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# Poet Billy Collins wins 2016 Helmerich Award

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Billy Collins, the former U.S. Poet Laureate, is the winner of the 2016 Peggy V. Helmerich Distinguished Author Award. SUZANNAH GILMAN/Courtesy

By JAMES D. WATTS JR. World Scene Writer | 1 comment

A few stanzas about an insect opened Billy Collins' mind to all the possibilities of poetry.

Collins, who served as U.S. Poet Laureate from 2001 to 2003, grew up around poetry – he remembers his mother peppering her conversation with lines she had memorized, and Collins himself wrote his first poems as a youngster.

But it was a poem written in the early 1600s that made a lasting impression on Collins.

"I was 18 and in college, and one of the poems we studied in this course I was taking was John Donne's 'The Flea,' " Collins said. "It's a very funny, yet somewhat dark, poem about a man trying to convince a woman to go to bed with him.

"I think the thing that impressed me was that it was this very sexy, very insistent seduction poem, but at the same time, it's very funny," he said. "When you're 18, sex and humor are pretty much separated in your mind. I just couldn't believe that a poem could be passionately seductive and

extremely amusing.

"And that really opened my mind up to something I try to get into my own poetry, to be funny and serious at the same time," Collins said. "At least, that's what I'm aiming for,



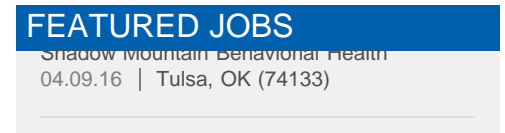
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finding that kind of balance.”

Collins, one of the country’s most popular and acclaimed poets, is the winner of the 2016 Peggy V. Helmerich Distinguished Author Award.

Collins is the first poet to receive this award, which has been presented annually by the Tulsa Library Trust since 1985. Other winners such as Margaret Atwood (1999), Joyce Carol Oates (2002) and Wendell Berry (2012) have published poetry but are better known for their novels and nonfiction.

Collins is the author of 13 volumes of poetry, with a new collection, “The Rain in Portugal,” due to be published in October.

“This is quite an amazing honor, and I’m very grateful,” Collins said, during a recent telephone conversation. “I think Ann Patchett (the 2014 honoree) may have put a bug in people’s ear about me, so I probably owe her a debt of gratitude as well.”

Collins will receive the award at a black-tie gala Dec. 2 at Central Library. The award consists of a \$40,000 cash prize and an engraved crystal book. Collins will also take part in a free public presentation Dec. 3 at Central Library.

Collins has twice been to Tulsa. In 2006, he was the guest of the Oklahoma Center for Poets and Writers. He returned in 2009 as part of the University of Tulsa’s Presidential Lecture Series.

A native of New York City, Collins wrote his first poem at age 12, but it would be almost 30 years before he would publish his first book of poetry, “The Apple That Astonished Paris,” published in 1988 by the University of Arkansas Press.

Subsequent volumes, such as “Ballistics” and “Horoscopes for the Dead,” have been best-sellers — compared to most volumes of poetry.

His work often begins with an easily recognizable image or situation, and the words flow in a conversational way, before a slight twist of phrase takes the poem into more profound, unexpected territory, leavened by subtle and crafty humor.

“We seem to always know where we are in a Billy Collins poem but not necessarily where he is going,” said poet and novelist Stephen Dunn. “I love to arrive with him at his arrivals. He doesn’t hide things from us, as I think lesser poets do. He allows us to overhear, clearly, what he himself has discovered.”

“One thing I tell always my poetry student is that you can’t give the reader a reason to stop reading,” Collins said. “I think I finish reading about 25 percent of the poems I start because a lot of them have deal-breakers for me. I come upon one of those, and I’m quite ready to move on to the next thing.”

When asked for an example of a poetic “deal-breaker,” Collins said, “Oh, words like ‘cicada.’ It’s completely irrational to use that in a poem. And poems about families — I think that if your poems have a lot of people in them, you should be writing fiction. I think of poetry as a private, intimate communication between the writer and a single reader. The maximum occupancy of a poem should be two — the poet and the reader.”

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