



Poetry 180

A Turning Back to Poetry

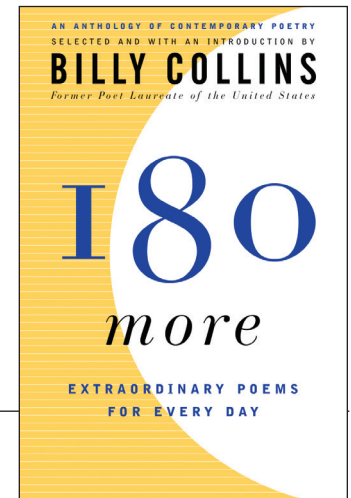
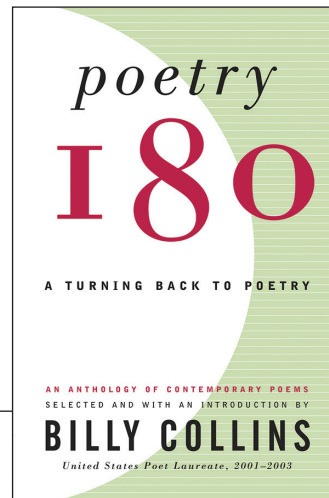
180 More

Extraordinary Poems for Every Day

Edited and with an Introduction by Billy Collins

Poetry 180 | Random House | TR | 978-0-8129-6887-3 | 352pp. | \$16.00/\$20.00 Can.

180 More | Random House | TR | 978-0-8129-7296-2 | 400pp. | \$15.95/\$20.00 Can.



• note to teachers •

Billy Collins, former U.S. Poet Laureate, believes poetry should be accessible to everyone, and everyone should have the chance to enjoy it. In *Poetry 180* and *180 More*, Collins sets out to help American high school English teachers and students correct the disconnect between adolescents and poetry appreciation.

To that end, Collins has hand-picked every single poem in these anthologies using three guidelines: (1) accessibility (2) quality; and (3) as he explains in the second book, *180 More*, “on their willingness to deliver immediate injections of pleasure” (Collins, *180 More*, xxii). He also strives to introduce students to “new voices in contemporary poetry,” including many not yet especially famous (Collins, *Poetry 180*, xx). He points out that in the typical anthology “dead authors beat out living ones at a ratio of nine to one” and has chosen to rule out poems that have become “a standard offering in textbooks or anthologies” (Collins, *Poetry 180*, xx).

• using *Poetry 180* and *180 More*

Billy Collins' preferred plan for using *Poetry 180* and *180 More* is to have one poem read aloud each day by a different member of the school community (with representatives of every segment taking part, from administrators to members of the grounds crew to students—everyone). The thinking behind this parallels Collins' philosophy about poetry in general: by introducing students to poetry outside the classroom context, students will come to the poetry without preconceived notions, and without the sense of intimidation that many feel when faced with the task of interpreting a poem. Collins suggests that, by making poetry enjoyable (rather than a chore), students will begin to appreciate the art form. Subsequently, students may be more receptive to further instruction.

But *Poetry 180* and *180 More* certainly do not have to be used for one all-school poem every day; any regular schedule of reading is preferable to no poetry at all. Indeed, the books have definite advantages for use in the classroom as introductory poetry anthologies: both present a wide array of poetic voices and provide biographical information for each poet.

Whether broadcast to the whole school or used at each individual teacher's discretion, Collins emphasizes that he has chosen poems that need to be read aloud for full effect. He has some suggestions for ensuring that the oral readers are set up for success:

1. Readers need time to practice reading their poems out loud with a listener, preferably an English teacher.
2. Readers should recite their poems slowly (every word can be important in a poem).

3. Readers should use a normal voice and not attempt a theatrical performance.
4. As readers practice, they should be cognizant that unless there is punctuation at the end of a line, the reader's voice should not stop but continue to the next line without pause.
5. The reader should look in the dictionary for the meaning and especially the pronunciation of unfamiliar words (Collins, "How to Read a Poem Out Loud").

Collins also suggests these other ways for students to interact with a poem:

1. "write the poem out, just as Keats and Frost did" (Collins, *Poetry 180*, xix).
2. "internalize a poem by memorizing it" (Collins, *Poetry 180*, xix).

about this author

BILLY COLLINS is an American phenomenon. No poet since Robert Frost has managed to combine high critical acclaim with such broad popular appeal. His last three collections of poems have broken sales records for poetry. His readings are usually standing room only, and his audience—enhanced tremendously by his appearances on National Public Radio—includes people of all backgrounds and age groups. The poems themselves best explain this phenomenon. The typical Collins poem opens on a clear and hospitable note but soon takes an unexpected turn; poems that begin in irony may end in a moment of lyric surprise. No wonder Billy Collins sees his poetry as "a form of travel writing" and considers humor "a door into the serious."

Billy Collins has published seven collections of poetry, including *Questions About Angels*, *The Art of Drowning*, *Picnic*, *Lightning*, *Taking Off Emily Dickinson's Clothes*, *Sailing Alone Around the Room: New and Selected Poems*, *Nine Horses*, and, most recently, *The Trouble with Poetry and Other Poems*. In *Poetry 180: A Turning Back to Poetry*, and *180 More: Extraordinary Poems for Every Day*, Collins beckons readers to return to poetry with an anthology of poems that exposes the richness and diversity of the form. His work has also appeared in *The New Yorker*, *The Paris Review*, and *The American Scholar*.

Included among the honors Billy Collins has received are fellowships from the New York Foundation for the Arts, the National Endowment for the Arts, and the Guggenheim Foundation. He has also been awarded the Oscar Blumenthal Prize, the Bess Hokin Prize, the Frederick Bock Prize, and the Levinson Prize—all awarded by *Poetry* magazine. In October 2004, Collins was selected as the inaugural recipient of the Poetry Foundation's Mark Twain Award for humorous poetry. He has been a writer-in-residence at Sarah Lawrence College and served as a Literary Lion of the New York Public Library. He is a Distinguished Professor of English at Lehman College, City University of New York, where he has taught for the past 30 years. In June 2001, Billy Collins was appointed U.S. Poet Laureate (2001-2003). In January 2004, he was named New York State Poet Laureate 2004-06.

→ teaching ideas

An educational theory known as Reader-Response is a good means for accomplishing Billy Collins' goal of increasing Americans' lifelong involvement with poetry. Reader-Response theory involves having students read and attempt to form and articulate their own thoughts and feelings about a piece of literature. Many researchers feel that this method is a far more effective way to promote lifelong reading and engagement with literature than listening to someone else's opinions.

As students become comfortable developing their own thoughts and feelings about a poem, interaction with their classmates will be a natural response. Robert Probst, a Reader-Response theorist, provides some guiding principles for the classroom to facilitate personal response and sharing of those responses:

1. Invite response to the text.
2. Give students time to shape and take confidence in their responses.
3. Find the links among the students' responses.
4. Invite writing about self, text, other and the culture of society.
5. Let the talk grow as naturally as possible, encouraging organic flow of the discussion.
6. Look back to other texts, other discussions, other experiences.
7. Look for the next step (prepare for the next read). (Probst, 42-43)

As teachers, your goal will be to facilitate student response to the poetry in *Poetry 180* and *180 More* so that they can achieve an understanding of the poem, communicate their thoughts and feelings

to others, and develop a lifetime love for poetry. Using the Reader-Response theory will help us with this, but we, as educators, have a lifetime of career preparation and knowledge that is valuable and ought to be shared with the students: it's just a matter of sharing the appropriate things at the appropriate times and letting the students participate in their own experience as much as possible.

A poetry response journal is a good way to help students process their reading and thinking about the poems they read. The teacher can have students share what they have written with partners, groups and/or the whole class. Progressive sharing (from small to large groups) will help them to articulate what they have to say, and may provide a springboard for writing assignments such as literary analysis. Teachers can also read the journals and respond to student entries individually, an act that helps to create a sense of audience. The teacher's goal in responding is not to tell students whether or not they interpreted the poem correctly, but rather to show interest in each student's attempt to find meaning. This can be accomplished through comments in the margin or a brief paragraph at the end of a section.

Literature response journals of any kind can be a great teaching and learning tool, but as middle school teacher Linda Berger points out in "Reader Response Journals: You Make the Meaning . . . and How," when you begin using Reader-Response journals for the first time, many students will need your help as they learn how to do it, especially if they are not accustomed to interpreting literature for themselves (380-385). Berger's usage of journals elicited two common responses: summarizing a piece rather than responding to it; and the exact opposite—expressing an opinion/feeling with no explanation or references to the lines of the poem. To facilitate a more meaningful response, Berger and her students brainstormed solutions and generated four questions:

1. What do you notice?
2. What do you question?
3. What do you feel?
4. What do you relate to? (Berger, 381)

Building on Berger's experiences, teachers of *Poetry 180* might take the students through poems early in the book, early in the school year, for a guided practice with these four questions, using the ideas/responses generated by the whole class in a discussion as a model. Students should understand that they are not assigned to answer these questions with every poem, but rather can consider the questions to be a fall-back position when they are finding difficulty articulating their personal responses to a poem.

Billy Collins' opening poem in *Poetry 180*, "Introduction to Poetry" is a good one to use for demonstrating how to use the poetry response journal. As with all the poems, the best practice is to read them out loud, and if they are read to the whole school, the teacher may want to have the poem read at least one more time in the classroom, a practice most poetry teachers recommend. As we begin the process, it's okay to do some coaching, and especially important to help students get a sense of what Collins wants the reader to understand about not just poetry but poetry reading. Ask students to consider Collins' lines:

*... tie the poem to a chair with rope
and torture a confession out of it.*

*They begin beating it with a hose
to find out what it really means."*

And ask what point he is trying to make about the most common approach to the study of poetry. Ask them to compare those lines with:

*... waterski across the surface of a poem
waving at the author's name on the shore."*

The teacher might, at this point, ask all students to write in their poetry response journals a brief answer to the questions:

1. At what point does analyzing a poem go too far?
2. How do you interpret the term "accessible" as it is used to refer to poetry?

After students seem to have finished writing down their thoughts, ask them to share their responses with the class. The teacher can brainstorm with the students what elements of poetry might be useful for reference as they write in their response journals, such as: metaphor, simile, personification, connotation, sensory imagery, metonymy, irony, allusion, meter, rhyme scheme, etc. This is not to say that students are required to refer to so many devices of poetry per entry, but

rather to introduce a set of tools they may find useful. Be sure to give a model/example, such as this one about "Introduction to Poetry":

What do you notice?

I notice the change in connotations at the point in the poem where we go from "waterskiing," which surely has good connotations and evokes images and memories of fun and enjoyment, to "torture a confession," obviously evoking negative images of the kind most people only experience vicariously through the movies or reading a spy novel. Personally, I would rather waterski across these poems than. . .

Another poem the class might discuss as a whole in preparation for using the two books is current Poet Laureate Ted Kooser's poem, which is second in the series, "Selecting a Reader." Like Collins, Kooser is very conscious of the accessibility of poetry, and discussing this poem as a class will help students to consider the connection/relationship between the poet and the reader. In addition to using Berger's four Reader-Response questions, the teacher might ask:

1. What did you find surprising or unexpected?
2. Did you find anything ironic?

→ suggested activities

1. **Silent Discussion.** Create five to eight stations in the classroom consisting of tables with large sheets of butcher paper (about three feet long) or poster board taped to the center of each table. On each sheet of paper or poster board, tape one of the poems in the center, leaving room all around for students to write. Students are to rotate from table to table, in groups or individually. At each table they read the poem and write a personal response of some kind to the poem in colored pencil, marker or crayon (the teacher can model doing this and can list a sampling of response types: agree/disagree, personal connection, relevance of poem to age level, anything that strikes the reader about the poem). Students rotate from table to table (a different poem at each table). As they arrive, they must first read the poem, then read the responses of others, and then write their own response to the poem.
2. **Individual Expert.** Students choose a poem, poems, poet or poets from Collins' collections and prepare to talk about the poet and read a poem or poems by that poet. The students may choose what they think is important to discuss from that poet's life or the teacher may suggest categories for research.
3. **Poetry Circles.** Small groups use a rotating leader position in which one student is responsible for chairing the discussion and reporting to the larger class about the group's discussion of a poem. Each student gets a copy of the poem, and the teacher reads the poem out loud. A student then reads the poem out loud, and from this reading the teacher provides information on words or syntax that appear unfamiliar. The teacher asks whether the students have any questions about the poem that are not related to interpreting the verse. The teacher encourages students to answer these questions themselves, if they can. Then a student reads the same poem out loud followed by all students in the group taking time to read it silently. Each student then makes one statement of first response to the poem, a statement to which others may not respond. Everyone has a turn. At this point students no longer need to speak in order, but as they take a turn, they must first read the word, phrase, line or passage upon which they are commenting. At any point when a stalemate is reached, they are to again read the actual lines of the poem. Halfway through the discussion and again at the end of the discussion the group rereads the entire poem. At the end of the discussion the group prepares a report that takes into account all members' thoughts and comments about their experience of the poem. The whole class comes together and each group reports. The teacher refrains from influencing the content of reports or discussion, but may ask probing questions at the very end, provided they are inspired by the groups' reports. The teacher refrains from giving a final "this is the correct information about the poem" lecture. (Dias, 48-49)

→ beyond the book

Poetry 180

<http://www.loc.gov/poetry/180/>

Billy Collins: The Academy of American Poets

<http://www.poets.org/poets/poets.cfm?prmid=284>

Billy Collins: PBS Interview

http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/entertainment/july-dec01/collins_12-10.html

The Poems of Billy Collins at PoemHunter.com

<http://www.poemhunter.com/billy-collins/poet-8221/>

America's Poet Laureate Consultant in Poetry to the Library of Congress

<http://www.loc.gov/poetry/laureate.html>

Vandergraaff's Reader Response Criticism and Resources

<http://www.scils.rutgers.edu/~kvander/readerresponse.html>

other titles of interest

Billy Collins Live: A Performance at the Peter Norton Symphony Space

Introduction by Bill Murray

Random House Audio | Unabridged Compact Disc | 0-7393-2011-4 | \$19.95

Nine Horses: Poems

Random House | Trade Paperback | 0-375-75520-9 | \$12.95

Poetry 180: A Turning Back to Poetry

Random House | Trade Paperback | 0-8129-6887-5 | \$13.95

Sailing Alone Around the Room: New and Selected Poems

Random House | Trade Paperback | 0-375-75519-5 | \$13.95

The Trouble with Poetry: And Other Poems

Random House | Trade Paperback | 978-0-375-75521-7 | \$15.00

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about this guide's writer

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