



Telephone Ringing in the Labyrinth

Adrienne Rich

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Telephone Ringing in the Labyrinth is one of Adrienne Rich's most unpredictable and evocative collections. In the folk/blues tradition behind "Rhyme," in the incantatory pattern of "Behind the Motel," in the voices from past and present in "Letters Censored, Shredded, Returned to Sender or Judged Unfit to Send," in the dystopic scenes and intimate encounters of "Draft # 2006," in the mysterious negotiations of the title poem, the tempos and moods of this book constantly vary. Here, Rich draws on the artistic means of a lifetime.

Telephone Ringing in the Labyrinth Details

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Craig Werner says

As Rich entered her 70s, she began looking back in a different way than she'd previously done. You could look at the book as a long conversation with/meditation on the ghosts/legacy of the Sixties and Seventies. In "Skeleton Key," she ends a section that begins "Cut me a skeleton key/ to that other time, that city/ talk starting up, deals and poetry," with an acknowledgement that she is "Exhuming the dead / Their questions." She circles back repeatedly to the sense that that era was, in fundamental ways, different than what was to follow: "But as for living at that time/ we were all living together with many others/ for whom living was precisely the question" ("Even Then Maybe"). Among those others, the Leroi Jones of *The Dead Lecturer* (not to be confused with the Amiri Baraka of *Black Art*), who she addressees directly in "Rereading The Dead Lecturer," which balances on the knife edge between regret and affirmation of "An idea. And we felt it./ A meaning. And we caught it/ as the dimensions spread," conversations "scrawled with smoke and music." Whatever his contradictions and limits, Jones wrote, as Rich concludes the poem a "(book of a soul contending."

All of that against the backdrop of the Bush era with it's "Excruciating contempt for love/ For the strained fibre of common affection, mutual assistance" ("Draft #2006"). Like the smoke and music--I can't help thinking of Paul Simon's "the words of the prophets are written on the subway walls and tenement halls"--Rich listens for "Contraband packets, hummed messages. Dreams of the/ descendants, surfacing." At several key points, wearily but with a sense of surprised wonder, she turns her eyes to the cosmos. In "Hubble Photographs: After Sappho," she turns to "the ex-stasis of galaxies/ so out from us there's no vocabulary/ but mathematics and optics/ equestions letting sight pierce through time/... "beyond good and evil as ever stained into dream/ beyond remorse, disillusion/ fear of death."

It's not somewhere she can or would rest or remain. Rather, as she has done again and again for more than four decades, she recommits herself to the poet's work, seeking to forge an "instrument searching, probing/ toward a foreign tongue" ("Long After Stevens"). It matters because without clear honest articulation, the descendants will find themselves lost: "You think you are helpless because you are empty-handed/ of concepts that could become your strength" ("Letters Censored Shredded Returned to Sender or Judged Unfit to Send"). Feeling age, knowing death isn't abstract, she turns to the task "Not for me/ but for furtherance," for the descendant, "You, the person, you/ the particle fierce and furthering."

Among the highlights: "Skeleton Key," "Archaic," "Long After Stevens," Hubble Photographs: After Sappho," "Midnight, the Same Day," "Rereading The Dead Lecturer," "Letters Censored," "Draft #2006" and the unforgettable "The Burning Kangaroo," which I'm sure will be showing up in my dreams.

Jennifer Collins says

Adrienne Rich's poems are always gorgeous, provocative, and striking. In this collection in particular, though, there's a sort of haunting quality to many of the works. The political element that comes into her poetry so often, and which makes for some of my favorite poems, is turned more toward personal revelation and struggle here, focused more on characters and situations which readers will find strangely available and familiar, less documentary in a larger sense as opposed to a relatable, if sometimes terrifying, personal sense.

This collection surprised me--it wasn't what I expected, based on other collections of Rich's I've read, and yet it was every inch her lyrical voice and elegantly dangerous, striking work.

For readers of poetry, or Rich, I absolutely recommend it.

Lauren says

If this wasn't Adrienne Rich, I would probably be singing this collection's praises. But the problem with having an amazing and lengthy career is that you have quite a body of work to compete with and frankly, I don't know that I'm the greatest fan of Ms. Rich's current work. However, there are some standout pieces and I love anyone who combines politics and poetry. There were a couple pieces that seemed to be inspired by the aftermath of Katrina. Moving, but not crucial like the rest of her work.

Caitlin Conlon says

3.5 stars. honestly, not my type of poetry, so I don't feel completely comfortable rating this. I could really appreciate these poems, even if they weren't personally my favorite. Rich is clearly immensely talented.

Lisa M. says

I was sick while reading this book, and it really influenced my reading. I would pick up the book and put it down because my head hurt too much to concentrate. So, this will be a light review. This book had a few different themes. I really enjoyed the quotes Rich opens the collection with. She claims that the "I" and "you" in poetry are not necessarily real. The idea of misunderstood identity is carried out in the first half of the book, where appearances are not always what they seem. The last half of the book read as more socio-political to me, with Rich telling her readers that love is the answer. Tone ranged from entertaining (Rhyme, Hotel) to more serious poems. As always, Rich does interesting things with line breaks. Her rhyme is amazing. When I read Rich, I wish she handled punctuation differently. I enjoy what Rich says about life, and how she writes it.

C says

I felt like I just couldn't "get into" this collection at first. --In other words, I felt too stupid to really understand it.

The last couple of sections really drew me in, though, and wouldn't let me stop reading until far too late in the evening.

My favorite lines from the end of the first section of Three Elegies:

And beneath the skin of boredom
indecipherable fear

Grady McCallie says

Poetry is always hit or miss for me. I imagine these are very good poems - they are certainly dense. Not quite stream of consciousness, though sometimes the juxtaposition of words, and the line breaks, seem impressionistic. There's a vagueness in the settings for these poems, as though the material, concrete world just isn't that important a part of what Rich is trying to convey. Unfortunately, most of these poems were lost on me - I didn't understand them analytically, and they didn't light me up emotionally.

Emma says

The GOAT

Forever resonating.

Leslie says

Really only 2½ stars. While I did like a few of the poems ("Rhyme", "Hubble Photographs: After Sappho", parts of "Draft #2006"), most left me either unmoved or confused. Perhaps I should have gotten an earlier collection, more similar to "Planetarium".

Julie Ehlers says

So good. It's the second-to-last collection she ever published, and it's up there with her best.

Abby Franks says

Punctuation is needed and important! So difficult to read. A couple of gems, but frustrating overall.

Story of Choice says

Telephone Ringing in the Labyrinth is not a linear narrative easily read in a few sittings, and unlike many novels and guidebooks, Rich's work cannot be quickly digested and encapsulated for another party. However, she wields language as a master craftswoman, uniquely reflects and validates my own experience, and invites me to expand myself with her observations of places unfamiliar to me, or, just as gratifying, with new observations of more familiar places. Rich is a keen and sympathetic observer of the world around and within her and I discover fresh or edifying insight each time I sift her poetry. A welcome addition to my library.

Louvaine says

Not to my taste, though initially I thought I might like these poems. Except for "Rhythm" and one or two others, this collection seems rambling and very disjointed. I had trouble following the flow of the poems, they didn't make sense to me, nor were they pleasing for the words or rhythm. It almost seemed like the author put too much effort into being "artsy" and clever, rather than letting the words speak for themselves. I just didn't get it or enjoy it. Oh well.

Jessica says

Adrienne Rich is a magician when it comes to putting one-syllable words in a long row, each one heavy and full as a silver coin. All lined up, they are like a necklace without the string.

While for sound she is a genius, for meaning she veers towards the private. I am left out too much of the time for my taste.

Mike Jensen says

There are certainly some fine poems in this book, but either Rich's concerns are not my concerns or her way of expressing her concerns are sufficiently strange to me that I never felt she was speaking to me.
