

PressRelease



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## **IRAQ AND AFGHANISTAN WAR VETERAN/POET CHRISTOPHER P. COLLINS WINS THE FIRST JAMES GATES PERCIVAL PRIZE FOR LITERATURE**

*The Prize Commemorates the United States' First Poet Who Came to Galena, Illinois and Lived and Worked in Surrounding Areas in Illinois and Wisconsin during the 1850s*

**GALENA, ILLINOIS (APRIL 15, 2019)** — The Kentucky poet, Christopher P. Collins has won the first James Gates Percival Prize for Literature, which will be bestowed to the poet during the opening ceremony this May of the James Gates Percival International Poetry Festival in Galena, Illinois.

The International Festival dates are May 17-19, 2019.

The Poetry Festival is named after James Gates Percival (1795-1856), who is considered America's first poet and who eventually lived and worked in the Galena-area and died and is buried in Hazel Green, Wisconsin

The three-day festival rebrands the importance to Percival who is also considered "the father of modern American poetry" and brings together poets and literature-lovers from different localities and nations in a celebration of art, culture, and literature in the Historic City of Galena.

The Festival is organized by The Chicago Athenaeum: Museum of Architecture and Design and The European Centre for Architecture Art Design and Urban Studies together with Galena City Beautiful.

Christopher F. Collins is a former Captain having served twelve years in the U.S. Army (Reserve). He completed three combat deployments in Afghanistan and Iraq as a platoon leader and as a commander. He earned his M.F.A. in Creative Writing (Poetry) at Murray State University. He is currently a PhD candidate in Literary Nonfiction at the University of Cincinnati. He taught high school English for more than a decade before pursuing his doctorate. He lives and works in the rural town of Independence, Kentucky.

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**CHRISTOPHER P. COLLINS WINS THE FIRST JAMES GATES PERCIVAL PRIZE  
FOR LITERATURE**

Add One

Collins chose to take his experiences as a soldier, having completed three combat tours as a soldier in the U.S. Army Reserve in Afghanistan and Iraq, to produce several collections of poetry that were inspired by family and war.

In his experience of war, the poet has taken his tours in the Afghanistan and Iraq wars and has extracted their emotional and complex shrapnel and examined their toll on his civilian life.

He considers the two sides of himself that have been wrought in these parallel lives. One is the self of the citizen-soldier; the other is the self of the husband and father. His poems reveal the brutal ways in which these selves collide and bleed into one another.

Writing about those experiences, he published a poetry chapbook entitled *Gathering Leaves for War* (Finishing Line Press) in 2013.

His recent collection of work, entitled *My American Night* (University of Georgia Press), creates a catharsis of emotions as the reader is drawn into his personal journey through the human destruction of the Iraq and Afghanistan War.

“There is something sacred, profound, and deeply cathartic about a soldier who is sent to war and comes back as a poet,” states Christian Narkiewicz-Laine, Museum President, The Chicago Athenaeum.

“The nightmare of war’s ultimate brutality, horror, devastation, and the senseless loss of human life on a battlefield, all now mirrored on a poet’s renewed and transformed soul.”

“This is a statement about our ultimate humanity, about real social justice, about our essential conquest for peace, and about the uselessness and degradation of war and the critical and supreme preservation of human dignity.”

“Ultimately, as in the case of this poet, our human souls will triumph even in the nightmare face of war and human destruction.”

Collin’s’ first recollection of involvement with writing goes way back to second grade, when a short story he wrote was published in the parish bulletin.

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Add Two

In those early years, he always liked writing, but was not one to sit down for leisure and scratch out a few lines. He was not encouraged to write other than for the occasional school assignment. The turning point came at Thomas More College in fall 1995 when he took English 255: Special Topics Creative Writing with Fr. Murray Bodo, a member of the Franciscan Priesthood. Chris states, "I took Father Murray's class and he was the first person that ever said, 'You know you're a pretty good writer, have you thought about writing?'" Chris took three more workshops with Fr. Murray, who encouraged and pushed him, providing the one-on-one mentoring necessary to hone his craft.

The desire to serve his country was always present for the poet. Upon graduation in 1998, he enlisted in the Army Reserves. The first couple years were simple enough but then the tragedy of 9/11 struck, and the role of Army Reservists changed. During the Iraq and Afghanistan War, his commitment to both training and service became more concentrated. Deployments were a regular part of life, and Chris was sent overseas to both Afghanistan and Iraq for up to 12 months or more at a time, seeing some of the harshest realities of what the war meant for both U.S. military personnel and the civilian population in those devastated areas. He continued to write while on mission, "I had a notebook that I would write stuff down in, just observations and notes. Some of my poems and nonfiction come out of what I had jotted down during that time."

"There are many stirring and striking similarities between Percival and Collins," continues Christian Narkiewicz-Laine.

"Both American poets are deeply patriotic; Percival writing about the glory and independence of the new-born nation of The United States and Collins who was ultimately sent to war to defend that same country after 9/11."

"Like Collins, Percival's poem, 'Elegiac' laments the tragedy of war, but pays homage to those who died in battle defending American freedoms. 'Elegiac' was woven into the music for 'The Consecration Dirge' by the American composer Alfred Delaney and sung and performed by a choir on November 19, 1863 before President Abraham Lincoln as Lincoln delivered the Gettysburg Address during the consecration of the Soldier's Cemetery at Gettysburg."

"The complexities of what a person lives, becomes more apparent as time progresses. Everyone has a story to articulate, some take the form of a memoir, some a diary, some even a novel; it can be written as fact or taken as the form of fiction."

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Add Three

“For Christopher Collins, the form is poetry and prose that comes from his heart,” continues Narkiewicz-Laine.

On Friday May 17 at 3:00 PM, The James Gates Percival Prize for Literature will be given to Collins at Grace Episcopal Church at 107 N Prospect St, Galena.

Grace Episcopal Church is one of Galena's leading landmarks, designed by William LeBaron Jenney, architect and the inventor of the first modern skyscraper in Chicago.

Collins will give a reading of his work, which will be followed by readings of poetry by James Gates Percival by the Chicago artist/poet, Mary Petrine Livoni.

The general public is invited to attend. Admission is free.

Copies of Collin's book, *My American Night* (\$19.95), are available at The Chicago Athenaeum's Museum Book Store at 601 South Prospect Street or by order at +815/777-4444.

For more information, contact Jennifer Nyholm, Director of Communications, at +185/777-4444 or by email at [Jennifer@chicagoathenaeum.org](mailto:Jennifer@chicagoathenaeum.org).

**NOTE TO REPORTERS AND EDITORS:** Photographs of Christopher P. Collins are available for download. For more details on the award and The James Gates Percival International Poetry Festival visit the Festival's website at [www.galenapoetryfestival.org](http://www.galenapoetryfestival.org).

**About The Chicago Athenaeum** ([www.chi-athenaeum.org](http://www.chi-athenaeum.org)) is a global nonprofit education and research institute supported by its members. Its mission is to provide public education about the significance of architecture and design and how those disciplines can have a positive effect on the human environment.

**About The European Centre for Architecture Art Design and Urban Studies** ([www.europeanarch.eu](http://www.europeanarch.eu)) is dedicated to public education concerning all aspects of the built environment - from entire cities to individual buildings - including the philosophical issues of arts and culture that ultimately give the final shape to design. A high emphasis exists on contemporary values and aesthetics, conservation and sustainability, and the theoretical exploration and advancement of art and design as the highest expression of culture and urbanism.