



Amia Srinivasan, Grade 11, and Grade 12 students Lauren Willoughby, Carolynn Crabtree and Chris Berger meet US Poet Laureate Billy Collins, center left, and UK Poet Laureate Andrew Motion, center right, in the Mellon Library.

The unprecedented meeting of the POETS LAUREATE

As written and reported by Alexandra Haggiag '97

When I visited ASL this past December, High School English teacher Keith Millman told me gleefully that he was plotting to bring two poets laureate to ASL.

"There are two poets laureate?" I asked.

"British and American," he explained.

"How are you going to get them to come to the School?" I asked, realizing ASL has earned a more glamorous name for itself than "the bunker" as London cabbies always called it. Mr. Millman explained how the Bergeron Writing Residency now brings a well-known writer to ASL each year.

"This year Billy Collins, the American poet laureate, is coming to teach Grade 8 students for a week. And while Billy Collins is here," he added, a small twinkle in his eye, "I thought I might invite the British poet laureate to come and meet him."

A month later, early on the evening of 19 January, High School English teacher Scott Boehnen introduced me to Andrew Motion, who very politely shook my hand and introduced himself in a soft, Oxbridge accent.

Billy Collins arrived shortly after us, wreathed in admirers who had

already met him at readings during the past week.

The poets formally shook hands, cameras flashed. Chairs were drawn up next to an L-shaped sofa and everyone settled in place. Amia Srinivasan, a Grade 11 student from the High School literary magazine, *Jambalaya*, began the interview with a masterfully phrased question directed at both of the laureates.

"What inspiration does each of you draw from the other side of the Atlantic?" she asked. Andrew Motion began, saying that he grew up reading poems in the 60s and 70s that were from America: poets including Lowell, Roethke, Bishop. Auden, he added with a grin, was the renegade we all read. (Collins nodded his head vigorously to indicate he, too, had been thrilled by Auden.)

"But now the number of American poets we read over here is greatly reduced," Motion continued as Collins visibly deflated beside him. "You'd have to be among the poets we read," Motion conceded gesturing to Collins, "and Rita Dove, maybe. The old, old thing of being divided by the same language has hit poetry pretty hard. The stuff we read in the Norton

Anthology is so far from being the expected stuff here."

Well, I'm not sure if that beginning would thaw cultural relations between the literary communities in England and America, I thought.

Billy Collins nodded his head after Andrew finished, saying: "There is much less cross-pollination today than previously, considering that we're both using this common language which divides us. I was an English major at college, which pretty much meant I was reading dead white men, many of them English. Today only about 15 poets from England are getting any airtime in America, where about 50 from the US are widely read. I suppose it's proportional to the population."

Motion turned to Collins and pointedly asked, "Is English poetry not read as much as it might have been because of English references that cannot be translated?"

Collins replied, "That's likely. Your language bears traces of where you are from, a state flower which might be used as a symbol in a poem for an American audience becomes a surrealistic dip in the poem when read by an Englishman. I am very aware when I read English poetry of references that I can't get."

So the supposed "language barrier" is truer than ever. Despite being touted as masters of English in its most potent form, the two laureates may not be able relate with each other at all!

"The real difference between English and American poetry happened because each culture responded differently to modernism. Crudely, the Americans ran with it," Motion continued.

Collins teased: "You just went on to Post-Modernism from Victorian writing without going by Modernism. As if Modernism had never been invented."

"Well, no, we went on as if we'd known about it all along!" Motion replied merrily.

Chris Berger, a Grade 12 student in Mr. Boehnen's poetry class and editor of *The Standard*, said he felt that poetry was sometimes overanalyzed in the classroom and asked the poets how they feel poems should be interpreted in school. Both poets seemed to think that "heartwork" was required along with "headwork." Of course, Collins added, headwork is easier to teach, but you need a balance to really get it.

Carolynn Crabtree, Grade 12, offered that Langston Hughes had called himself a musician among poets, and T.S. Eliot had described himself as the painterly poet: what would Billy Collins and Andrew Motion call themselves in relation to the body of poets as a whole?

"Owner of a small frame shop of poetry," Collins said immediately. "I don't want to be overly modest," he added, to laughter, "but it's true." Motion seemed a little more flustered by the question and said, "During this whole parade, carnival, nonsense of the laureate thing there was this ridiculous notion of a shortlist presented in the paper. All of the poets on the list were pictured as cars. I think I was a Volvo." He smiled at the thought. "At least you don't die when it crashes and it goes faster than you think it will, so I didn't mind."

The two men seemed warmed by each other's responses to the question.

Collins was interested by Motion's description of being short-listed and said that there was no such publicity surrounding the American appointment of a laureate. Motion nodded and said scathingly that it was a "British

I think I was a Volvo. At least you don't die when it crashes and it goes faster than you think it will.

Game." Collins said he likes the fact that the American laureate is only appointed for a tenth of the time of the British laureateship, and proposed that the American version was a hot rod version of a British invention. With a cheeky twinkle in his eye he glibly added, "We will overtake your Volvo with our Mustang in 10 or 15 years."

"Drive up, drive in, drive out. The fast laureate version." Motion replied tartly.

"Well maybe that's a good thing?" Collins said, half smiling. "The longer you serve the more corrupt you become, right?"





At this point Grade 12 student Lauren Willoughby adroitly jumped in to ask the two poets about the inspiration they may have drawn from being poet laureate.

"Three years in I still get a few dozen invitations to write a poem from different people each week." Motion replied, "Sometimes it's completely bonkers, others it's a nice little note asking if I would write a little poem for someone's wedding, but a few of them are poems I would have written anyway, I feel, had I been clever enough to think of the subject myself. There is an expectation that I will write something, but sometimes I have also been very moved by what I have been asked to write. When I was appointed, both the Queen and Tony Blair said right away, 'You don't have to do anything.' Most of the pressure has come from the press. I mean I was expected to write up Sophie Rhys-Jones' wedding and so I did that. It's not very good, but you try writing that when the entire country is staring at you."

"It's hard to do," Collins said sympathetically, "the requests tend to be so subject matter heavy."

"I wait for a green-light moment," said Motion. "If I don't get it ... if it's not authenticated by something within me, then I don't write the public poem."

Collins seemed to mull something over. All the students with papers clutched in their laps opened their mouths as though ready to fire another round of questions. Collins beat them all to the punch and turned to Motion, asking if he'd felt obliged to write about September 11. Motion admitted that he could hardly pick up the mail from the mat because he had so many requests for poems that would record the tragedy.

Motion grew more animated. "In one response I quoted you, Billy, and said that 'a bard with his long perspective has a million ways of crystallizing his thought.'"

Collins seemed to agree with his own statement, "That's right," he said, "there is a lot of time. I keep saying that someone will write the September 11 poem in time, but that someone may not be me."

"To be honest," Collins continued, "It's been a source of annoyance, becoming a 'national conscience.' There are so many requests or invitations to write a certain type of poem. I've never written a poem about a public event! So I sort of ducked it." He turned to Motion in a questioning way, as though to ask if he'd felt the same way about writing public poems.

"Most of my poems are personal things as well," Motion responded, thoughtfully. "What is public might become a personal thing. I am just one

POLITICAL POETICS

For over 250 years the British poet laureate was appointed for life and became a member of the royal household, expected to commemorate national events and royal occasions. In 1999, when Andrew Motion succeeded his teacher, Ted Hughes, to become the 19th poet laureate, the government reformed the post, which is now held for only 10 years. Today's poet laureate receives a salary of £5,000 per year instead of the traditional £100 and a vat of wine. The amount would still seem meager to the American poet laureate, who is not expected to regale royalty but is nonetheless paid the healthy sum of \$35,000 for 10 months of service. The position of US poet laureate, a literary consultant to the Library of Congress, was officially formed in 1920.

Apart from serving different roles to their countries, Billy Collins and Andrew Motion were received very differently as poets when they were appointed. Both surprised the public by making the front pages of national newspapers, but perhaps not the way they had hoped. Andrew Motion was inducted amid public dismay that Prime Minister Tony Blair had chosen to recommend an Oxford educated "professional" and "insider" rather than a "people's poet" such as Tony Harrison. Motion responded to public scorn by immediately saying he'd like to be a "town crier, can-opener and flag-waver for poetry."

Billy Collins assumed his post as poet laureate in October of last year. Collins sees himself as one of the people, an English professor from a city college in New York who had never met any previous poets laureate, nor recited poetry at the Library of Congress. But the appointment of Collins reached the front pages because critics felt that readers had voted for Collins with their wallets. His poetry anthologies sold unprecedented numbers of copies while critics often made light of his "accessible" style that reminded them of "fridge-magnet poetry."

Perhaps theirs will be a mutual bond, as both men write that their aim is to make poetry a vital art form in the 21st century. Motion applauds and anthologizes the spontaneous poems that are written by ordinary people after extraordinary events like the death of Diana, and in his poem *Introduction to Poetry* Collins exclaims that he wishes people would learn to water-ski over a poem, rather than trying to torture out a confession from its overwrought lines. Both wish to see their craft as a living, breathing line of communication. Whether they may use this desire to cross a centuries-old chasm of prejudice and mockery, whether they can actually communicate across the lines of cultural bias, remains to be seen.



I have this idea in my head that I'm writing for one personality and then I do a reading in a large auditorium and there are hundreds of people who think they know me, and crowds asking about the death of my father.

voice among a million so my poem is public but rather personal."

"Everyone was feeling so strongly about the same thing after September 11," Collins said vehemently. "For me to get up and say what I felt would be presumptuous. I think this whole thing about the poet laureate is outdated: it was a way of memorializing, remembering. There were no photos to capture an event, so people got together and said, 'How are we going to remember this?' And they came up with poems that have mnemonic devices like rhyme and meter to store the event in the national memory."

Motion smiled uneasily at Collins' summation of their common task. "True," he conceded after a moment. "but commemoration within poetry is also a recognition of why we need it in the first place. Our impulse to chant and to make music (to beat the drum, added Collins nodding) is absolutely primitive. The more sophisticated our language, the more we forget that strong primal feeling and we forget it at our peril."

On the face of it, the two poets couldn't have been more different from a cultural perspective, but at dinner later that evening they seemed to find common ground.

Collins described how he'd had a hard time with fame. How he never expected it. "It's a circus," he said, "we never asked for the circus which attends celebrity."

"But you do hope to be read by many people!" I teased him. Collins paused and smiled and then shook his head.

"No, I think I always write to just one person. I have this idea in my head that I'm writing for this one personality and then I do a reading in a large auditorium and there are hundreds of people who think they know me, and crowds afterwards asking about the death of my father."

"I don't have any time to just sit and reflect. Just be lazy," Collins continued. "And so much of writing comes from those moments of laziness."

Collins is fond of a comment by Keats in which he'd said that laziness in a writer is often romanticized as languor. Both poets laughed across the table, and muttered about the inordinate amount of time they spend procrastinating before doing any work. I told them how Steinbeck came up with a theory that there is a perfect proportion of work to procrastination required for any writing to get done at all. I asked the poets laureate if they had found that proportion. Motion and Collins both nodded their heads vigorously. So how much laziness is needed to write something, I asked. About 23-1/2 hours a day, Collins said grimly. Motion laughed approvingly.

Collins turned to Motion and asked him how he can keep writing under

the spotlight of public opinion? Andrew Motion said that at first it had been hard, but eventually the post had actually given him the inspiration to write things he wouldn't have thought of himself. People had asked him to write about events that inspired him to write better poetry than before he became a laureate.

Conversation continued until Motion's cab drew up outside the window of the restaurant and blew its horn.

What had bridged the gap between the two men was a shared understanding of the impossibility of their perceived role as a singular voice to define national experience. The poets seemed to discover that each venerates the quiet, introspective moments that they say a poet needs and cannot find once he has been inducted into the carnival of fame.

"I'm afraid I have to go," Motion said quietly. He stood up and Collins got out of his chair to shake his hand.

"The Unprecedented Departure of Two Poets Laureate" declared Collins, in the voice of announcers on old newsreels.

But when Motion had left the room, the bravado dropped out of Collins' voice, and he said, "It's not quite as special with only one poet, is it?"

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Photography: Mark McEvoy

