
Profile

Engagement with Life: An Interview with Michael Collier, Maryland's Poet Laureate

Contributed by Ann Bracken

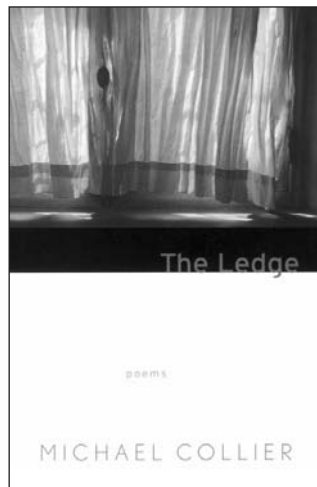


Michael Collier

Michael Collier, Maryland's Poet Laureate since 2001, lives on a quiet, shady street in the middle of Catonsville, one of Baltimore's oldest suburbs. He greeted me at the front door of his brown, cedar shingled home dressed in a red t-shirt, jeans and flip-flops, slightly tanned from his frequent swims at a nearby university's outdoor pool. Collier led me through the comfortable-looking house and outside to the converted garage that serves as his

study. His quiet, carpeted office is lined with numerous shelves of poetry and literature books.

We began the interview by discussing the nuts and bolts of Collier's distinguished career including numerous, prestigious fellowships and grants, as well as teaching positions at Johns Hopkins University, Yale University and the University of Maryland, College Park where he is currently a professor of English. Additionally, Collier has served as the director of the Bread Loaf Writers' Conference since being appointed in 1994, and has been an ambitious, thoughtful, highly-visible ambassador for poetry since being appointed Maryland's Poet Laureate in 2001.



AB: When did you first begin to feel or know you were a poet?

MC: I first began to write in high school, but didn't think of myself as a poet. I was putting language down that broke like a poem, but I hadn't read poetry so I really had no models. My sense of what poetry was came more from song lyrics, Bob Dylan's for example, which served as a guide for how to arrange words. But when I first began to write the only thing I was conscious of was an incomprehensible compulsion to put language down on the page, almost as if I was satisfying a physical urge. Like many beginners, what I wrote was free-form and totally inchoate.

AB: Can you think of a particular fiction writer whose use of language made an impression on you?

MC: In high school I was introduced to Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* and also read some of his short stories which were sort of odd and dark. I really responded to the beauty and the strangeness of the description in those stories which was probably related to the dark and repressed eroticism of that novel. There was also the slightly macabre aspect to the novel which I remember was played up by one of my classmates who drew a very primitive picture of Hester Prynne's humiliation scene, a wonderfully absurdist drawing which probably marked my first encounter with true literary criticism.

AB: Can you remember anyone who influenced your love of literature and passion for writing?

MC: I took it seriously when my mother once told me that the most important thing anyone could do was read. Why I took her advice to heart is hard to say. We had very few books in the house. My mother didn't read, she had no time while raising five children. My father read the condensed *Reader's Digest* novels. In high school, I had a couple of really good English teachers who got me reading in a big way. What most stands out about these teachers is that they encouraged me to be both curious and skeptical about things as well as to have some ambition for your intellectual life. It was only later that I figured out that the intellect and emotions were somehow connected. My attendance at a Jesuit high school exposed me to teachers who valued introspection and the importance of an inner life; furthermore, they had a routine practice of keeping a journal for this purpose. For me, writing has always been about an activity.



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— *Michael Collier*

This is connected to the physical urge I talked about earlier. It’s been about making something as well as being connected to the mystery of being alive and the strangeness of being on this planet for a short time.

AB: Describe your core ideas or beliefs about poetry.

MC: I believe that one of the things that distinguishes poetry from other forms of literature is that it speaks to the mystery of our need to communicate with each other, not necessarily pass information on, but to acknowledge and affirm our common humanity. In poetry, communication can take place almost completely by way of sound, by way of pattern... and so there’s a kind of profound and mysterious way that language operates in poetry that doesn’t operate in the other forms of literature. Poetry doesn’t really have to do anything except communicate the awe of being alive.

AB: Can you think of an analogy for the purpose of poetry as opposed to the purpose of other literary genres?

MC: You know birds do sing for a purpose, but they also just sing. And I think poetry does that; poetry allows us just to sing. Poetry has the ability to make us feel the intensity of our existence, not only in our moments of solitude, but also in our connections with others. I like what Paul Valery says about the difference between poetry and prose ... that prose is akin to walking. When we walk we almost always have a goal or purpose for it. But poetry is more like dancing; a dance has no purpose really except to create its own shape, its own pattern. And that pattern doesn’t necessarily get you a glass of water; poetry simply creates its own reason and necessity for being.

AB: What do you most like to share with people about the role of poetry in your own life?

MC: Poetry gave me something to be passionate about, something to live for. It put me in relationship to something much larger than myself, and in that way it ful-

filled a spiritual or even a religious craving. I do believe that to do something that’s larger than yourself, to do something that allows you to participate in the larger human endeavor, rather than just make money, or acquire comfort and safety is the greater kind of happiness. To have something to believe in, to put one’s faith and trust in, staves off despair. Any optimism I have has been reinforced by the fact that I have poetry in my life.

AB: Do you buy into the idea of literature’s power to evoke change, growth and healing?

MC: Yes, I think it does. Literature and poetry don’t promote healing and change the way religion, medicine and talk-therapy do. These modes of healing are designed to change the people in some way, through conversion or the physical healing of the body or psyche. Conversion and healing are not art’s primary goal, but that doesn’t mean art doesn’t have the power to change the direction of somebody’s life. There are too many examples of it operating like religion, converting people. So I do believe in it, though it’s not art’s first goal. I’m not even sure that using art purposely could change someone, though I certainly think it might.

AB: I would agree with that—the person/client has to come to the experience of any form of therapy with the intention of wanting help, healing and a more fulfilling life.

MC: One of my early teachers at the University of Santa Clara was Gabrielle Rico, author of *Pain and Possibility* and *Writing the Natural Way*. My experiences have taught me that writing has a kind of therapeutic value that can be a by-product of the act of writing. An important notion I gleaned from her concerned the process of writing and how the initial stirring up of images is primarily a way of tapping into one’s experience and unconscious.

AB: Would you like to say anything else to this audience of people who use language in a therapeutic way and are also devotees to the wonderful art of poetry?

MC: W.H. Auden claimed that he was only a poet when he was engaged in the act of writing poetry. We are only poets when we are writing. At all other times we must give ourselves over to living; engagement with life is what provokes us to write. The great challenge lies in figuring out ways of staying engaged with the world and of turning that engagement into our guiding and even obsessive passions. ■