

# Poet Laureates

June 20, 2001

## Librarian of Congress Appoints Billy Collins Poet Laureate

Librarian of Congress James H. Billington has announced the appointment of Billy Collins to be the Library's eleventh Poet Laureate Consultant in Poetry. He will take up his duties in the fall, opening the Library's annual literary series in October with a reading of his work. Mr. Collins succeeds Robert Penn Warren, Richard Wilbur, Howard Nemerov, Mark Strand, Joseph Brodsky, Mona Van Duyn, Rita Dove, Robert Hass, Robert Pinsky and Stanley Kunitz.

Of his appointment, Dr. Billington said, "Billy Collins' poetry is widely accessible. He writes in an original way about all manner of ordinary things and situations with both humor and a surprising contemplative twist. We look forward to his energizing presence next year."

Billy Collins' books of poetry include *Picnic, Lightning* (University of Pittsburgh Press, 1998); *The Art of Drowning* (1995), which was a Lenore Marshall Poetry Prize finalist; *Questions About Angels* (1991), a National Poetry Series selection by Edward Hirsch; *The Apple That Astonished Paris* (1988); *Video Poems* (1980); and *Pokerface* (1977). A volume of his new and selected poems, *Sailing Alone Around the Room*, will be published this year by Random House.

His honors include 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. He is a Distinguished Professor of English at Lehman College, City University of New York, where he has taught for the past 30 years. He is also a writer-in-residence at Sarah Lawrence, and served as a Literary Lion of the New York Public Library. He lives in Somers, New York.

Author Annie Proulx has remarked, "I have never before felt possessive about a poet, but I am fiercely glad that Billy Collins is ours—smart, his strings tuned and resonant, his wonderful eye looping over the things, events and ideas of the world, rueful, playful, warm-voiced, easy to love."

"Billy Collins writes lovely poems," writes John Updike. "Limpid, gently and consistently startling, more serious than they seem, they describe all the worlds that are and were and some others besides."



## Background of the Laureateship

The Library keeps to a minimum the specific duties required of the Poet Laureate, in order to permit incumbents to work on their own projects while at the Library. Each brings a new emphasis to the position. Allen Tate (1943-44), for example, served as editor of the Library's publication of that period, *Quarterly Journal*, during his tenure and edited the compilation *Sixty American Poets, 1896-1944*. Some consultants have suggested and chaired literary festivals and conferences; others have spoken in a number of schools and universities and received the public in the Poetry Room.

Increasingly in recent years, the incumbents have sought to find new ways to broaden the role of poetry in our national life. Maxine Kumin initiated a popular women's series of poetry workshops at the Poetry and Literature Center. Gwendolyn Brooks met with groups of elementary school children to encourage them to write poetry. Howard Nemerov conducted seminars at the Library for high school English classes. Most incumbents have furthered the development of the Library's Archive of Recorded Poetry and Literature. Joseph Brodsky initiated the idea of providing poetry in public places--supermarkets, hotels, airports, and hospitals. Rita Dove brought a program of poetry and jazz to the Library's literary series, along with a reading by young Crow Indian poets, and a two-day conference entitled "*Oil on the Waters: The Black Diaspora*," featuring panel discussions, readings and music. Robert Hass sponsored a major conference on nature writing called "*Watershed*," which continues today as a national poetry competition for elementary and high school students entitled "River of Words." Most recently, Robert Pinsky initiated his Favorite Poem Project, which energized a nation of poetry readers to share their favorite poems in readings across the country and in audio and video recordings.

**Consultants in Poetry and Poets Laureate Consultants in Poetry and their terms of service are listed below:**

Joseph Auslander 1937-41

Allen Tate 1943-44

Robert Penn Warren 1944-45

Louise Bogan 1945-46

Karl Shapiro 1946-47

Robert Lowell 1947-48

Leonie Adams 1948-49

Elizabeth Bishop 1949-50

Conrad Aiken 1950-52 (first to serve two terms)

William Carlos Williams (appointed in 1952 but did not serve)



Randall Jarrell 1956-58  
Robert Frost 1958-59  
Richard Eberhart 1959-61  
Louis Untermeyer 1961-63  
Howard Nemerov 1963-64  
Reed Whittemore 1964-65  
Stephen Spender 1965-66  
James Dickey 1966-68  
William Jay Smith 1968-70  
William Stafford 1970-71  
Josephine Jacobsen 1971-73  
Daniel Hoffman 1973-74  
Stanley Kunitz 1974-76  
Robert Hayden 1976-78  
William Meredith 1978-80  
Maxine Kumin 1981-82  
Anthony Hecht 1982-84  
Robert Fitzgerald 1984-85 (appointed and served in a health-limited capacity, but did not come to Library of Congress)  
Reed Whittemore 1984-85 (Interim Consultant in Poetry)  
Gwendolyn Brooks 1985-86  
Robert Penn Warren 1986-87 (first to be designated Poet Laureate Consultant in Poetry)  
Richard Wilbur 1987-88  
Howard Nemerov 1988-90  
Mark Strand 1990-91  
Joseph Brodsky 1991-92  
Mona Van Duyn 1992-93  
Rita Dove 1993-95  
Robert Hass 1995-97  
Robert Pinsky 1997-2000  
Stanley Kunitz 2000-2001

