

Chapter 1 : The Best American Poetry by Billy Collins (, Paperback) | eBay

In "The Best American Poetry," I found so many doorways to new thoughts it was as if this book contained 20 worlds from which to view life and its many moments invisibly charged with crystalline emotions, edgy contemplations, tantalizing twists and taunting mysteries.

Table of Contents provided by Publisher. He had supported himself for many years by teaching English and was, like many other poets, looking for a publisher. The University of Pittsburgh Press began to publish his books in its estimable series directed by Ed Ochester. Radio host Garrison Keillor gave Collins perhaps the biggest boost of all by asking him to read his poems on the air. He did, and the audience loved what it heard. At the same time, it was understood that he was no less serious for having the common touch. The unlikely success story reached its apogee a year after September 11, when Billy Collins read "The Names," a poem he had written for the somber occasion, to a rare joint session of Congress. By then Collins had become a phenomenon. While remaining a member in good standing of the poetry guild, an entity with a purely notional existence whose members would theoretically starve for their art, he had regular contact with honest-to-goodness book-buying readers who were not themselves practicing poets. They numbered in the tens of thousands and made best-sellers of his books. Collins was regularly dismissed as an "easy" or "anecdotal" poet. It was then that I knew he had made it big. It sometimes seems to me that a different Freudian paradigm -- sibling rivalry -- may explain the behavior of contemporary poets, for the backbiting in our community is ferocious, and nothing signifies success better than ritual bad-mouthing by rivals or wannabes. Probably the most important is that poetry has the potential to reach masses of people who read for pleasure, still and always the best reason for reading. We say we want real readers, who buy our books not as an act of charity but as a free choice, yet should one in our party escape the poetry ghetto, we tremble with ambivalence, as if having real readers means a sure loss in purity. Inevitably the discussion turns to a question that seems substantive. Does popularity result from or result in a loss of artistic integrity? To the second of these questions, the answer is a simple no. It is, in fact, entirely possible that the poet setting out to be the most popular on the block stands the least chance of achieving that goal. Even critics of Collins would concede that his poems have a high quotient of charm. He is, to ring a variant on a theme from Wordsworth, unusually fluent in the language of an adult speaking to other adults in the vernacular. Above all, his poems make themselves available to the mythical general reader that book publishers crave. They are, to use a charged word, accessible. An "accessible" poem, he wrote, is one that is "easy to enter," in the sense that an apartment or a house may be welcoming. The opposition between clarity and difficulty, or between communication and experimentation, is happily not absolute. Nor can we take it for granted that any of these terms has a fixed meaning that all can agree on. Accessibility -- as a term and, implicitly, as a value -- has been attacked recently by Helen Vendler in *The New Republic*. And so it has happened. Abstract discussion is one thing, poetic creativity and intuition is another, and it takes the former a long time to catch up with the latter. Let the debates continue. The poets themselves will make their choices, but they will do so on the basis of poems loved rather than positions held, rebuffed, or discarded. There may be a structural antagonism between poets and critics, but at its best, criticism can make better writers of us, link poetry to its readership, and help build a community. The work of explanation, evaluation, and elucidation is there to be done. Unfortunately, much contemporary criticism is singularly shrill, sometimes gratuitously belligerent, even spiteful. I wonder where the rage comes from. Is it to overcompensate for the widespread if erroneous perception of poets as a band of favor-trading blurbists forever patting one another on the back? Or is the explanation simply that it is and always has been easier to issue summary judgments than to grapple with new art? Every year I screen hundreds of newspaper articles touching on poetry, and there are always one or two items that linger longer in the memory. Two last year stood above the rest. One was in the obituaries for Jerry Orbach, an actor as skillful playing a cop on *Law and Order* as singing a chorus in *Carousel*. It turned out that Orbach wrote hundreds of short poems to his wife. Some were read at his funeral. In contrast to this loving memory was the terse funereal report filed by Carlotta Gall in the *New York Times* on November 8, He beat her up, gave her a black

eye, and knocked her unconscious; she died in the hospital. Nadia Anjuman was a woman of great courage as well as talent. In the city of Herat in western Afghanistan, she had joined a group that called itself the "Sewing Circles of Herat. The Taliban also forbade women to laugh out loud. The women of the "Sewing Circles" risked grave penalties, imprisonment or worse, if caught. Brutally murdered, she left behind a six-month-old child and poems that continue to be read. An allegory in which the wielders of the pen suffer devastating losses before triumphing over the wielders of the sword? It may have been neither of these or other things that spring to mind. Excerpts are provided for display purposes only and may not be reproduced, reprinted or distributed without the written permission of the publisher.

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