



## AT THE LIBRARY

By Julie Winkelstein  
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*“To write is an act of hope – essentially, you’re hoping someone will read it.”*

-Billy Collins, United States Poet Laureate 2001-2003, at the opening of the general session of the California Library Association’s annual conference, November 10-13, 2006

This past week I took the train to Sacramento for the California Library Association (CLA) 108<sup>th</sup> annual conference and exhibition. I sat on the San Pablo Bay side of the train, and as the train followed the curve of the bay, I didn’t read my book or do my work, but instead watched the ripples of gray and blue moving through the water. I love riding the train, as it passes past houses, fields, backyards, over water – it is as if I am going on a long journey even when I’m traveling only seventy-five miles.

This year’s theme was “Raise Our Voice,” an appropriate one for a conference held in the state capital, where one would hope all our voices are heard. To go with the theme, many of the programs were about advocacy, community outreach, literacy and the future of libraries. To further inspire us, there was a California State Library display of more than 40 library projects funded by the Public Library Bond Act of 2000. These included libraries in

design, such as the Oakland Public Library 81<sup>st</sup> Avenue branch; libraries under construction, such as the Santa Marina Public Library; and ones now open, such as the Alameda Main Library. These large boards gave information about the libraries, drawings or photographs of the buildings, and the architectural design. The range of designs and sizes was fascinating and it was exciting to see so many new libraries being added to the communities of California.

The first event I went to was an amazingly funny reading by Billy Collins. His wry way of looking at the every day world makes it easy to see why he is such a popular poet. In fact, he was introduced as an “oxymoron: a bestselling poet.” He read from several of his books, pausing in between to give a little background on the next poem. His comments on English teachers who ask after reading a poem, “What is the poet trying to say? – as if they had failed to actually say it –

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really made me laugh. What I particularly appreciate about this poet is the way he makes it seem normal to write poetry – what a gift for the young people who experience his work.

Another worthwhile presentation was called “I is Not for Indian.” We heard stories of Native American children who are tired of being asked whether they have running water or live in a tepee. Some of these kids don’t even identify themselves as Native Americans, because they are nothing like the images presented in some books. The Native Libraries Round Table sponsored this program and I was pleased to receive their list of recommended Native American literature for children and young adults. Three of the books on the list received this year’s first American Indian Youth Literature Award, and they were chosen because they “present Native Americans in the fullness of their humanity in

the present and past contexts” (Press release American Indian Library Association September 5, 2006).

This year I spent more time actually talking to some of the various vendors, who come from all over the United States and Canada. They sell everything from library furniture to online continuous customer satisfaction surveys. I was struck by their far-reaching knowledge about public libraries and came away thinking we should be taking advantage of their expertise. Perhaps in the future a conference like this will include a panel of librarians and vendors, giving all of us a chance to ask questions and gather information about what will work for our libraries.