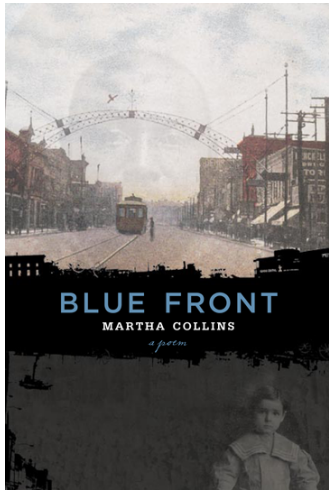


Anisfield-Wolf Book Awards*



Blue Front

Martha Collins

2007 AWBA Fiction Winner

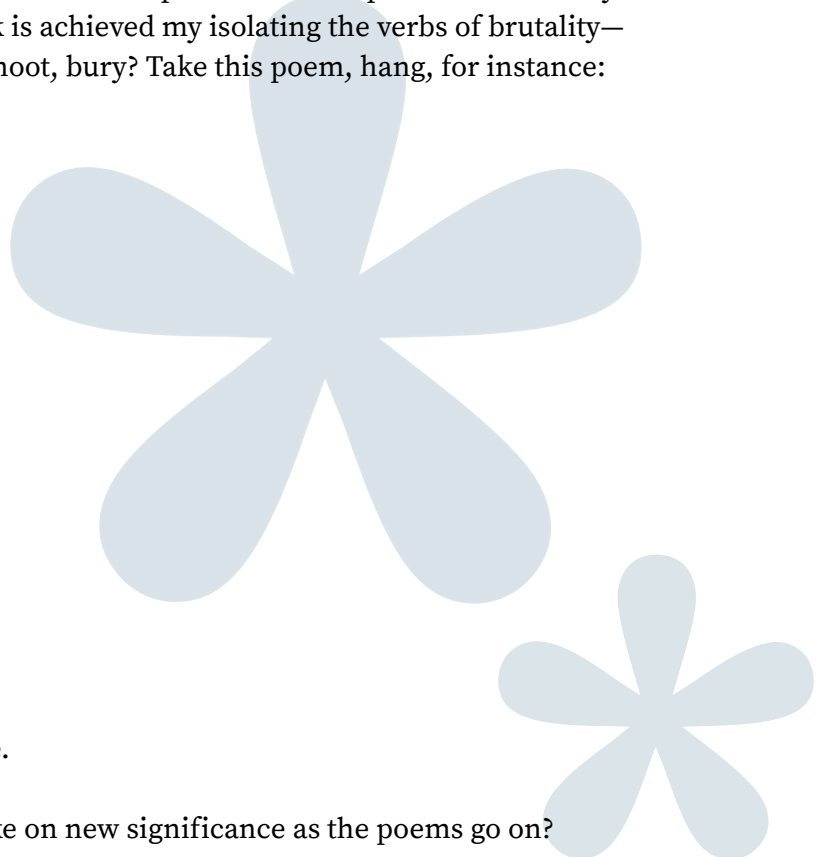
BOOK DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Martha Collins's father, as a five-year-old boy, witnessed a lynching in Cairo, Illinois alongside a reported 10,000 spectators. The Blue Front is an investigation into family memory, white supremacy, and racist violence. Collins weaves newspaper articles, legal history, postcards, census data, and speculations about her father's experience into this collection. This creates discursive storytelling that circles around a singular moment in history. As a reader, why do you think Collins chose to explore this historical moment from multiple angles? What does fragmentation and layered storytelling add to the narrative?
2. In a series of poems scattered throughout The Blue Front, Collins takes a selection of verbs used to describe the horrendous lynching and murder of William James and produces a haunting elegy that illuminates the depths of white supremacist brutality and spectatorship. What do you think is achieved by isolating the verbs of brutality—track, lynch, drag, hang, cut, burn, shoot, bury? Take this poem, *hang*, for instance:

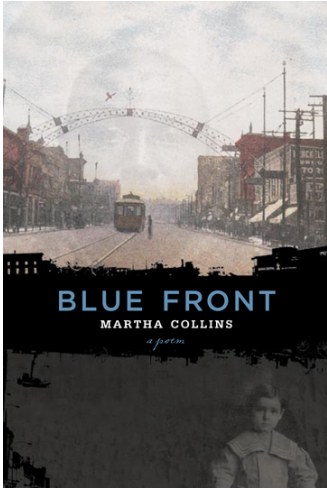
hang

as a mirror on a wall, or the fall
of a dress. a dress, a shirt on a line
to fasten to dry. on the rack, or back
in the closet again, a sweet curse
on it all, sliver of nail, delayed
attack. shamed creature, a curse
on itself, so the act of doing it
changes the verb, tense with not
quite right. with rope, like a swing
from a tree. from a pole, like a flag,
or holidays, from an arch lit bright
with lights. in the night, in the air
like a shirt. without, or with only
a shirt. without, like an empty sleeve.

How do the meaning of the verbs take on new significance as the poems go on?



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BOOK DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

3. On page 50, Martha Collins turns her gaze to the trees in Cairo, Illinois—Sycamore trees, Cedar trees, Poplar, Pine, exotic ginkgoes, stately magnolias—conjuring up historical knowledge of lynching. Collins’ meditation on the trees illuminates trees as a symbol intertwined with America’s violently racist past. Towards the end of the poem, the poem turns as Collins writes,

The victim hanged, though not on a tree, this
was not the country, they used a steel arch
with electric lights, and later a lamppost, this
was a modern event, the trees were not involved.

What do you think this turn in the poem reveals about the past? Is nature implicated in the poem? How are historically violent and racist practices showing up in contemporary society?

