



The Shadow of Sirius

W.S. Merwin

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Winner of the 2009 Pulitzer Prize for Poetry

Featured on NPR's "Fresh Air" and "The NewsHour with Jim Lehrer" on PBS.

Honored as one of the "Best Books of the Year" from *Publishers Weekly*.

"In his personal anonymity, his strict individuated manner, his defense of the earth, and his heartache at time's passing, Merwin has become instantly recognizable on the page; he has made for himself that most difficult of creations, an accomplished style." —Helen Vendler, *The New York Review of Books*

"Merwin is one of the great poets of our age." —*Los Angeles Times Book Review*

"[The Shadow of Sirius is] the very best of all Merwin: I have been reading William since 1952, and always with joy." —Harold Bloom

"[Merwin's] best book in a decade—and one of the best outright... The poems... feel fresh and awake with a simplicity that can only be called wisdom." —*Publishers Weekly*

"Merwin's gentle wisdom and attentiveness to the world are alive as ever. These deeply reflective meditations move through light and darkness, old love and turning seasons to probe the core of human existence." —*Orion*

"[The Shadow of Sirius] shows the earthly possibilities of simple completeness in a writer's mature work. More than an achievement in poetry, this is an achievement in writing." —*Harvard Review*

The nuanced mysteries of light, darkness, presence, and memory are central themes in W.S. Merwin's new book of poems. "I have only what I remember," Merwin admits, and his memories are focused and profound—the distinct qualities of autumn light, a conversation with a boyhood teacher, well-cultivated loves, and "our long evenings and astonishment." In "Photographer," Merwin presents the scene where armloads of antique glass negatives are saved from a dumpcart by "someone who understood." In "Empty Lot," Merwin evokes a child lying in bed at night, listening to the muffled dynamite blasts of coal mining near his home, and we can't help but ask: How shall we mine our lives?

*somewhere the Perseids are falling
toward us already at a speed that would
burn us alive if we could believe it
but in the stillness after the rain ends
nothing is to be heard but the drops falling*

W.S. Merwin, author of over fifty books, is America's foremost poet. His last two books were honored with major literary awards: *Migration* won the National Book Award, and *Present Company* received the Bobbitt Prize from the Library of Congress.

The Shadow of Sirius Details

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From Reader Review The Shadow of Sirius for online ebook

William2 says

There's a wonderful lack of obscurity here combined with an emotional directness that is rare in poetry, rare even in Merwin's poetry. I found the book powerful and recommend it highly.

Maria says

I have read other books by W.S. Merwin -- his poetry and also his translations -- but was unfamiliar with this latest collection of poems entitled "The Shadow of Sirius" until I was given it as a birthday present. Like a lot of Merwin's later poetry, this collection of poems is about age and mortality. As this collection suggests, however, the shadow of Sirius is the holding metaphor for the poems. Sirius is the brightest star in the night sky and its name from the Greek refers to the scorching or searing quality of this star's light. Sirius is also the place to which, according to the Egyptian Book of the Dead, souls go after they leave the body. Sirius also represents renewal in the way the yearly flooding of the Nile brought new life to the the Egyptians by creating fertile soil for new plantings. These poems exist in the shadow of this bright star's scorching light. The shadow is memory itself -- it is the play of light, darkness, temporality, and eternity interweaving with Merwin's memories that give us an insight to existence (ours, his?) in these poems.

Writing a review about a collection of poems is difficult precisely because poetry is not narrative and cannot be captured so easily in language. The best way to give a taste of what it is like to journey through these poems is to quote directly from the poet, himself, as he calls forth from the universe's chiaroscuro shadows a language that tells us of his memories. In an entitled Blueberries After Dark, he recalls his mother's death and also all the deaths and losses in her life ...

"my mother told me
that I was not afraid of the dark
and when I looked it was true

how did she know
so long ago

with her father dead almost before she could remember
and her mother following him
not long after
and then her grandmother
who had brought her up
and a little later
her only brother
and then her firstborn
gone as soon
as soon as he was born
she knew

In this poem, we are in the place where souls go. The "night" or death is described as something that tastes

like blueberries eaten "one at a time, not early or late."

In another poem, where he is once again remembering his mother, it is the piano that evokes a memory of her:

...through the notes my mother's hand appears
above my own and hovers over the keys
waiting to turn the pages of Czerny
whose composition has completely dissolved

from her had a scent of almonds rises
which she had put on after whatever she had been doing
it survives with the sound into another life...

Of a lost love, he writes

Through all of youth I was looking for you
without knowing what I was looking for

or what to call you I think I did not
even know I was looking how would I

have known you when I saw you as I did
time after time when you appeared to me

as you did naked offering yourself
entirely at that moment and you let

me breathe you touch you taste you knowing
no more than I did and only when I

began to think of losing you did I
recognize you when you were already

part memory part distance remaining
mine in the ways that I learn to miss you

from what we cannot hold the stars are made

Sirius is also referred to as the Dog Star. In a poem where he takes us back into the shadows of Sirius, we are following a black dog, making an oblique reference here to this other name for Sirius.

I can see nothing there but the black dog
the dog I know going ahead of me

not looking back oh it is the black dog
I trust now in my turn after the years

when I had all the trust of the black dog

through an age of brightness and through shadow

on into the blindness of the black dog
where the rooms of the dark were already known

We are, as Merwin tells us at the beginning of this poem, in the land of the shades or the shadows: "When it is time I follow the black dog into the darkness that is the mind of day..."

I find his reference to night as "the mind of day" just a wonderful metaphor.

In another poem, he captures how the past illuminates the present -- the past is always part of the present.

See how the past is not finished
here in the present
it is awake the whole time
never waiting

And how poignant his poem that captures the elusiveness of the moment and the difficulty of remembering. He hints that not being able to re-capture the moment in memory is perhaps our way of protecting ourselves from experiencing the pain of loss again. He calls this poem "One of the Butterflies."

The trouble with pleasure is the timing
it can overtake me without warning
and be gone before I know it is here
it can stand facing me unrecognized
while I am remembering somewhere else
in another age or someone not seen
for years and never to be seen again
in this world and it seems that I cherish
only now a joy I was not aware of
when it was here although it remains
out of reach and will not be caught or named
or called back and if I could make it stay
as I want to it would turn into pain

In other poems he describes the distinct qualities of autumnal light. In *The Making of Amber*, he writes

The September flocks form crying
gathering southward
even small birds knowing
for the first time
how to fly all the way as one

at daybreak the split fig
is filled with dew
the finch find it
like something it remembers

then across the afternoon
the grape vine hangs low in the doorway
and grapes one by one
taste warm on the tongue
transparent and soundless
rich with late daylight

In September's Child, the beekeeper in me resonates to the image of "old hands holding honey jars sunlight on weathered faces knowing summer and winter well but bound to neither of them.."

And he ends this compendium with a poem entitled "The Laughing Thrush" where we find ourselves in that place between waking and sleeping, where the self floats between heaven, earth and the underground and where we are reminded about nature's powers of renewal, if we but can hear and see...

O nameless joy of the morning

tumbling upward note by note out of the night
and the hush of the dark valley
and out of whatever has not been there

son unquestioning and unbounded
yes this is the place and the one time
in the whole of before and after
with all of memory waking into it

and the lost visages that hover
around the edge of sleep
constant and clear
and the words that lately have fallen silent
to surface among the phrases of some future
if there is a future

here is where they all sing the first daylight
whether or not there is anyone listening.

As with all poetry, this is not the end of my reading of this collection of poems. It is opening the door to returning to plumb the depths of these poems again and again, finding something new to experience each time.

S. says

The Shadow of Sirius

I really love W.S. Merwin. He takes the most basic materials and finds their power, hammering them until they're . . . until they're *what* . . . something eternal. There's nothing fancy about his word choices, no overly weird layouts on the page. He does forgo punctuation, but it somehow adds to his simplicity, as if he doesn't

want to disturb the train of thought, and that draws you into thinking along with him.

There's no unnatural posing going on. Merwin relies entirely on the resonant power of language. He writes often of nature but it's almost degrading to call him a "nature poet." Has anyone done this? Desist. It also seems completely unnecessary to give him a Pulitzer Prize, like throwing a twig on the bonfire.

Whenever I think about the Nobel Prize committee complaining about how caught up American writers are with themselves and their culture - and I often agree with them - I want to shout "NOT W.S. MERWIN! Give HIM the Nobel Prize!" Really, he deserves it. I hope he lives long enough for them to realize it.

I opened the book pretty much daring Merwin to do it again. Surely there couldn't be more he could say after "The Lice," "The Rain in the Trees," "The Carrier of Ladders," the translations, etc. He can't make the tired spring or stone or river into something so deep again, can he? Yes, he can. But Sirius is the brightest, most searing, most serious star. It's the one you can sometimes see in the daylight.

"The Shadow of Sirius" is largely concerned with memory, with time and the reflection afforded only by getting older (and nature, too).

As a footnote, I will say "The Shadow of Sirius" isn't my favorite of Merwin's collections. Of the later poems, I prefer the beautiful "The Rain in the Trees." I went back and forth on four and five stars. I gave this four because it isn't my favorite Merwin, but then I thought about some poetry books that I've given five stars to that could never approach his greatness. In the end, I have to judge him in his own separate category, so that although this seriously kicks the ass of some of the other books I've rated the same or even better, it doesn't actually kick Merwin's own ass.

Robert Beveridge says

W. S. Merwin, **The Shadow of Sirius** (Copper Canyon Press, 2008)

There are some poets who come relatively close to the household-name threshold, even in an America where poetry is about as dead as the influence of the Kennedy clan. W. S. Merwin is one of them. He's won the Pulitzer Prize twice (1971 and 2009, the latter for this book), the Academy of American Poets' Tanning Prize (1994), the National Book Award (2005), and the Bobbitt Poetry Prize from the Library of Congress (2005, for a different book). And, most recently, he was named Poet Laureate of the United States. And this is not an exhaustive list by any means. I figured it was probably time to get around to reading him. Why not start with a Pulitzer winner? As well, I've been on a run of really, really good poetry recently (I've given two five-star and one four-and-a-half-star reviews to poetry books in the last two months, and that has never happened before), so I went into this confident that I'd love it. And then I started reading.

Now, I grant you, Merwin does come up with a line every now and again that makes a reader stop in his tracks and think about what an awesome line it is. ("the bird lies still while the light goes on flying", from "Unknown Age", is my favorite line in the book.) And sometimes he manages to combine a number of good-to-great lines to form an entire good poem ("Nocturne II" is a good example). But for the most part, this is a collection that seems phoned in to me, what a magazine editor whose name I have now long forgotten called "easy, false surrealism". Merwin adopts Apollinaire's tactic of leaving out all punctuation, but his language doesn't have the ebb and flow one expects from poets who do this; his rhythms jar far more than roll. The

images are stock, and while there are real emotions behind them once in a while, it's not enough to transcend the quotidian nature of the work itself.

There's some good stuff here, but not nearly enough to occasion doing more than taking it out of the library.

**

Bruce says

Merwin's verse is almost entirely unpunctuated. This has the effect, inter alia, of making ambiguous whether a word of phrase applies to what precedes or to what follows it, creating delicious ambiguity and multiple meanings. Here is an example: "...the tall gray horses all slender mares/ moving lightly as clouds before me/ close to me curious none of them/ can remember me I tell myself/ all of them must have been born since I/ was here last..." Does the "curious" mean that the mares are curious, or is it curious that none can remember me?

Here is an example of the tone of some of Merwin's writing:

From "The Nomad Flute":

"...the star is fading
I can think farther than that but I forget

...I have with me
all that I do not know
I have lost none of it"

He plays with and reflects upon the very nature of language itself:

"Note

Remember how the naked soul
comes to language and at once knows
loss and distance and believing

then for a time it will not run
with its old freedom
like a light innocent of measure
but will hearken to how
one story becomes another
and will try to tell where
they have emerged from
and where they are heading
as though they were its own legend
running before the words and beyond them
naked and never looking back

through the noise of questions”

Many of his poems are reflections on the nature of time and memory, understandable topics for those of us who are aging - and who is not? Eras elide, superimpose. Memories collide with present reality - but which is in fact more real? There is a fluid nature of Merwin’s work, and images and metaphors shift, refusing to stay in place.

“Traces

Papers already darkened
deckled because of the many years
bear signs of a sole moment
of someone’s passage
that surely was mine
not a sound of it now
coming from its land
that was all there was
in its time
with all its leaves
and the barking not noticed
in the distance
and the silence in the books then

now the machine that does that
is taking the world away
just across the streambed
at the foot of the garden
what can abide as we
follow among those
who have forgotten
and what do we remember
eyes but not the seeing
often we did not know
that we were happy
even when we were not
how could we have known that
at no distance”

Part II of this volume consists of eleven poems to the memory of his dogs. Here is an example:

“Night with No Moon

Now you are darker than I can believe
it is not wisdom that I have come to

with its denials and pure promises
but this absence that I cannot set down

still hearing when there is nothing to hear
reaching into the blindness that was there

thinking to walk in the dark together”

And here are a descriptions of birdsong from two different poems:

“...their voices glittering in their exalted tongue”

“...the birds carried water in their voices”

It is hard for me to convey the richness, the tone and the multiple layers of sense and meaning in Merwin’s poetry, and I fear that I have failed with these examples. The poems are truly enchanting, drawing the reader into a consciousness that is aware of underlying currents of intuitive knowing, into an awareness of reality beyond or underneath the metaphors that attempt to express experience. They invite and even compel one to read and reread, each reexamination revealing fresh nuances and understandings.

martha says

I've been on a huge Merwin kick lately, and wondering why I overlooked him for so long. This was a great choice for which book of his to read, since it just won the Pulitzer in poetry. (I'm blaming that for the fact that there's an actual waiting list at the library for it; and the general nerdiness of Boston.) I really enjoyed paying attention to how it was organized, the different sections, and then how in the last one all the poems that mentioned months or seasons were in chronological order. Plus it has the same thoughtful older-poet tone as Jack Gilbert or Franz Wright or Czeslaw Milosz.

Though it's not in this book, here's my favorite Merwin poem ever: <http://april-is.tumblr.com/post/87920...>

Wealththeow says

I love Merwin's poetry, which has a little sarcastic edge to it sometimes but always a sense of wonder and hope tinged with loss. Not much regret, though, and I like that. He writes with a sense of acceptance that I wish I had myself. I like his deceptively clear and simple style, as well. He says a lot in a very little while.

My favorite in this book was "Youth,"

Through all of youth I was looking for you
without knowing what I was looking for

or what to call you I think I did not
even know I was looking how would I

have known you when I saw you as I did
time after time when you appeared to me

as you did naked offering yourself
entirely at that moment and you let

me breathe you touch you taste you knowing
no more than I did and only when I

began to think of losing you did I
recognize you when you were already

part memory part distance remaining
mine in the ways that I learn to miss you

from what we cannot hold the stars are made

Kristen says

My first experience reading Merwin was a pleasure. Section three had a lovely seasonal cadence to it. I might try some of his translations next.

Jim Elkins says

A Cold Late Style

I have been reading Merwin since "The Lice," "The Carrier of Ladders," and "The First Four Books of Poems" -- since about 1974. No review can do justice to half a lifetime of reading, despite what reviewers continuously imply.

But there is increasingly a chill in Merwin, a kind of persistent, deep in the bones kind of cold. "The Lice" had sharp edges, scraps and shards of images, and the poems were as if read by an uneven voice. They fluctuated from astonishingly lucent to weirdly opaque, from ferocious to hypnotized.

His newer work is like a diffuse deep luminous fog. It is lovely, but textureless. Its surface is crossed by small brittle waves, worrying themselves over damp sand (that's partly from one of his images): he is usually both slightly troubled and inconsolably deeply wounded, and at the same time he is also, sadly for his readers, at peace. After a while, reading the new Merwin, I feel chill, as if I have been walking too long on a foggy seashore. So I might, finally, after over thirty years, stop buying his books.

s.penkevich says

‘Stories come to us like new senses’

W.S. Merwin's 2009 Pulitzer Prize winning collection of poetry, The Shadow of Sirius, is an enrapturing look at the memories which have shaped our lives and send us forward into eternity. Poet Laureate of the United States from 2010-2011, and recipient of numerous awards, including two Pulitzer's, one for this collection and a previous award for *The Carrier of Ladders* in 1971, Poet Laureate of the United States from 2010, W.S. Merwin has proven himself time and time again to be a champion of the pen and prose, and this slim collection may be one of his very best.

'From what we cannot hold the stars are made'

The Shadow of Sirius spends much of its time winding through Merwin's memories, which are viewed as a shadow on the mind, a contrast of light and dark that corresponds to present and past. These memories form the building blocks of our character, and are always hand in hand with the present forming the bigger picture of everything we do. Merwin reflects often upon his mother, now gone into the shadow, and the lessons and values she instilled in him.

From *Rain Light*:

*All day the stars watch from long ago
my mother said I am going now
when you are alone you will be all right
whether or not you know you will know*

Merwin demonstrates how life is a collection of wisdom we gain through experience. He shows how each day, each vision, each color, smell and feel of the world which we pass through, leaves an imprint upon our minds and souls. We are always growing, always changing, always learning.

Worn Words:

*The late poems are the ones
I turn to first now
following a hope that keeps
beckoning me
waiting somewhere in the lines
almost in plain sight*

*it is the late poems
that are made of words
that have come the whole way
they have been there*

As the title implies, we are in the shadow of Sirius, the shadow of the heavens and of eternity. We are doomed to return to the dust, mortal in an vast endless sea of space. Like the star Sirius, we are a bright shining speck in the void, our memories and actions blaze through the darkness of existence until we are extinguished, but such a blaze of light is what casts shadows. Without life, without light, darkness and death would take no meaning, As in the poem *Youth* (included in it's entirety below as it is too beautiful to miss), without loss we could not '*learn to miss you*'. Through the collection of memories, through the fusion of past and present, through our acquisition of wisdom, we form a space in the void of existence that leaves a shadow, leaves a mark, leaves a legacy, that is both ephemeral and eternal. Through Merwin, all those he has known and lost exist forever in his prose:

*'As those who are gone now
keep wandering through our words
sounds of paper following them*

at untold distances'

Merwin writes with little to no punctuation, in one long strand, broken occasionally into stanzas, that flow endlessly and tirelessly in a river of thought. The language is simple, the metaphors and similes are nothing that will baffle the reader, but it works well to create a visceral vision inside the reader that is vibrant and immediate, while also haunting and translucent as a dream from which you have just woken.

*'a vision before a gift
of flight in a dream
of clear depths where I glimpse
far out of reach the lucent days
from which I am now made'*

The words from Merwin are each a little gift to the world. For those who love poetry, for those who love words, and for those who love life, this is an extraordinary collection and a great introduction into the works of an American treasure. The great W.H. Auden, a personal prose hero of mine, hand selected Merwin's first book of poetry to be published, and if he speaks truth in Worn Words, then here in his later life we have an even greater wealth of insight and wisdom.

5/5

Youth

*Through all of youth I was looking for you
without knowing what I was looking for*

*or what to call you I think I did not
even know I was looking how would I*

*have known you when I saw you as I did
time after time when you appeared to me*

*as you did naked offering yourself
entirely at that moment and you let*

*me breathe you touch you taste you knowing
no more than I did and only when I*

*began to think of losing you did I
recognize you when you were already*

*part memory part distance remaining
mine in the ways that I learn to miss you*

from what we cannot hold the stars are made

One of the Butterflies

*The trouble with pleasure is the timing
it can overtake me without warning
and be gone before I know it is here*

*it can stand facing me unrecognized
while I am remembering somewhere else
in another age or someone not seen
for years and never to be seen again
in this world and it seems that I cherish
only now a joy I was not aware of
when it was here although it remains
out of reach and will not be caught or named
or called back and if I could make it stay
as I want to it would turn to pain.*

A Codex

*It was a late book given up for lost
again and again with its bare sentences
at last and their lines that seemed transparent
revealing what had been here the whole way
the poems of daylight after the day
lying open after all on the table
without explanation or emphasis
like sounds left when the syllables have gone
clarifying the whole grammar of waiting
not removing one question from the air
or closing the story although single lights
were beginning by then above and below
while the long twilight deepened its silence
from sapphire through opal to Athena's iris
until shadow covered the gray pages
the comet words the book of presences
after which there was little left to say
but then it was night and everything was known*

Just This

*When I think of the patience I have had
back in the dark before I remember
or knew it was night until the light came
all at once at the speed it was born to
with all the time in the world to fly through
not concerned about ever arriving
and then the gathering of the first stars
unhurried in their flowering spaces
and far into the story the planets
cooling slowly and the ages of rain
then the seas starting to bear memory
the gaze of the first cell at its waking
how did this haste begin this little time
at any time this reading by lightning
scarcely a word this nothing this heaven*

Patrick Gibson says

Oh my thank you world. He is a magnificent poet. (He just won the Pulitzer.) Not sure? Read this
(from a previous collection)

"Naturally it is night.
Under the overturned lute with its
One string I am going my way
Which has a strange sound.

This way the dust, that way the dust.
I listen to both sides
But I keep right on.
I remember the leaves sitting in judgment
And then winter.

I remember the rain with its bundle of roads.
The rain taking all its roads.
Nowhere.

Young as I am, old as I am,

I forget tomorrow, the blind man.
I forget the life among the buried windows.
The eyes in the curtains.
The wall
Growing through the immortelles.
I forget silence
The owner of the smile.

This must be what I wanted to be doing,
Walking at night between the two deserts,
Singing.

Bill says

I'm not sure why I don't read more poetry. Perhaps it's because I have this idea that reading poetry requires a more intense level of concentration than reading prose. I also tend to think that most poems benefit from being heard as opposed to being read, so I like to read poetry aloud to myself.

I discovered W.S. Merwin via the recent PBS documentary about the Buddha. I was very impressed with his insights and later watched a video of him being interviewed by Bill Moyers. He read some of his poetry on the Moyers program and I decided to read some of his work. "The Shadow of Sirius" contains some brilliant poems. There is a stateliness to them; a gracefulness that's very appealing. The finest of these poems are the ones that shocked me as I read them, or concluded with an unusually striking image. They are not all

remarkable, but this volume is well worth reading.

M Wiegers says

Amazing, existentialist book. If it were possible, this book should be printed on translucent pages. In the end, the words remain and rise into being, floating in the world. May be his best in many years. Gorgeous, sad, full of love--I could go on with hyperbole--this book makes me happy to be alive and in the presence of such a writer.

metaphor says

The old grieving autumn goes on calling to its summer
the valley is calling to other valleys beyond the ridge
each star is roaring alone into darkness
there is not a sound in the whole night

*

and here we are
with our names for the days
the vast days that do not listen to us

Susan Katz says

This is a gorgeous book. "I have with me," Merwin says, "all that I do not know/I have lost none of it." But he also has with him all that he does know, and it shines everywhere in these poems. He admits his own preference, in his eighties of turning first to "late poems" because those are the ones "that are made of words/that have come the whole way." There's a lifetime in this book, a luminous panorama - and always with the awareness of how short a distance the whole way really is. When you're 25, 20 years is nearly a lifetime ago. But when you reach an age where a moment brilliantly clear in your mind shocks you with the realization that it's 50 years past, time becomes a shape-shifter. Merwin captures perfectly the sensations and epiphanies that occur in such moments. Like Updike's, his poems in old age are probably his best.
