

Sailing Alone Around the Room
Billy Collins
Random House
\$32.95 192 pages

First, I must admit that before beginning this review I had never heard of Billy Collins. So I queried a respected friend, New York poet Alan Sondheim, and received this reply: "Who on earth is Billy Collins? I don't know anyone named Billy—honest."

Whether or not Sondheim was being completely honest—I believe he was--, Billy Collins was born in New York in 1941, in the same hospital—he likes to point out—where poet/pediatrician William Carlos Williams once practiced. After attending Holy Cross College, Collins earned a doctorate in Romantic Poetry at the University of California at Riverside. A few years working as a "scholar/gypsy" followed. In the early 1970s, he accepted a long-term teaching position at Lehman College, in New York.

His first book, "Questions About Angels," won the National Poetry Series competition. From there he went on to become "America's best selling poet." Now, at age 60, the Library of Congress' eleventh Poet Laureate Consultant in Poetry is as likely to appear before an audience of high school students as Wall Street executives. It seems as if almost everyone can enjoy a Billy Collins poem.

Dragging this baggage behind me, I boarded the book, saluted its Capitan, and began to look around. Living in Oregon, "Fishing on the Susquehanna in July" caught my eye. It begins, "I have never been fishing on the Susquehanna / or on any river for that matter / to be perfectly honest." It turns out that Collins is addressing a painting he saw in a Philadelphia museum that depicted a river that "curled around a bend / under a blue cloud-ruffled sky..." After musing on the painting, he "blinked and moved on / to other American scenes..."

even one of a
brown hare
who seemed so
wired with alertness
I imagined him
springing right out
of the frame.

The notion of the scene springing out of its frame could be interesting, if Woody Allen hadn't already deployed it cinematically, making it somewhat hackneyed. Another poem, "Reading an Anthology of Chinese Poems of the Sung Dynasty, I Pause to Admire the Length and Clarity of Their Titles," ends with these lines:

How easy he has made it for me to enter here,
To sit down in a corner;
Cross my legs like this, and listen.

Comfort is the crux of Collins' aesthetic. Sung Dynasty poets were usually aristocrats, or retired bureaucrats, who were writing to a small, extremely educated, literati. Their poems were filled with allusions to other poems with which the readers were familiar. Thus their apparent simplicity comprised a constellation of allusions, something that has also been said of Collins' work. Unfortunately, a poet's popularity in contemporary America depends more on its entertainment value than having an inclusive agenda. Honestly, I don't think we need poets to entertain us, as we are already an over-entertained, under-intellectually stimulated society. Instead, like with our scientists, we need poets who surprise us with their discoveries, without sacrificing the complexity of their language.

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