

Praise for Books by Phillis Levin

*An Anthology of Rain*

(Barrow Street Press, April 15, 2025)

*From the Publisher*: Phillis Levin’s much-anticipated sixth collection, *An Anthology of Rain*, is a series of poems immersed in time while acknowledging “How it is / Is not how it is / It keeps changing.” Memories become palpable as the present: a duel of roses between friends and across languages is cause for delight, as is the vision of a father returned to life to assuage the poet’s grief. Light and water are twin elements, whether the “Blighted light”of a leaf turning in early fall or a drop of rain inviting us to trace its movement down a window.A spirit of reciprocity between poet and reader animates this collection, creating what the best poems offer—a thrilling sense of immediacy in the face of flux.

“Phillis Levin's poetry has been characterized over the past thirty years by an astonishingly

consistent excellence. She has written, again and again, across a half-dozen books, poems that

are precise, feeling-full and piercing, elegant, informed and aware of the world, and rich in

the kind of profound play that is a hallmark of real art. She's been a central figure, an important

and admired figure, in the poetry community. She has a loyal and wide fan base, and she

possesses every marker that would indicate a writer's capacity to break out into new levels of

cultural presence, and to command broad attention. She is widely known, deeply admired as a

wonderfully authentic writer.”

—Vijay Seshadri

“The poetic line so at ease within its boundaries that motion and stillness compose a single

music. Rhyme (*cumuli, passersby*) and all-but-rhyme (*visitor, meander*) so cordial in their

modulations they might be the products of nature rather than art. As only supreme artistry

can achieve. Phillis Levin has long been one of our purest masters of lyric form, and in this

ravishing new collection she bids us welcome to a realm of solace and enchantment. Sorrow

and loss and foreboding are here as well – how could it be otherwise? – but in the company

of a mind like this, one might almost believe our world could remember the contours of peace.

I will keep them close, these beautiful poems.”

—Linda Gregerson

“In this stunning new collection, *An Anthology of Rain,* the insightful observation of Phillis Levin

is at its full power. Elegantly understated, there’s a lyric intensity here that reminds us of how

closely beauty and heartbreak can co-exist. Whether she trains her eye ‘on a black cloth, a line

of chalk’ from a painting by Moroni in Italy’s Cinquecento period, or, within this century, ‘on

a black wave, gentle, thick as night’ in her father’s hair, we learn how to see the world around

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us with a freshness that feels vital now, when too much can both be overlooked and yet longed

for. Like many of her poems over her impressive career, these poems reveal what we needed to

see—not simply around us but within us—all along, ‘as if breaking a spell.’ Yeah, that’s ‘how

it is.’”

—A. Van Jordan

“That impassioned group of Phillis Levin readers, the ones who rely on her intelligence and

precision, who depend on being swept up into the clouds of thought or funneled into the

contemplation of a single waterdrop, will be joyfully enriched by *An Anthology of Rain*. Who but

Levin would even devise such a title—ethereal, yet material, full of wet weather and dry wit?

Part of her readers’ potential joy is a new dimension to the work they expect from Levin, one

of America’s most classical, elegant, eloquent poets, and that is a fresh, warm ease. Not only

does she bring her readers to the subject, whether that is a 16th century tailor or an ear of corn,

but she presents her sharp perceptions with a wisdom tempered by humor, experience—and

vulnerability, too.

“With her unique combination of sumptuous vocabulary and spare execution, in locales from

Cairo to Cornwall, Connecticut, she delivers the poems that she has shaped—and more

importantly, that have shaped contemporary poetry over nearly four decades. Although she

writes about time and memory, she never wastes her readers’ time. Far from it. A Levin poem

expands time.”

—Molly Peacock

“A bit of background: Phillis and I met when she was a Fulbright Fellow to Ljubljana and I the

same to Prague in 1995. I was thrilled to meet her in person, having loved her poetry—and in

fact I begged (and received) a poem by her for an anthology I edited of sacred poetry from

Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, titled *Burning Bright.* As it happened, the editor for that volume

(at Ballantine) was Andrea Schulz at the beginning of her career in publishing. Sometimes the world is small. Later Phillis and I discovered we shared the great good fortune of having Paul

Slovak as an editor at Viking (I in prose, Phillis in a several volumes of poetry).

“Phillis has been an important, indeed essential poet for me—and for American poetry over her

distinguished and vibrant career. This latest collection is a confirmation of her gifts at the

highest level. She is not only an original but belongs to the enduring classical intelligence that is

the bedrock of lyric poetry. What always surprises: her poems are immediate, but never merely

familiar. The associations are striking, the vision acute. I found myself pausing over lines, seeing

something familiar afresh, anew. In ‘Blueprint,’ for example, a poem is ‘an ample

parallelogram/with a skylight open to a patch of stars.’ Yes! And ‘Orb’ is a breathtaking poem

of memory and love for a father now gone. An elegant elegy.

“That's the thing about Phillis’s work: it is naturally elegant. That is, classical in its commitment

to saying what is seen, not dressing it up with literary flounces, but all the more beautiful for

conveying an individual being in this world of light and dark, faithfully describing, attending.

Once again, I'm dazzled by Phillis’s work. And grateful.”

—Patricia Hampl

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“The reader is made to feel included in these poems, where the wandering poet’s self is found

mirrored in the details of her experience. Whether the poet’s gaze falls on a drop of rain, an ear

of corn, a wooden cooking spoon, a vermilion leaf, or a Vermeer, the resulting poems smartly

braid together object and subject to create vital intertwinements. In all, this book offers all the

known poetry pleasures and adds some Phillis Levin ones just for you.”

—Billy Collins

“In her five previous books of poems and in her new book, *An Anthology of Rain*, Phillis Levin

has established herself as a distinctive poetic voice. She’s a poet of consummate wit and elegance

with a metaphysical cast of mind. Beneath the exquisite surfaces of her poems, threat lurks, and

history breaks into the present. The commonplace is revealed as uncommon, even uncanny; a

blueprint needs to leave space for ‘a roomful of ash’; Moroni’s tailor is seen ‘cutting darkness

/ From darkness.’ These are poems of stringent intelligence with a high, formal polish: internal

rhymes, syllabic patterns, and puns create an art of delicacy and surprise. In ‘An Anthology of

Rain,’ Levin is in top form, proving that subtlety, suggestiveness, and erudition are in

themselves a form of power.”

—Rosanna Warren

*Mr. Memory & Other Poems*

(Penguin Books, 2016)

FINALIST FOR THE LOS ANGELES TIMES BOOK PRIZE

*From the Publisher:* Acclaimed poet Phillis Levin’s fifth collection stays true to a visionary impulse

sparked as much by the smallest detail as the most sublime landscape. From expansive meditation to haiku, in ode and epistle, dream sequence and elegy, Levin’s new poems explore motifs deeply social and historical, intimate and metaphysical. Their various strategies deploy the sonic powers of lyric, the montage techniques of cinema, and the atavistic energies of the oral tradition. An ash on a crackling log, a character from Alfred Hitchcock’s *The 39 Steps,* a burgundy scarf, an X-ray of

Bruegel’s *Massacre of the Innocents,* and a demitasse cup from Dresden are all woven into a collection by turns rhapsodic and ironic, pithy and incantatory.

From *Library Journal* (starred review):

“The longer you look, the more your eye is rewarded. This advice applies equally to art lovers and

readers of Levin’s deeply felt new collection, her fifth. ‘X-Radiograph’ is a moving meditation on

*The Slaughter of the Innocents*, a painting by Pieter Bruegel the Elder, dating to about 1565. Parts of this canvas have been painted over, most likely by others, at a Habsburg king’s direction. However, it is the underlying traces of Bruegel’s brushwork (the pentimenti) that catch Levin’s eye: ‘. . .there is no ham, no cheese, though that/ Is what the naked eye sees./ It isn’t hunger, it’s not a day of plunder,/Something else is bringing her to her knees./ If you look a little closer, the shadow/ of an infant shows through: you can find/ many such shadows in the scene.’ Verdict: Levin similarly turns a fine eye and taut, probing line to Anne Frank’s high heels, an Alfred Hitchcock film (the book’s title poem), a burgundy scarf, a light blinking on the horizon—drawing readers beyond the page and deep into an underlying world of feeling and sensation.”

—Iris S. Rosenberg, New York

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“Levin enacts intense longing in these expansive meditative poems and moves from the social to the metaphysical with enviable ease, in touch with the wonder of ‘being everywhere at once’.”

— Carol Muske-Dukes, *The Huffington Post*

“What I’m admiring is the stately performance of these poems, the way Levin frames and channels

her experiences, the way she sees and describes events from a stance of pure brain fashioned into

refined artistry…. The considered, assured intensities of writing like this give *Mr. Memory* a

distinctive intelligence, and Phillis Levin is probably one of the most brilliant poets writing today.”

—David Biespiel, *American Poetry Review*

“Phillis Levin’s own signature is in some lines in a poem about a lost soul in the first grade, named

Victor, where she says ‘I / Could be everywhere at once, inhabit / Any mind, occupy any pair of

shoes.’ And she does just that in *Mr. Memory*, whether it is a lost scarf she is inhabiting, or ash in a fire, or the Odessa steps, or a grave in Lithuania, or a dot on the horizon, or a dead poet. The Other is not just close to her heart, it *is* her heart.”

— Gerald Stern

“The poems in *Mr. Memory* are a fusion of keen intellect, passion, and wit. Phillis Levin has a sure

grasp of the astonishing powers of the poetic line and the energy contained therein. Full of wonder

and mystery, the poems in *Mr. Memory* transform the experience of ordinary life into something

dream-like and visionary. Levin is a poet who knows ‘...we stand undone by all / We recognize...,’

yet has the courage to embrace the shattering transformations that result.”

— Elizabeth Spires

“I've always deeply admired the way Phillis Levin combines suggestiveness of statement with

subtlety of feeling. Her sequence of poems in the consciousness of Zeno, the Greek philosopher,

are as mordant and full of longing as Zbigniew Herbert’s Mr. Cogito. She never fans the air with

some single faculty, but in every encounter in every poem the full force of all her faculties achieves a sacramental completeness of understanding.”

— Tom Sleigh

*May Day*

(Penguin Books, 2008)

*From the Publisher*: *May Day* is a work of a visionary imagination. In tones playful and celebratory, in gestures both intimate and international, Levin’s poems explore how tenderness and violence change our lives. From a flood overtaking the Prague Zoo to the joy of a maypole dance, from a mural of the Trojan War in a Greek diner in New York to the “noiseless explosions” of time in the opening of a flower, these poems are rhapsodies of the senses and the intellect, disclosing new thresholds of meaning.

“Instead, she values writing for longevity. What I mean is, to place one’s poems into a public space is to agree to be canny. It is to immerse one’s self in the lyric values of the past to communicate with the future. As Philip Larkin once said, poetry is a ‘richness’ and a ‘release of delight’ that’s meant to last beyond the next news cycle and the last reader. Phillis Levin is just this sort of poet. Since 1988, with the publication of her first book, *Temples and Fields*, she has composed poems that invoke a dazzling fusion between the ancient and the contemporary. Her sort of poetry is metaphysical—a mixture of colloquial touch, ingenious metaphors and a mind flexible enough to fix moments onto a continuum of the sublime. In a word, poised.”

—David Biespiel, *The Oregonian*

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“One of Levin’s great gifts is her ability to fuse the tiny and the vast in order to evoke the sweep of

bygone eras and the realities of our own. Even if ‘the book of the world [is] so swollen it cannot

close’ (‘Album’), her own poems, rich in spare, evocative language and subtle metaphors, offer a

vision sharply etched and all her own.”

—Ned Balbo, *Antioch Review*

“Phillis Levin’s poems shimmer with gracefulness. By this I mean they sing, with eloquent restraint, as though ‘there is no other way to say this.’ But I also mean to identify that primal relationship between grace and the mysteries—for the perfectly voiced poems of *May Day* situate us, time and again, on the line between articulation and erasure, security and peril, real clarity and the ancient sublime. I know of no other contemporary American poet whose style of secular poetry verges so convincingly on the holy. Levin’s abiding restraint reminds us again: A whisper allows us to hear the most sound.”

—David Baker

“Phillis Levin’s poems are both hot and cool—at once molten glass and shaped crystalline structure. With her abstracting and philosophical intelligence, she muses on patterns of passion and loss; with her heart, she makes us feel them. *May Day* is a book of severe clarity and authority.”

—Rosanna Warren

“Lyrical, metaphysical, tender, and fierce, Phillis Levin's *May Day* delights and astonishes. Her use of Greek myth to illuminate contemporary violence and disgust summons up both tears and deep

thought about our present and future.”

—Martha Nussbaum

*Mercury*

(Penguin Books, 2001)

*From the publisher*: In this collection, Phillis Levin offers thirty-three luminous poems that extend her reputation as a master of form and an alchemist of the vernacular. In her work, she pushes the

boundaries of sound, syntax, and sense—and ultimately makes structures incarnating the complexity of consciousness and the transfiguring power of memory.

“Shaped by a metaphysical sensibility that is at once fiercely cerebral and deeply passionate, and that responds to both rigorous logic and spiritual mystery, the poems in *Mercury* mediate repeatedly between heart and mind, faith and science, the domain of ideas (and words) and the physical world, setting us down inside a restless, relentless mind that, torn between these poles, strives continually against imbalance and fragmentation and for equipoise, harmony, wholeness.”

—Bruce Bawer, *The Hudson Review*

“Phillis Levin’s work is tragic, audaciously playful, and redeeming. She is a marvelous architect and an amazingly moving poet.”

—Tomaž Šalamun

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“Like the element of its title, Phillis Levin’s poetry is at once weighty, elusive, versatile, and unique.

Levin commands many modes but a single and beautifully authoritative and intelligent voice. She is one of the best poets writing in this country.”

—Rachel Hadas

*The Afterimage*

(Copper Beech Press, 1995)

“The temperament of Levin’s poetry is both spiritual and philosophical. If the world flashes with

epiphany, we must also interrogate it with reason…. At her best, Levin’s passionate engagement

redeems the world’s apparent randomness into meaning.”

—Robert Schultz, *The Hudson Review*

From *Publishers Weekly*:

The poems of Levin’s second collection embrace loss and rapture. Meticulously observant, she

captures the paradox of our connection with and distance from others. After sitting comfortably on

a subway ride between two women, one reading a bible and one spinning a small globe, she

encounters a man—"ill-kempt, jagged, harsh, / And capable of violence...”—whose isolation

suggests “never been touched / By the world or its words.” She readily sees the significant in such

dailiness as making beet soup. Plumbing the classics, religious themes and personal memories, she searches almost religiously, although she rejects “the easy/ Mysticism of my classmates” and

formulas for easy solace. Levin speaks powerfully from a place “Between detachment and wonder.”

“In the elegant formulations of her second collection, *The Afterimage*, Phillis Levin explores the gaps and forges the links between language, thought, and matter. She is an ‘alchemist of the vernacular’ whose clarities are hard-won and whose mindfulness is lit by a passionate flame.”

—Edward Hirsch

“Phillis Levin reaches beyond form and beyond occasion to draw in a deep, light mystery: the world

we know and yet do not know, until we meet it here in her mercurial poems.”

—Jean Valentine

“Her strong statements, too severe to be lyric merely, are mostly recuperations of the sacramental

from our metropolitan or provincial lives. As in the masterful ‘Prologue/Epilogue,’ the poet is

concerned with the degree to which we approximate, coincide with, or miss utterly the mythical

instances so surprisingly vouchsafed by our existence. She envisions, rather like Christina Rossetti in this, the cost of such missing, and the ecstasy of such coincidence—of equal necessity to her poetics, which is cautery.”

—Richard Howard

*Temples and Fields*

(University of Georgia Press, 1988)

WINNER OF THE NORMA FARBER FIRST BOOK AWARD

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“There is strength and authority in this book, so much sheer intelligence and craft it is a virtual

certainty that these centered poems will anchor hard, determined, and important ones to come.”

—Dick Allen, *The Hudson Review*

“Informed by an extraordinary combination of knowledge, imaginative power and mastery both of

diction and rhythm . . . This book provided deep and enlightening pleasure.”

—John Hollander (Judge, Norma Farber First Book Award, Poetry Society of America)

“A lost age of gold haunts these deft and intense poems. At their best they show us how to claim it

for our own.”

—James Merrill

“*Temples and Fields* has any number of finely constructed ideas, sanctuaries for this poet’s devoted

intelligence—and all around them stretches an inviting expanse of natural detail. As we move among Phillis Levin’s cool, stately, fluted lines, their marble miraculously ‘embeds . . . its igneous past, / Being made of what it was not.’ We emerge refreshed, believing, grateful.”

—J. D. McClatchy

“Over the surface of these poems the play of light and shadow is traced with steely delicacy, and yet they’re big-hearted and tough-minded poems. Their maker is already an accomplished stylist, and too mature to show off her formidable skills; instead, she uses them. . . . Phillis Levin’s debut should be met with gratitude.”

—William Matthews

“Her fierce intellect sanctifies the brilliant architecture of these poems with a promise of love.”

—Molly Peacock

*The Penguin Book of the Sonnet*

(Penguin Books, 2001; UK Edition: Allen

Lane / The Penguin Press, 2001)

*From the Publisher:* A unique anthology celebrating that most vigorous of literary forms—the sonnet. The sonnet is one of the oldest and most enduring literary forms of the post-classical world, a meeting place of image and voice, passion and reason, elegy and ode. It is a form that both challenges and liberates the poet. For this anthology, poet and scholar Phillis Levin has gathered more than 600 sonnets to tell the full story of the sonnet tradition in the English language. She begins with its Italian origins; takes the reader through its multifaceted development from the Elizabethan era to the Romantic and Victorian; demonstrates its popularity as a vehicle of protest among writers of the Harlem Renaissance and poets who served in the First World War; and explores its revival among modern and contemporary poets. In her vibrant introduction, Levin traces this history, discussing characteristic structures and shifting themes and providing illuminating readings of individual sonnets. She includes an appendix on structure, biographical notes, and valuable explanatory notes and indexes. And, through her narrative and wide-ranging selection of sonnets and sonnet sequences, she portrays not only the evolution of the form over half a millennium but also its dynamic possibilities.

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From *Library Journal*:

This compact text is a biography of the sonnet as composed in English. In an introductory essay,

Levin discusses the sonnet’s origins, history, traditions, and possibilities, including its use by poets of the Harlem Renaissance and veterans of World War I as a form of protest. Interwoven with the history are approaches to interpreting and criticizing this poetic form. The bulk of the text is an

anthology of over 600 sonnets composed by more than 230 poets. Over 150 of the poets represented wrote during the 20th century. The text is enriched with an appendix covering sonnet

patterns and variations, brief biographies of the poets, a list of additional readings, and indexes of

authors, titles, and first lines. No recent publication on sonnets has included such a broad spectrum of sonnet writers or attempted to present so complete a history of the sonnet. Recommended for all public and academic libraries.

—Shana C. Fair, Ohio University, Zanesville

“Phillis Levin collects classic and subversive versions of this most traditional form. [Levin’s]

introduction alone is really an intellectual history of the West by way of the sonnet. This is one of

my desert-island books!”

—Kimiko Hahn

“Thanks to Penguin Books for offering their readers half a millennium of the sonnet in English—

edited and introduced with wisdom and generosity—a treasure-trove of the first order.”

—Robert Fagles, Arthur W. Marks ’19 Professor of Comparative Literature, Princeton

University, and award-winning translator of Homer

“As Phillis Levin so rightly puts it, the sonnet is about process, being a movement that leads from

image to insight, from inquiry to understanding. She has undertaken this autobiography of a literary form with sustained knowledge from early to now, intimate comprehension, remarkable clarity and elegance of style, leading all of us enthusiasts of poetry to a new understanding. It is a kind of twenty-first-century miracle, and we are all more than grateful.”

—Mary Ann Caws, Distinguished Professor of English, French, and Comparative Literature,

The Graduate Center, City University of New York

“Edited by the superb poet Phillis Levin, this collection and its exemplary introduction bring the

sonnet vibrantly into the twenty-first century. Levin’s prose and her taste seem themselves nourished by the elegant excessiveness the sonnet transforms into strange and moving precision.”

—Charles Altieri, Professor of English and Director, Consortium for the Arts, University of

California, Berkeley

**About Phillis Levin**

Born and raised in Paterson, New Jersey, Phillis Levin earned degrees from Sarah Lawrence College and The Writing Seminars at Johns Hopkins University. She was a full-time member of the creative writing faculty at The University of Maryland from 1989 to 2001; taught poetry workshops and craft seminars at The Unterberg Poetry Center from 1993 to 2006; and from 2001 to 2007 she was a visiting professor in the graduate writing program at New York University. Poet-in-Residence and Professor of English emerita at Hofstra University, Levin lives with her husband in New York City and West Cornwall, Connecticut.

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