

## The Star-Ledger

### Speaking Volumes: Fathers and sons

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In his second poetry collection, "Boy" (University of Georgia Press, \$17), Drew University English professor Patrick Phillips explores the life-changing experience of fatherhood and the corresponding feeling of mortality as his father successfully battles cancer and his father-in-law dies at home, surrounded by loved ones. Phillips' vibrant, witty and elegiac collection chronicles the terrors and everyday joys of what it means to be a father, while at the same time creating a moving link to one's ancestors.

Phillips, 37, was raised in Georgia and educated at Tufts University. His first poetry collection, "Chattahoochee," won the 2005 Kate Tufts Discovery Award. Phillips lives with his wife and two sons in Brooklyn, where he spoke with freelance writer Dylan Foley by telephone.

Q. Are the poems in this collection autobiographical?

A. They grow out of my life, but I wouldn't say they are strictly autobiographical. They are poems, not memoir, so there is not an exact one-to-one matchup. This second collection is five or six years of work. The period of these poems coincides with me becoming a father. I noticed a common thread coming through, and I realized that the poems were going to be about my life radically changing from the day my first son was born. My sons are five and seven now. I told some of my writer friends when I first had kids that if I ever wrote sappy poems about having kids, they should shoot me. Becoming a father is a transformational experience. One of my goals was to write about this honestly.

Q. In the poem "What Happens," you pull together three stories about one of your sons almost dying in childbirth, a car accident and the death of a friend when you were a teenager. How do you link these images?

A. The third section of the poem is the birth story, which I had been telling for a year after he was born. In five or 10 minutes, I went through the excitement of "He's going to be born" to "Yeah, we lost him" to "He's back," and then I was holding him. A lot of the poem has to do with time as not a straightforward process, that things happen again and again in the way we experience them. In the part of the poem about a friend dying, I literally learned the news in the middle of the night, then woke up and didn't remember that he'd died. I had gone through the grieving, then had forgotten he was dead, then had to go through the grieving all over again. This poem also has to do with the fragility of life, which parenthood has brought home to me. We walk around as if things are stable and they always will be. I have an awareness I didn't have until my kids came about how fragile things really are.

Q. You write about your father's battle with cancer and your father-in-law's death. How did you combine images of fatherhood with mortality?

A. I never really thought of this until the last few years that my parents were, even in my childhood memories, still the children of their own parents. As a child, you are not aware of that. When my father-in-law was dying at home, there were toddlers running around. In this house of death, it was a great comfort, or at least a temporary relief, to have these children around. As I worried about my father and my father-in-law, about death and the threat of death, these kids were at the same time an incredible new beginning.

Q. In the poem "6:12," you wrote about the euphoria and silliness of a father coming home from work. Why?

A. I am trying to write about things that I don't find a place for in everyday life. One of these things is the sheer joy. In the same way that you can't explain the sheer terror of watching your child walk on a high wall, it is equally difficult to explain the moments of joy that you don't plan for and don't see coming. Suddenly, your heart lifts and having these children has made you incredibly grateful to be alive.