



**Charleston County School of
the Arts**

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Media Release

The works of 22 SOA graduates to be published by University Press of Mississippi

North Charleston, SC – Twenty-two Charleston County School of the Arts (SOA) graduates will be published by the University Press of Mississippi in a new book due out in August. The book features interviews with two-term United States Poet Laureate Billy Collins.

SOA English Department Chair, John Cusatis, Ph.D., teaches contemporary poetry to AP English Literature students. As part of that unit, students contacted high profile poets such as Collins and asked them to discuss their work, first via phone and then virtually.

"Students researched Collins before interviewing him, and now their interviews have joined the existing research," said Cusatis. "Bringing poets into the classroom via conference call, Skype or Zoom, humanizes them. It makes the literature we study real."

Through the years, Cusatis has helped facilitate the publication of more than three dozen of these interviews in the *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, published by Gale. They are available in print and most are also available to CCSD students through the database MackinVia.

Cusatis was inspired to propose a book of Collins' interviews to the University Press of Mississippi for possible inclusion in their esteemed "Literary Conversations Series," popular with students, scholars, and general readers worldwide. As a result, *Conversations with Billy Collins* will be published in August 2022.

"Poets have responded well to the request to be interviewed," said Cusatis. "They are especially pleased that high school students are not just reading contemporary poetry but are able to read it carefully enough to ask informed questions about the poets' work. One poet who befriended our school and spoke to my students on five different occasions is former United States Poet Laureate Billy Collins, dubbed 'the most popular poet in America,' by *The New York Times*."

Conversations with Billy Collins chronicles the poet's career beginning with his 1998 interview with Terry Gross on *Fresh Air*, which exponentially expanded his

readership, three years prior to his being named United States Poet Laureate. Other interviewers range from George Plimpton, founder of the *Paris Review*, to Pulitzer Prize-winning poet Henry Taylor to a Presbyterian pastor, and a physics professor.

Over the course of the 21 interviews included in the volume, Collins discusses such topics as discovering his persona, that consistently affable voice that narrates his often wildly imaginative poems, why poetry is so loved by children but often met with anxiety by high school students, and his experience composing a poem to be recited during a joint session of Congress on the first anniversary of 9/11, a tragedy that occurred during his tenure as poet laureate. He also explores his love of jazz, his distaste for gratuitously difficult poetry and autobiographical poems, and his invention of a mock poetic form: the paradelle.

"Irreverent, incisive, and deeply life-affirming, like his twelve volumes of poetry, these interviews, gathered for the first time in one volume, edify and entertain readers in the way his sold-out readings have done for the past quarter century," explains the publisher's jacket copy.

"There is no better source for understanding how a poem comes into existence than the poets themselves," added Cusatis. "As a result of their extensive research, drafting, interviewing, transcribing, and editing, these SOA graduates, all credited in the book, are published authors."

"I am so proud of our students and their gifted teacher, Dr. Cusatis, for their contributions to this project," said SOA Principal Dr. Shannon Cook. "I was present in one of the interview sessions with Mr. Collins and was impressed with the knowledge and insight reflected in the questions they posed to this renowned poet and classroom guest. We at Charleston County School of the Arts have much to celebrate as this collection is published and shared worldwide."

The most recent SOA graduates who are credited in the book include Hannah Burton, Alex Clifford, Maya Cline, Caroline Conway, Ellen Emge, Hannah Jones, Christina Lewis, Luke Shaw, Layla Wheelon, John White, and Kitty Zheng (Class of 2020 and 2021) in addition to graduates from the Class of 2011 and 2012, Jordan Baer, Colleen Brennan, Mary Lee Carter, Austin Cope, Stephanie Hardy, Free Kopsak, DeVante Lee, Rachel Riddle, and Madison Smith.

"My most influential professor at the University of South Carolina, Matthew J. Bruccoli, edited the first volume of the Literary Conversations Series, a collection of Ernest Hemingway interviews, in the mid-1980s," said Cusatis. "It is an honor to have edited this most recent volume on Billy Collins and to be able to include the work of my own students."

The book is now available for presale in both hardcover and paperback from [Amazon](#) and can be purchased at a significantly reduced price from the publisher until November 15 by clicking [here](#).

For more information, contact Principal Cook at 843-529-4990.

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About the Charleston County School District

Charleston County School District (CCSD) is a nationally accredited school district committed to providing equitable and quality educational opportunities for all of its students. CCSD is the second-largest school system in South Carolina and represents a unique blend of urban, suburban, and rural schools spanning 1,300 square miles along the coast. CCSD serves approximately 49,000 students in 88 schools and specialized programs.

CCSD offers a diverse, expanding portfolio of options and specialized programs, delivered through neighborhood, magnet, IB (international baccalaureate), Montessori, and charter schools. Options include programs in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM), music and other creative and performing arts, career and technical preparation programs, and military.