and you don't have anything more you want to read."

Collins received the Helmerich Award on Friday night at a black-tie ceremony at Central Library.

He will also give a free public presentation at 10:30 a.m. Saturday morning in Central Library. Collins will be signing books following the presentation, and copies of Collins' books will be available for purchase.

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