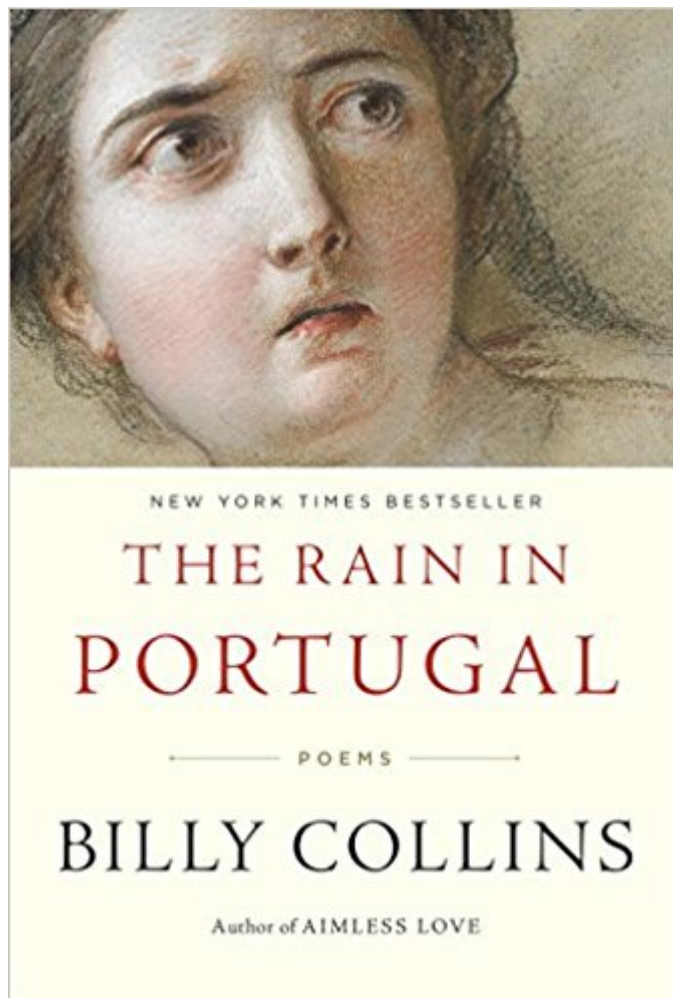


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# The Rain In Portugal: Poems



## Synopsis

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER From former U.S. Poet Laureate Billy Collins comes a twelfth collection of poetry offering over fifty new poems that showcase the generosity, wit, and imaginative play that prompted The Wall Street Journal to call him “America’s favorite poet.” The Rain in Portugal is a title that admits he’s not much of a rhymer and sheds Collins’s ironic light on such subjects as travel and art, cats and dogs, loneliness and love, beauty and death. His tones range from the whimsical “the dogs of Minneapolis . . . / have no idea they’re in Minneapolis” to the elegiac in a reaction to the death of Seamus Heaney. A student of the everyday, Collins here contemplates a weather vane, a still life painting, the calendar, and a child lost at a beach. His imaginative fabrications have Shakespeare flying comfortably in first class and Keith Richards supporting the globe on his head. By turns entertaining, engaging, and enlightening, *The Rain in Portugal* amounts to another chorus of poems from one of the most respected and familiar voices in the world of American poetry. Praise for *The Rain in Portugal*: “Nothing in Billy Collins’s twelfth book . . . is exactly what readers might expect, and that’s the charm of this collection.” *The Washington Post* “This new collection shows [Collins] at his finest. . . . Certain to please his large readership and a good place for readers new to Collins to begin.” *Library Journal* “Disarmingly playful and wistfully candid.” *Booklist*

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## Customer Reviews

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Billy Collins is the author of twelve collections of poetry including *The Rain in Portugal*, *Aimless Love*, *Horoscopes for the Dead*, *Ballistics*, *The Trouble with Poetry*, *Nine Horses*, *Sailing Alone Around the Room*, *Questions About Angels*, *The Art of Drowning*, and *Picnic, Lightning*. He is also the editor of *Poetry 180: A Turning Back to Poetry*, *180 More: Extraordinary Poems for Every Day*, and *Bright Wings: An Illustrated Anthology of Poems About Birds*. A Distinguished Professor of English at Lehman College of the City University of New York and Senior Distinguished Fellow at the Winter Park Institute of Rollins College, he was Poet Laureate of the United States from 2001 to 2003 and New York State Poet from 2004 to 2006. In 2016 he was inducted into the American Academy of Arts and Letters.

Regular readers of Billy Collins’s poetry will recognize his usual subjects in his new book of poems *THE RAIN IN PORTUGAL* (the phrase shows up in the poem “On Rhyme,” which is not my favorite poem): cats, dogs, a breakfast meal, distant cities, travel, nature, other poets (Donald Hall, W. H. Auden, Cavafy, Shakespeare et al). And as we have come to expect, he writes with gentle humor. (“A Note to J. Alfred Prufrock” is one example of many.) A poem that begins as whimsical, however, sometimes may turn serious and surprise you. Practically every poem in this collection is the kind that Garrison Keillor would choose to read for his daily “The Reader’s Almanac” on NPR. Mr. Collins said in an interview some years ago that the subject of most poems is death. Three of my favorite poems here have to do with the subject. In “December 1st” he remembers his mother who, if she were alive, would be 114: “Today is my mother’s birthday, / but she’s not here to celebrate / by opening a flowery card / or looking calmly out a window.” (Has there ever been a mother on earth who did not love those Hallmark cards that we always sent them I ask.) The poem “Portrait” goes to the bone. The narrator of the poem observes a woman with a ponytail disappear in a crowd: Now neither of us was

either here nor there and would fail to make our mark on the history of civilization. And that reminded me of the day I stood in a museum before a somber painting then bent close to read the little printed card that told me it was a portrait of an anonymous Dutch family by an anonymous Dutch painter. My favorite poem is at least for today as I might change my mind tomorrow is the poem "Helium." Imagining what the weather will be like on the day following your death has a place on that list of things that distinguish us from animals as if walking around on two legs laughing to ourselves were not enough to close the case. In these forecasts, it's usually raining, the way it would be in the movies, but it could be sparkling clear or grey and still with snow expected in the afternoon. Much will continue to occur after I die seems to be the message here. The rose will nod its red or yellow head. Sunbeams will break into the gloomy woods. And that's what was on my mind as I drove through a gauntlet of signs on a road that passed through a small town in Ohio: Bob's Transmissions, The Hairport, the Bountiful Buffet, Reggie's Bike Shop, Balloon Designs by Pauline, and Majestic China Garden to name a few. When I realized that all these places could still be in business on the day after I die, I vowed to drink more water, to eat more fresh fruits and vegetables, and to start going to the gym I never go to if only to outlive Balloon Designs by Pauline and maybe even Pauline herself though it would be enough if she simply lost the business and left town for good. Finally, in what must be a first for subject matter, Mr. Collins has written a poem "Under the Stars" about urinating while looking at the moon (he uses a word that I cannot write here for the act.) In the same interview referred to above, Mr. Collins, who as I recall was commenting on a new biography of Emily Dickinson with some new twist, stated that we should simply read Miss Dickinson's poetry for the sheer beauty of it rather than analyze it to death. The same can be said for his own poetry.

Nobody is more surprised than I am that I love poetry. I didn't in my early years, I didn't have the patience for it. But hearing T. S. Eliot's "The Wasteland" read aloud was an epiphany for me, not so much, "Oh now I get it." as "Oh yeah, that's what it's all about..." (It's a poem I've read a hundred times, once or twice a year, mining new meanings, new ideas.) I love many poets and their poems, none unreservedly, but in the same way I love my friends. I see their flaws and it makes them the dearer to me for those flaws. So when I see people slagging Billy Collins as middlebrow, I have to scratch my head because I don't know what highbrow poetry is supposed to be. For me it's all of a piece, and poetry is poetry. Like porn you know it when you see it. Collins is a relatively accessible

poet, and perhaps that's why some people don't consider him cerebral enough. I'm not sure that's a worthy measure, though. Consider Cocteau's definition of poetry: "Such is the role of poetry. It unveils, in the strict sense of the word. It lays bare, under a light which shakes off torpor, the surprising things which surround us and which our senses record mechanically." and you'll see that Collins' work fits that definition admirably. Often while reading one of his poems, I'll feel a little impatience and think, "What is he on about?" And then I'll reach the end and find myself smiling and nodding. "Oh yeah, that's what it's all about." He's made me laugh or nod in recognition of universal experiences on any number of occasions. One of the things I like about this particular volume is that many of the poems are replies to other artists and their work. There's the delightfully humanizing portrait of Shakespeare experiencing air travel, listening to Miles Davis and needing reassurance when the jet flies into a thunderstorm. There's an upbeat comparison of two paintings of Icarus, and the poem by Auden which was inspired by one of them analyzed within Collins' poem, inspired by the other. And there's a very funny response to Eliot's Prufrock and his dithering: "What is your \*problem\* man?" "So no, I don't find anything wrong with being accessible. I've read David Jones, I get inaccessible, and it's not intrinsically better, just different. If you think you don't like poetry, try Billy Collins. And if you know you do, then revel in his moments of insight, or his goofiness.

Billy Collins touches my heart, makes me smile and...occasionally, wonderfully...makes me laugh out loud. He puts Prufrock...and Adam and Eve...in accessible places. For that alone I will love him forever. This collection speaks of aging in comforting ways. Bliss.

Billy Collins is his usual, offhand self here, but the effort appears mailed in. It's like he decided that not only may we reject formalism, but also any pretense to quality. A thin submission. That said, his elegiac homage to a male piss was brilliant (if also aware of its audience): It's a very peaceful pissing under the stars or beneath the mild colors of twilight, so refreshing to take a deep breath outdoors then exhale all the woes of the day and even the longer woes and thorns of the year. Such a calm descends like a calm descending as you piss from a dock into a wavy lake and think about your many brethren, spread out across the land, pissing tonight against a tree beyond the circle of a campsite or watering a flowering bush at a corner of a lawn. If only more brothers recognized their shared brotherhood in a piss, we would all be better off.

I've followed Collins' work for a long time now, but was disappointed in this latest collection. Not his best.

As always Billy Collins is accessible, sensible and fun. First heard him as poet laureate on Prairie Home Companion and decided his thoughts resonated. Have purchased or borrowed his books--always eagerly awaiting the latest. Haven't finished this one yet, am enjoying a few pages every evening. A book to read, and re-read.

The writing wanders. Not as good as his earlier work.

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