

"Your success, your happy and lucky life is due to the fact that you are an only child."

GARRISON KEILLOR, to Billy Collins



Photos by Kylene Lloyd, The Courier-Journal

"A Prairie Home Companion" host Garrison Keillor, left, gives poet Billy Collins a bow at the beginning of their interview Thursday.

Collins, Keillor talk life, death

Veteran writers swap wit at Kentucky Author Forum

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Popular and successful, former U.S. Poet Laureate Billy Collins can't quite have suffered enough to fulfill a writer's serious mission of being truly miserable.

That is how radio host Garrison Keillor kicked off a combative yet lighthearted interview with Collins that drew frequent laughter from a packed house at the Kentucky Center's Bomhard Theater on Thursday night.

Collins' trademark lightness and humor is decidedly at odds with serious poetry, "a

world rife with petty jealousies, bitter denunciations and so forth," Keillor noted.

Collins is the author of nine volumes of poetry, including his most recent collection, "Horoscopes for the Dead," which appeared in bookstores last week.

"Your success, your happy and lucky life is due to the fact that you are an only child," Keillor told the diminutive, sweater-clad retired professor of literature and composition at the City University of New York.

During the hourlong interview on a library stage set for the Kentucky Author Forum, Collins acknowledged he was an only child, a "godsend" to his middle-aged parents, was



Keillor told Collins that his trademark humor is at odds with serious poetry, "a world rife with petty jealousies, bitter denunciations and so forth."

childless himself, and was loath to pen confessional, autobiographical verse.

Rather, Collins said, he liked to think of his poetic voice as a more refined, tea-drinking version of his coffee-drinking, Jesuit-trained self, a voice that observes tortured poetry

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jams and the like "and makes fun of all that."

But Collins warmed when Keillor recited John Updike's description of him as "limpid."

"What is limpid?" Keillor asked, his trademark red-sock-clad feet tucked

under a wooden desk facing Collins.

"It does not mean limp," Collins answered. "It means clear. Transparent. Untroubled."

That would be like Collins' poem "Taking Off Emily Dickinson's Clothes," Keillor said, adding he admired the line "I

proceeded like a polar explorer ... sailing toward the iceberg of her nakedness."

Carrying on his obsession with the meaningless of life, a frequent theme of "A Prairie Home Companion," his nationally syndicated radio show that can be heard locally on WFPL, Keillor, 68, pressed Collins, 70, about the "futility" of teaching college literature courses and a writer's life in

general.

There are two deaths, Collins answered. The first is the physical death. The second takes place when "your name is completely forgotten."

"Writing," he added, "is a way of lengthening the time between those two deaths."

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