

An In-Between Sort of Place: Poet Ryan Collins Explores the Quad Cities in "Complicated Weather"

Written by Mike Schulz
Friday, 09 October 2009 10:41



"I think everyone has a complex relationship with where they're from," says Ryan Collins, the Moline native currently serving as Quad City Arts' poet-in-residence. "Especially if you've left and come back, which I've done more than once. But the prevailing opinion seems to be that there's nothing to *do* here. That it's kind of an in-between sort of place, you know?

"We're like a crossroads," he continues. "A place in between places. There's the state capital, the University of Iowa These things are close, but, like, what's *here*?"

The question of "What's here?" in the Quad Cities is both directly and indirectly addressed in Collins' new chapbook, *Complicated Weather*. And the answer, as expressed in this thoughtful collection of poems, is as complex as the author's feelings about the area.

Collins says that he hopes readers have an instinctive response to the poems rather than immediate comprehension.

"Feeling should come before understanding," Collins says during a recent interview. "If you can't get a feeling from a poem, why even bother trying to understand it? I tell people that about poetry when they say, 'I don't really understand this.' Well, does it create any kind of emotional response, positive or negative? I mean, even if they *hate* it, that's still a response. It's like the Andy Kaufman school of audience expectation. Someone loving you and someone hating you are kind of equal.

"So I'm not so concerned about [readers] understanding it," says Collins of *Complicated Weather*.
"Because
it's kind of about
not

understanding the place that you're in. Not having a clear understanding of what's going on around you, even though it's very familiar, and it might be home. But if you can get some kind of emotional impression from it, something that causes reflection, then I think it's successful."

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In such poems as "Life in the Basin," "Dear Davenport," and "Dear Rock Island" - three of the individual works included in the 28-page chapbook - Collins takes an evocative look at life in the Quad Cities, and the images evoked aren't always complimentary ones. One poem finds the Rock Island resident writing, "Some people around here say that we're a Ferris wheel away from being somewhere." Another features the sentiment, "It's been too long since we've seen anything but double, seen anyone anywhere but off."

His deeply personal works, though, are also filled with a hard-earned love for the region and its people - those who are, as Collins writes, "mindful of company, hospitality, being a good neighbor just because." As area poet Rebecca Wee states on the back cover, *Complicated Weather* boasts "resolve as well as restlessness," with Collins fashioning "a vivid, honest, many-layered collection of actual and emotional weather with these poems. Those of us who live here will see things newly; those who've not visited may want to change that."

"It's not meant so much as a commentary as it is a reflection," says the 30-year-old Collins (nephew of the late, noted local author David R. Collins) of his first published chapbook. "Just food for thought - like a conversation piece. It's probably *not* the most complimentary thing, but you know, this is just my opinion. I'm not trying to *convince* anybody of anything."

Though Collins had written several of *Complicated Weather's* poems years before their inclusion in this 2009 collection, the chapbook's origin came from the theme for his Quad City Arts residency: "Looking at place and identity through poetry."

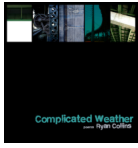
"I have a lot of writing that centers around 'place' in one way or another," says Collins, who received a master's degree in poetry from Chicago's Columbia College in 2007. "And I've always kind of thought about this place a lot, in terms of images, people I've known here, personal memory, and a kind of larger, collective memory."

Despite his fondness for the Quad Cities, however, Collins says he's more than aware of the dismissive feelings that others have for this particular Midwestern locale. ("I've lived different places in the country," he says, "and I've heard a *lot* of Iowa 80 Truckstop jokes in my day.")

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And many of those feelings, he believes, are easily justified.



"It seems like there's always a push to bring something here rather than *highlight* what's here," says Collins, who explores this notion in the *Complicated Weather* poem titled "[What ever happen to the World's Fairs?]", in which he argues for "no more tourist traps until the streets are exhausted from invention." (See [sidebar](#) for the poem in its entirety.)

Collins says, "There seems to be an impulse of, 'What can we do to make this place better? Or cooler?' Which I think is a *good* impulse, but it seems that a lot of times, it kind of falls short."

This is demonstrated, says the author, not just in the local interest in "tourist traps" - and Collins' conflicted feelings about local riverboat gambling are addressed in his *Complicated Weather* inclusion "Taxonomy" - but also in other, equally misguided area "improvements."

"Like the Avenue of the Cities," he says. "I know it's been called that for a few years now. But I'm from Moline, I went to Moline High School - that's 23rd Avenue. And for me, and for a great many other people I know I mean, it's just laughable. You can call something whatever you want, but it's not like it'll ever *change*."

Yet Collins also finds himself ambivalent about the Quad Cities' very geography. "When I was speaking at Bettendorf" High School, says the author, "I asked the kids, 'When you think of this area, what do you think of?' And somebody said, 'It's small but it's big.' And I understood what that meant.

"It's a big area," he continues, "but there's not really great public transportation around here. You know, if you need to go from one end of Bettendorf to another end of Rock Island and you

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don't have a car, and you can't afford any of the cabs around here, it's not happening. It's a *lo-o-ong* bike ride.

"And then you have people that live in downtown Rock Island that won't drive across the bridge to downtown Davenport. There's a lot of people, especially older people, that just won't *do* that. That kind of mindset

makes

your place smaller. For some people, I think it's a comforting thing, but for a lot of others, it's really frustrating."

This frustration is one that Collins says he knows well. "Growing up around here," he says, "it was always, 'There's nothing to do. This place sucks.' I even heard some of that at Bettendorf, and I understand what they were saying on some levels, because a lot of things that go on around here happen at places that are 18 or 21 and older. You know, we've got a big bar culture, and if you can't take part in that, that's limiting.

"But this whole 'This place sucks and I gotta get out of here' idea is pretty wacky," continues Collins. "I mean, *everywhere* has its pros and cons. You go somewhere new and it's really great; you live there for six months, and the luster is gone. That attitude isn't productive, obviously, and I think it kind of belittles the people that *are* here, and aren't going anywhere, and

like

it here."

Consequently, Collins' chapbook finds the author grappling not only with the area's challenges, but also its rewards. "I know a lot of people that have moved away to go to school, got jobs, lived cool places, lived rich, full, interesting lives, and moved back here by *choice*," he says, "because they grew up here, and they want to raise their kids here. I mean, that *says* something."

Exactly *what* it says, however, is left for *Complicated Weather's* readers to decide.

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"I don't like poems that preach," says Collins. "I don't think a lot of people do. It's like political poetry, which is kind of the worst. If I'm going to write a poem about the war in Iraq - if I want to say the war in Iraq is a bad idea - then everything that goes on in that poem has got to be about making my points. And then it becomes a totally rhetorical kind of thing, and there's no surprise. It's accessible, and it might be really clear, but a lot of times, I think, it's also really boring. So I try to do something that's a little more free-associative. I never know *where* I want poems to end."

Ryan Collins will read from, and discuss, his chapbook Complicated Weather at the Bettendorf Public Library on Monday, October 19, at 7 p.m., at ICONS Martini on Tuesday, October 20, at 8 p.m., and at Davenport's Fairmount Street Library on Thursday, October 22, at 4 p.m. Collins' book is available for purchase at each event, and by visiting VisibleQC.blogspot.com

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Collins will also lead a poetry workshop - "Questions of Travel" - at the Midwest Writing Center on Wednesday, October 21, at 7 p.m., and host a public reading of Visible Cities Poetry Project submissions at the center on Thursday, October 22, at 7 p.m. For more information on Collins' Quad City Arts Poet-in-Residence events, visit QuadCityArts.com.

Sidebar: The Visible Cities Project

In addition to the scheduled area readings and discussions for his chapbook *Complicated Weather*, Ryan Collins' tenure as Quad City Arts' current poet-in-residence finds him shepherding a literary experiment titled The Visible Cities Project, in which practiced and novice writers are encouraged to share their own thoughts and feelings about the Quad Cities through poetry. The project's entries, to date, can be found online at VisibleQC.blogspot.com, and will subsequently be read at a Midwest Writing Center event on October 22 - the last day of Collins' residency.

"I just didn't want [the residency] to be all about *me*," explains the author, in describing the project's origins. "I mean, I'm not really anybody. I've published a lot of work, but until now, I

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didn't have any books or anything. And I just figured if we were going to have a week of public events, I'd want to close it with *other people.*"

Open to those living in the greater Quad Cities area and those who once resided here, the Visible Cities Project is, like *Complicated Weather*, designed to invite discussion on what it means to be a Quad Citian. And one of the project's chief perks, says Collins, is that "this is a local thing, and it's not like you're going to get a rejection letter. Everyone who submits might not get included, but everyone will get critiqued and get some feedback," which, as Collins well knows, is invaluable for one's growth as an author.

"I wrote for years before I ever got anything other than 'That's really good,' or 'Wow, man,'" he says. "You know, not at all *helpful* things."

As the project's editor, Collins states there are no strict guidelines for which poems will and won't be included. "For this particular project I'm just looking for effort," he says, "and thought, and emotional resonance. Just something that feels like it rings true. I don't have any preferences for style and form. I'm not looking for the best poems ever. I don't know what the best poems ever would *look* like.

"What's going to make them personal," he continues, "and what's going to give them resonance, are the *imperfections* - people not over-thinking things, but just trying to give away something of themselves. The whole point of the project is just to consider one's surroundings and *effect* on them a little bit."

Collins says that the Visible Cities Project is especially ideal for those who've always wanted to try their hands at poetry, yet never knew quite how to start. "This is a good thing, an *easy* thing, because there's no wrong way to write a poem," he says.

One of the entries on the project's Web site - Connie Wilson's "Please Do Not Feed the Waterfowl" - even reads more like a short story than a poem, and Collins states, "Something like that, something that's so straightforward and so literal, can translate really well [as poetry]. With

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so many people, their problem with poetry is that they find it impenetrable and don't understand it, but it can also be immediately accessible and recognizable.

"I think a lot can be taught about writing," he continues. "But I think curiosity is enough. And if you're curious, I think it's worth putting pen to paper, or fingers to keys, and finding out."

Adding that he'd particularly like to see "younger people submitting, and people who write but maybe have never *thought* about submitting," Collins says that he hopes to have "as many people read on the 22nd as possible." (As of October 9, there are a half dozen submissions featured on the Visible Cities Project's Web site, although Collins says, "I got a little backlogged - there's another five or six coming.") He also sees no reason for the Visible Cities Project to end with his Quad City Arts residency.

"I might just keep going with it after all the events are done," he says. "Maybe I've just had a little bit of a clearer lens on this, but there's always been a really strong writing community around here. I mean, the project isn't about it being *my* blog, so if it has legs, I'll do it as long as people have interest."

- Mike Schulz

Ryan Collins is currently accepting entries for The Visible Cities Project, and submission information can be found at VisibleQC.blogspot.com. A public reading of selections will be held at the Midwest Writing Center on Thursday, October 22, at 7 p.m., with the poems' authors reading their own works. Admission is free, and more on the event is available by calling (563)324-1410 or visiting MidwestWritingCenter.org

Sidebar: [What ever happen to the World's Fairs?], by Ryan Collins

What ever happen to the World's Fairs? Would the internet be filling their voids, multiplying by the day? Some people around here say that we're a Ferris wheel away from being somewhere. I say we're somewhere already & we don't need an amusement park to keep 'em

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coming, so to speak. We're not Adventureland & the rain here doesn't coagulate overnight. This is a delicate balance. You need wheels to get around here, no pun intended - unless nature intends & then what? Then it's time for wonder, to inspire awe across the tongues of foreign visitors. No more tourist traps until the streets are exhausted from invention. We'll muster an army to sidewalk-chalk the way.

Complicated Weather *is available for purchase at* VisibleQC.blogspot.com.

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