

# Poet Laureate Billy Collins advises young poets

Emma Carmichael and Kelly Stout  
FEATURES EDITORS

Billy Collins says he wrote 700 bad poems before he wrote a good one. As an emotionally-torn high school student Collins believed he had to write down his emotional meanderings because they were so unique that if he didn't, they would be forever lost to human history. He wrote reams upon reams of poems about himself until he came to the difficult realization that nobody cared. "That's a hard thing to swallow when you're writing about you," Collins told a small, but engaged crowd at UpCDC last Wednesday, Sept. 23.

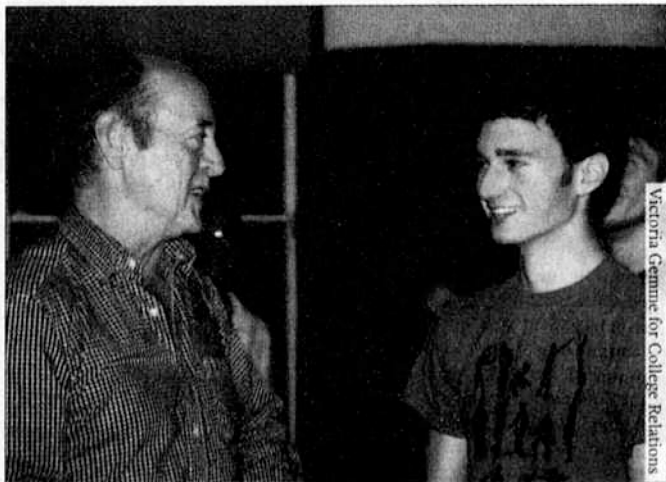
Collins was at Vassar last week to speak at the annual William Starr Lecture for first-year students. Prior to a packed lecture in the Villard Room, Collins took students' questions alongside moderator Amy Selsowsky '10 on the second floor of the Students' Building. He was also kind enough to sit down with *The Miscellany News* to talk about his experience as a young, aspiring poet. "I had pretensions," said Collins, "I was very smitten with the whole romantic idea

of being a poet. It seemed something to do with my confusion at the time—something noble."

Most Americans know Billy Collins not as a struggling young poet, but as the former U.S. Poet Laureate appointed by former President George W. Bush in 2001. Collins served as the Poet Laureate from 2001 to 2003. Before publishing his first book of poetry, *Pokerface*, in 1977, Collins worked as a professor. "I kind of morphed into a poet," said Collins. He was somewhat surprised by his own fame because, as he explained, it came years after he started writing poetry.

"I never thought I'd ever have a book published, let alone have several published," he said, modestly failing to mention his time as Poet Laureate. "I never envisioned coming to Vassar College and talking to students. That was all strange gravy that came much later."

In the all-campus lecture, Collins spoke dismissively of the literary necessity of listing one's "influences." Instead, he commented on the role jealousy and imitation play in shaping a poet's voice. He had the audience



Victoria Gemme for College Relations

William Starr Lecturer and former Poet Laureate of the United States Billy Collins talks with Andrew Gaines '12 following the poet's remarks.

laughing when he called jealousy of other poets, "the little boat under the water that is driving creativity."

"That's what your professors call 'literary influence,'" Collins added. But he became more serious when he spoke about the poets he has, in his

words, "imitated," in his writing. Collins recalled seeing a photograph of Edgar Allan Poe in high school and thinking he looked "pretty cool."

"No adult I had ever seen before looked like Edgar Allen Poe," Collins  
See COLLINS on page 6

COLLINS continued from page 1

said. "I wanted to be with people like him—to see if I could find my way into that picture." In college, Collins read Wallace Stevens and felt he had encountered the "apex of poetry." He feared that as a poet there was nothing he could possibly contribute. Stevens, it seemed, had said it all. For a number of years thereafter, Collins felt that all his poems were more of a forced imitation of the poets he admired than work of his own. Part of his development as a poet was to learn to combine those "influences in a way that no one recognizes." That, he maintains, is how a poet finds his voice.

As he began to write what he considered more successful poems, Collins started reading poetry differently: He looked for things that other poets could teach him.

When you're developing your own skills as a writer, "you take on a different way of looking at things. You begin to look for someone who can teach you something."

Designating himself as a poet has always been important to Collins. He told the *Miscellany* that he wanted to be a poet from a very young age and declared it unapologetically during his college years. "I did walk around saying 'I want to be a poet,'" he admitted, "but I didn't expect anyone to believe me." Perhaps his job as a professor has instilled in him a sensitivity to the insecurities young poets confront. "If you say 'I'm a poet,' immediately you sound like you're claiming some kind of superiority to other human beings, to other mortals," Collins said.

Since Collins' 2001 appointment, there has been little question as to whether Collins can call himself "a poet." Indeed, the U.S. Poet Laureate-ship was probably the ultimate affirmation that he is, 700 bad poems later, a bona fide poet. "Certainly, when I got a call telling me I was going to be the Poet Laureate, at that point I felt I was on pretty firm ground," Collins said, laughing. He added, "Probably until then I was a little insecure about the whole business."

To Collins, learning to cope with insecurity is a necessary step in a poet's development. He half-jokingly told the students in UpCDC that a poet's life is one "of great dissatisfaction," because "rarely is a poem a total bull's-eye. There are anxieties attached to doing anything creative," Collins added.

Aspiring poets may find it disheartening to hear such uncertainty coming from one of the nation's most celebrated poets. But when Collins was 20 years old, he certainly did not envision having published six collections of poetry. He told the *Miscellany* that his pretensions as a young poet always outweighed his expectations of himself. He had to believe that he could write poetry in a way that no one else could. "Vassar is equipping you to be able to do things that not everybody can do," Collins said. "The catch is, if you're—and I hate to use the word 'artist' because it sounds very elevated—but if you're an artist, and you're good, [then] you can do something nobody else can do," he continued. "The highest thing you can do is something absolutely no one else can do."

Collins is 68 years old. Yet there's something strangely young about him. It's easy to imagine him as a 20-year-old, writing poems about his broken heart in his dorm room. At his lecture in the Villard Room, Collins recalled seeing former Poet Laureate Robert Frost speak at his college and thinking that Frost had simply been born a great poet. Collins couldn't imagine what Frost wrote like or looked like at 20. "I thought he was born looking like that," he said with a laugh.

Perhaps the difference between the two is that we can picture Collins in college. He speaks unashamedly about what it took for him to become the poet he is now. "Poetry is really the fun of creation. It's the fun of making something that never existed before."

For Collins, it's poetry, but he doesn't tell us to become poets. He tells us to find something we're good at.

"How's that for some career counseling?" he said with a wink. "Go out and find something that nobody else can do."