



# The Collected Works of Billy the Kid: Left Handed Poems

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From the Booker Prize-winning author of *The English Patient* comes a visionary novel, a virtuoso synthesis of storytelling, history, and myth, about William Bonney, a.k.a. "Billy the Kid," a bloodthirsty ogre and outlaw saint. "Ondaatje's language is clean and energetic, with the pop of bullets."--Annie Dillard.

## The Collected Works of Billy the Kid: Left Handed Poems Details

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Author : Michael Ondaatje

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# From Reader Review The Collected Works of Billy the Kid: Left Handed Poems for online ebook

**mark monday says**

avant-garde, postmodern, revisionist, a deconstruction, self-conscious and self-aware, prose from another planet, beautifully brutal, the kind of spikey poetry you see in some of the books of Hawke or even some DeLillo (i'm thinking Libra), the kind of book that you read and reread and remember forever. at least this reader did.

all of the above does nothing to sum up the yearning and strangeness and *rightness* of this underrated modern classic.

i mentioned 'poetry' but i am talking about the prose. poetic prose, yes a cliché and yes wonderful when it is done right. and hey, there's actual poetry here too. 'poetry written by Billy the Kid' apparently. obviously not, but this is postmodernism or whatever so does it even matter? the poetry captures the character perfectly. perfect poetry.

Billy the Kid, vicious animal  
Pat Garrett, so sane he's insane  
Billy the Kid, the mythology removed and built up again

the fragmented, cut-up style is ingenious. historical records, first person accounts, news blurbs, photographs, poetry, pulp fiction... it all comes together to paint a picture of a timeless place populated with timeless characters enacting a timeless dance with fate and death. fate and death, fate and death, fate and death. is this really a Western? i suppose so, but it is so much else as well.

i'm looking through my old photocopy of the novel (thanks, Interlibrary Loan of 20 years ago) and i'm feeling a need to read this a third time. maybe i can then write a better review. oh you beautiful novel, i want to put my hands all over you again.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=16eSks...>

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**Jim says**

"Get away from me yer stupid chicken."

Oh man I love this book. There's a blurb from Larry McMurtry where he admits that it "strains one's powers of description" which pretty much sums it up. The Collected Works explores the interior life of Billy the Kid and his relationship with Pat Garrett. It's raw, funny, and frightening all in one go. Because 1) it's so interior, 2) Ondaatje excels at this sort of characterization, and 3) Billy is bat shit crazy, the exteriors are hyperbolic and grotesque. Billy might as well be on Mars the scenes are so strange and distinct.

It's like getting a phone call from a relative from the hospital when they're hopped up on pain medication and

all this beautiful/scary talk comes tumbling out. It doesn't mean anything, but then again maybe it does.

There's a scene where Billy is puking during a sandstorm where the vomit is a "pack of miniature canaries" torn out of his body, buffeted by the wind, and all the while he's trying to keep the dog from going after it eating up his mess. It's sad and brutal and hilarious all and there are many more scenes just as sharply layered and angled against expectations. So throw away all the received wisdom you may have picked up regarding BTK over the years and saddle up for a ride that's slick and weird.

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## Michael says

This is a portrait of Billy the Kid as reflected in a thousand pieces of a shattered mirror. The book is composed of vignettes, poems, photos, and fragments of prose, each of which is a little stroke of brilliance and all of which together paint an incredibly rich, violent, and moving portrait of this young man and his legend. Ondaatje is quite a conjurer here.

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## Tony says

*(Cue the Dylan soundtrack from the movie Pat Garrett and Billy the Kid. A little scratchy, a little 'first-take'. Go sepie. Remember the first time you heard: Billy, you're so far away from home.)*

Ondaatje was a kid in Sri Lanka -- a kid in Sri Lanka -- and he fell in love with the legend of Billy the Kid. Never kicked it. Then he started to write -- he *had* to write. He wrote a collage: of poems and poem fragments, prose, documentary testimonies. It's uneven, a broken western sky. But we're at the point where only impressionists can write Billy, who here says, *Blood a necklace on me all my life*.

This is a book where a dying man's last words are, indelibly, *get away from me yer stupid chicken*.

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Sallie had a cat that got bit by a rattler; was gonna die. They went to kill it, to put it out of its misery; but it jumped and fled. Ran under the house. Couldn't get it out, but imagined the pain. Billy said he'd kill him. You should read this to find out how. If you want to know.

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A poem:

*You know hunters  
are the gentlest  
anywhere in the world*

*they halt caterpillars  
from path dangers  
lift a drowning moth from a bowl*

*remarkable in peace*

*in the same way assassins  
come to chaos neutral*

-----

To writers, Ondaatje says this:

*/while I've been going on  
the blood from my wrist  
has travelled to my heart  
and my fingers touch  
the soft blue paper notebook  
control a pencil that shifts up and sideways  
mapping my thinking going its own way  
like light wet glasses drifting on polished wood*

-----

*Billy was the pink of politeness and as courteous a little gentleman as I ever met. And yet, Even though dead  
they buried him in leg irons.*

It's easy to be misunderstood.

-----

Dylan again, *Billy, they don't like you to be so free.*

-----

Get away from me yer stupid chicken.

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## **Libbie Hawker (L.M. Ironside) says**

A slim but gorgeous, highly experimental work, *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* follows, somewhat disjointedly, the life of the famous outlaw and a bit of his legend, too. Through a mixture of Ondaatje's unparalleled poetry (he is undoubtedly the most under-appreciated poet in the English-speaking world) and his equally moving, memorable prose, the reader drifts in and out of Billy's mind, his experiences, and the perspectives of the people who knew and loved him. The book is deeply focused on visual imagery, on the idea of photographs, of freezing a moment in time with foreground sharp and background blurred, on the act itself of making an image in order to preserve a memory.

Poignantly, the book opens with a caption beneath a blank "photograph" and ends with the type-written text of a very old graphic novel, sans images, featuring Billy the Kid: his own legend obscuring his life, continuing forward after his death; Billy becoming unseen behind the image of Billy.

It is a deeply moving, visceral work, as all Ondaatje's works are. This, his riskiest and strangest book, may also be his best -- and it is certainly his least appreciated.

This is pure, emotional literary fiction at its best. Highly recommended.

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## **Victor says**

Truly bizarre and unexpected.

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## **Goran Gluš?i? says**

Ovo je jedna nenormalno dobra knjiga koja u lijepoj našoj dolazi u kompletu s nenormalno lošim prijevodom.

Knjigu sam isprve ?itao dosta zbunjen, s tek komadi?ima o?igledne briljanosti koje su mi upadale u o?i. Jer ima ih, itekako ih ima. Ve?ina je ipak bila zbrljani mish-mash, no ajde, bilo je dovoljno dobro da krenem knjigu još jednom pro?itati na engleskom.

Na to me zapravo motivirala ova re?enica: "I'll be with the world till she dies" koja je kod nas prevedena kao "Pamtit ?e me dok je svijeta." Okej, da, prijevod zna?i više-manje isto, ali budimo realni, istovremeno je prili?no dosadna re?enica, a original to nije.

To je NAJMANJI problem, zato jer knjiga u našem izdanju nije samo bila 'slabije' prevedena nego jednostavno ima grešaka. 'Kite' je prevedeno kao 'kit', 'angles' kao 'an?eli', 'amateur' kao 'ljubitelj' (ovu zadnju ne mogu ni shvatit)... A da ne spominjem posebno fatalne trenutke u kojima **FALE PARAGRAFI!** Doslovno je po?etak jednog paragrafa zalijepljen na kraj drugog. **WHAT**

No ?itanjem na engleski je jedno grozno iskustvo ipak postalo lijepo, zato jer ova knjiga je divno napisana i gotovo neshvatljivo kreativna. Zanimljivo je vidjeti da su postmodernisti bili tako maštoviti ve? 1970-ih. Ova knjiga je ispri?ana nelinearno, kao nekakva puzla, a koristi poeziju, prozu, slike, izjave, fanfiction... Jedna od boljih fora je jedno malo poglavlje nakon dvadesetak stranica kojom narator (koji ima glas Billya) prezentira uvodni opis zato jer je zaklju?io da mu fali po?etak. Tako po?etak dolazi u sredini. Sve je to poprili?no originalno, ?ak i za današnje standarde.

I kroz to je ispri?ana pri?a Billya the Kida. Što ne zna?i da je ovo pri?a za fanove westerna, ne baš. Mada ?e pomo?i ako znate dosta o njemu i njegovoj bandi. Ja nisam znao skoro ništa i zato mi je drugo ?itanje bilo potrebno da pohvatam sve. Mada pretpostavljam da ?e i kratko guglanje prije ?itanja poslužiti.

Ipak, daleko je ovo od biografske knjižice. Umjesto toga, ovo je pri?a o ludilu, o surovosti divljeg zapada, o nasilju i svemu ružnom u svijetu što je, ?esto, ispri?ano tako lijepo da ?ete mo?i samo umorno puhnuti i prihvatiti poraz. Da, ovo je jedna ružna, ružna, predivna knjiga koja ima, po meni, baš sve.

Zato petica, bez ikakve sumnje ili dvojbe.

A prijevodu nula. Nemojte ?itati prijevod, molim vas.

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### **Tyler Jones says**

I don't see why you need my views on it.

But since you ask.

I do not claim to be an authority on poetry - least of all the experimental kind. Seems to me too many of them that write it see a reader enjoying their work as a sign they did it wrong. Listening to me ramble on about it - you'd think I was one of them dumbass Conservatives as hates anything intellectual - but I really put great store in most literatures. It's just that experimental poetry that gets my dander up.

But Billy is another story. Its like you been riding out on the dry plain all day and opening this book is like a cold beer with a whiskey chaser. Writ 40 years past - its as fresh today as then - or as it woulda been in Billy's own time. Part imagination part reportage - which is another type of imagination altogether - this book strikes at the truth that lives between the fancy and the fact. I feel I know Billy better from these hundred pages than from some egg-head history.

After reading it I took a bath and the tub was ringed with red dirt.

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### **Khashayar Mohammadi says**

One of the most original books of Poetry I have ever read. Ingenious, Bold and Lachrymose.

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### **- ?? jess ??- says**

if you are interested in experimental poetry or billy the kid, this book is for you, but since i know nothing about either i found this super jumbled and confusing

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### **Jan says**

If you're looking for something along the lines of The True History of the Kelly Gang or even Lonesome Dove, this ain't that. There were bits in this mishmash that worked, but the overall effect was too disjointed and maybe even self-indulgent to make for a satisfying read. Then again, it's Ondaatje, and Annie Dillard and Larry McMurtry blurbed it, so maybe I failed the author rather than the other way around.

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### **Spiros says**

A book every bit as exalted and brutal as Blood Meridian, if slightly narrower in scope; it delineates a world

in which life is cheap and short, and in which legend looms large.

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### Leigh says

I've taken to describing this book as "What would happen if William Faulkner wrote *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* as a poem. Concisely. In Canada."

So it's no surprise that it blew me away.

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### John says

I'd say this book is like a Terence Malick movie transformed into poetry/prose/a few pictures. It's fragmentary, nebulous, disintegrating, nonsensical, beautiful, weird, scary, quiet, even silent. It's got lots and lots of white space. For a reason. I think it's wonderful and I want to spend even more time with it, let it soak in a bit more before further reports. One thing to say: it's very much an Ezra Pound poetry as history sort of thing, but clearer (but only because we know the myth immediately since it's still prevalent, as opposed to, say, the history of the Malatesta family in 16th century Italy). Enjoy it.

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### John says

Michael Ondaatje is certainly one of the world's greatest living writers. My admiration for his writing craft is boundless but I will nonetheless attempt at a dispirited review of his first novel-ish publication. Although this is his first "novel" (more on novel(ish)ness later), it ranks among his most unabashedly avant-garde next to **The English Patient** and his most recent **Divisadero**. **The Collected Works of Billy the Kid** is one of the earliest attempts in North American letters at revising the Wild West *mythos*. The Revisionist Western is, again, one of my favorite sub-genres of all time, but I am still attempting objectivity. This novel(ish) piece of writing takes a stab at demythologizing the outlaw/bandit/freedom fighter archetype of which, for almost a century, Billy the Kid belonged to. It is intensely violent but this violence is offset by an, at times, strikingly humanized portrayal of a violent murderer. Similarly (or perhaps contrarily), Billy's portrayal is at times maddeningly animalistic. So too is Ondaatje's novel(ish). It garners its power by oscillating amongst historical record, first person narrative, eye-witness accounts, dime-store novel, photography and most interestingly, poems which are intended to be read as if Billy the Kid wrote them (which of course he didn't). Though it can be dizzying at times while at other times being stomach-churningly violent, this book is a must read for fans of the genre as well as fans of Ondaatje's peculiar, non-linear, pastiche narrative style.

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### Tinea says

Poems, snippets, and pictures.  
Hearty. Read it twice.

*After shooting Gregory  
this is what happened*



*I'd shot him well and careful  
made it explode under his heart  
so it wouldn't last long  
was about to walk away  
when this chicken paddles out to him  
and as he was falling hops on his neck  
digs the beak into his throat  
straightens legs and heaves  
a red and blue vein out*

*Meanwhile he fell  
and the chicken walked away*

*still tugging at the vein  
till it was 12 yards long  
as if it held that body like a kite  
Gregory's last words being*

*get away from me yer stupid chicken*

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## **Ben says**

"I'll be with the world till she dies."

So says William Bonney in Michael Ondaatje's impressionistic, avant-garde novel about the West's most mythologized outlaw.

In this postmodern experiment with poetry, fragmented narrative, and photography, Ondaatje mines the essence, if not the facts, of Billy the Kid, using atmosphere, language, and form.

"A river you could get lost in  
and the sun a flashy hawk  
on the edge of it"

I felt the book was at its best in the short, stark poems, which illuminate a very particular world. Ondaatje abhors the clichés of Western imagery, and revels in blood, death, and a feral vision of nature. The narrative sections can be dense, tangly bits of writing, difficult to follow on a literal level but potent with atmosphere. Many are narrated by Billy, who is described by Garrett as having an "imagination which was usually pointless and never in control." That unbridled linguistic force is reflected in the writing.

The title of this book seems to have thrown many readers for a loop. Comically, even the library I borrowed it from had it shelved alongside The Collected Works of Edgar Allan Poe, as if this *actually* represented the sum literary efforts of Billy the Kid.

Instead, Ondaatje has given us the book that Billy *should* have written. You get the feeling that this is, in fact, how the mind of a gunfighter would express itself--in bursts and fits, sometimes with great eloquence and sometimes with carnal violence. Always on a hair trigger.

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## Paquita Maria Sanchez says

A stew of fact and fiction, a hot mess of history, a researched yet fabricated poetry book, a travelogue, a series of gray-scale images, and also text describing nonexistent images in film photography's technical jargon (and I swoon), this book hits all my right notes. If Billy the Kid had ever constructed a little girl's scrapbook journal which reflected on the huge themes of his life, but in simple language like stripping bare an entire mythology of a real human being and then drawing it in crayon exceptionally WELL, it would be this book.

It is little. I will not over-do it in the quote-factory (I am saying that to myself 10-times-fast in order to control myself), but for those of you who skim the quotes in reviews: read these. I cannot explain myself properly in an "encouraging you to actually read this book" sorta way (though that is what I intend to do) without literally showing you what you are missing. Wait, what was the question?

catching flies with my left hand  
bringing the fist to my ear  
hearing the scream grey buzz  
as their legs cramp their  
heads with no air  
so eyes split and release

open fingers  
the air and sun hit them like pollen  
sun flood drying them red  
catching flies, angry weather in my head, too

And so another heart was broken and dusted off the pant-leg of a mental mess. What a lovely depiction of the mucky wrestle that is lurve: squashing things, then staring at the blood and guts in glaring sunlight. How beautiful it is that, and but, and what have I done, and wow, and huh? You know, that type of brain-stuff.

I don't know enough about Billy the Kid to review this book.

Miss Angela D has a mouth like a bee  
she eats and off all your honey  
her teeth leave a sting on your very best thing  
and its best when she gets the best money

That's right-Pynchon-y, am I wrong?

Now if you'll excuse me, I have a hot date with wikipedia. I would rate this a 4.8, but I always respected a teacher who had the decency to grade on an upward curve.

**The Kid Tells All: Exclusive Jail Interview: (1881)**

*(admittedly paraphrased)*

I: Mr. Bonney, or may I call you Billy...

B: No.

I: Mr. Bonney, do you believe in God?

B: No.

I: Do you wonder what will happen after death now that you don't believe in God?

B: Well I try to avoid it. Though I suppose not. I guess they'll just put you in a box and you will stay there forever.

I: How about you, do you think you will last in people's memories?

B: I'll be with the world till she dies.

Chin, chin, Mr. Bonney.

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**Pierce says**

I have a theory about my difficulties with poetry. I think, because I kind of discovered prose outside of learning, I've always viewed it as past-time more anything. My parents got me reading early, I feel like I was reading books quite early. I certainly had a well-established addiction to Famous Five by the time I was in first class (seven-ish?).

But never poetry. The only poetry I was ever really exposed to was in the classroom. Thinking about it like that I can understand how other kids felt about books.

Although I recently found a copybook full of poems I wrote about aged ten, but I think that was instigated by some competition in school. There's no motivation like prizes.

So I have this thing where my eyes start to skitter past lines if I'm tackling something heavy. They just start jumping up and down the page of their own accord. I have to really force myself to focus and take my time.

The point is: this collected works completely bypasses that. Because it's half poetry, half short-form prose. And you just naturally transition between the two. And the metrically structured stuff is rooted in the context of the rest of it.

And the whole thing is just so beautifully written I could cry.

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## **Karissa says**

I LOVE this. So much that after I finished, I spent some time reading about Billy the Kid's life, and then started rereading Ondaatje's book. This is one of those books that, like Anne Carson's *Autobiography of Red*, blurs the lines between novel and poetry. It needs to be savored slowly, and it's a book that doesn't seem to come together until you get to the end and then take the time to reread it. The first read was like wading through water -- enjoyable because Ondaatje's words are a joy to read. The second read is where all the pieces begin to click into place, at least it was for me. I love how playful Ondaatje is, how funny and tragic and lovely he is in this book at different turns. I just love this book, and know I'll be rereading it several more times in my lifetime. Luckily for me, it's short.

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