

Rejection is good for you

Billy Collins thinks Carson City writer Krista Benjamin wrote one of the year's best American poems

Rejection can be a good thing. If Krista Benjamin's

by
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poem, "Letter from My Ancestors" hadn't first been rejected by a literary magazine, she probably never would have revised it. If she hadn't revised it, she would likely never have gotten it published in a magazine that caught former poet laureate Billy Collins' eye. If she hadn't gotten it published, Collins likely would never have chosen it for *The Best American Poetry 2006* anthology.

"It turned out to be better for me," says Benjamin, curled up on an armchair in her Carson City home, her two cats beside her. "This is a nice little unexpected home run."

Benjamin, a full-time writer, wrote her first draft of the poem in 2004. She sent it to a small literary magazine called *Bathtub Gin*. Most rejection letters are generic slips of papers—a whole sheet of paper is not typically even used. But when *Bathtub Gin* rejected it, the editor wrote her a personal note encouraging her to try again. She revised the poem in a poetry class, working on some of the line breaks, sharpening her characters' edges and giving it a more distinct time frame and point of view.

When she heard that a literary journal, *Margie*, was hosting a competition judged by Collins to publish a poetry book, she included the revised "Letter from My Ancestors" in her manuscript. She didn't make it to the semifinals of that competition, so Collins didn't see it then. But the editors liked "Letter" enough to publish it in *Margie*. When it came time for Collins to scavenge through 1,754 magazines to select 75 of America's "best" poems for the *BAP* series, he found Benjamin's poem.

Some critics have written scathing commentary on both Collins and his selection for the prestigious series, which has come to be an annual state-of-the-art review of the past year's published poetry. Among the vitriolic condemnations are accusations of Collins being "vanilla," accessible, mainstream, commercial and prone more to humor than to intrigue, style or conflict. These types of complaints are reasons the series invites a new author to guest-edit each year, so as not to bog it down with one viewpoint or taste from year to year.

Letter from My Ancestors

We wouldn't write this,
wouldn't even think of it. We are working
people without time on our hands. In the old country,

we milk cows or deliver the mail or leave,
scattering to South Africa, Connecticut, Missouri,
and finally, California for the Gold Rush—

Aaron and Lena run the Yosemite campground, general
store, a section of the stagecoach line. Morris comes
later, after the earthquake, finds two irons

and a board in the rubble of San Francisco.
Plenty of prostitutes need their dresses pressed, enough,
to earn him the cash to open a haberdashery and marry

Sadie—we all have stories, yes, but we're not thinking
stories. We have work to do, and a dozen children. They'll
go on to pound nails and write up deals, not musings.

We document transactions. Our diaries record
temperatures, landmarks, symptoms. We
do not write our dreams. We place another order,

make the next delivery, save the next
dollar, give another generation—you,
maybe—the luxury of time

to write about us.

Krista Benjamin will give
a reading on Dec. 12 at a
Jazz and Poetry night
with the Mile High Jazz
Band at Comma Coffee,
312 S. Carson St.,
Carson City, 8 p.m. \$5.
Call 865-2662 for more
information.

The names and places in the poem come from real people, places and experiences in Benjamin's family. While helping her grandmother organize piles of photographs, she heard about her ancestors' histories and how they came to the United States. The journals she saw looked nothing like hers—as she notes in the poem, they were filled with facts rather than dreams. Certain phrases kept entering her mind about what they might have to say to her. Phrases like “We’re not poets. We’re not academics. We have work to do.”

Benjamin was born in Truckee 36 years ago and grew up in Lake Tahoe, where her family owned a resort motel. She says she's the first person in her family able to devote time to being artistic. The world of art was not seen as a practical endeavor.

“I’d be thinking, ‘They don’t know what the hell I’m doing,’” she says. “But all along, I think they were working toward giving future generations a better life.”

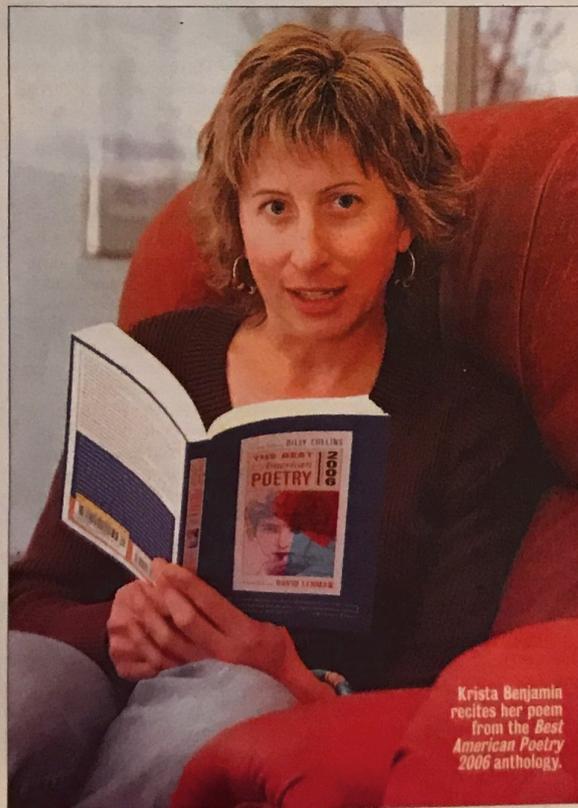
Benjamin sees herself as more of a writer than a poet. She's currently working on a coming-of-age novel set in Tahoe. The Nevada Arts Council gave her a \$5,000 literary arts fellowship after reading the novel's first 25 pages. The book

began as a short story, but, in another example of how rejection can lead to bigger things, a Simon & Schuster editor critiqued it and told her it wasn't working as a short story. It would be better developed as a novel.

“Before I started writing seriously, I thought not giving up meant not giving up sending work to publishers,” says Benjamin. “But it's not just that. It's revising. It's accepting that writing is rewriting. When I was a kid, I thought writing a novel would be just a little harder than reading one is.”

Just because Billy Collins thinks she wrote one of America's best poems, Benjamin's life has not changed drastically. She continues to plug away at her novel, her face lit up by a desk lamp through the window of her home. Self doubts still surface as the sentences come together. And it didn't make her filthy rich—she got \$75 and two copies of the book as payment. But encouragement and recognition always help.

“It makes me feel really honored,” says Benjamin. “I'm still just amazed and surprised to be in there. It's a message to me back from the world that says maybe I have something going.” □



Krista Benjamin recites her poem from the *Best American Poetry 2006* anthology.

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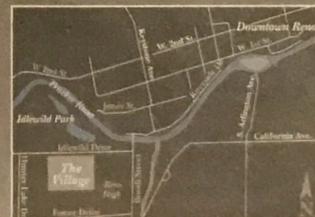


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