



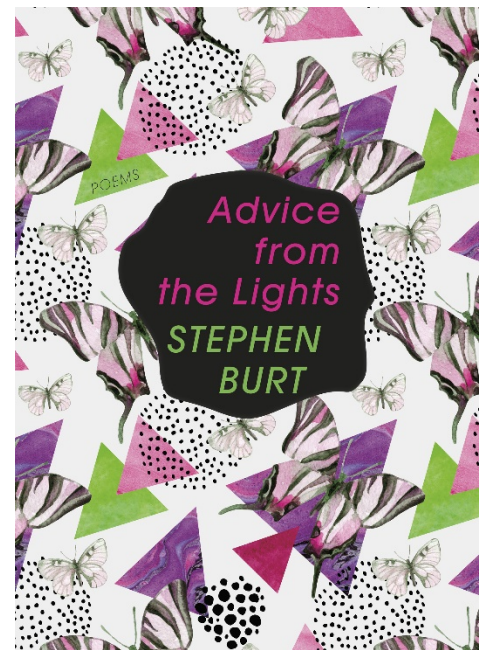
NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR THE ARTS

Reader Resources

Advice from the Lights

by Stephanie Burt

Stephanie (formerly Stephen) Burt is a poet and critic whose reviews of comic books, fan fiction, science fiction, young adult novels, and, above all, poetry are widely known. Her 2013 TED talk “Why People Need Poetry” has been viewed over a million times. Written during the “five-year period from the beginning to the end of the decisions [she’s] made about coming out as a trans woman” (Queer Guru TV), *Advice from the Lights*—her fourth full-length collection of poetry—is filled with talking objects and animals grappling with their unique identities: a hermit crab trying to find the right shell, a blue betta fish named Scarlet, and a roly-poly bug that doesn’t like the way it looks. Some poems imagine what her life would have been like if she had been raised a girl. They’re placed in stark contrast alongside other poems from her actual childhood raised as a boy. Burt’s collection is “deft, bubbly, poised, polished, consistently witty” (Lambda Literary), traveling “through a shape-shifting American childhood, a journey of multiple selves and genders that remixes ancient Greek poetry with ‘80s pop” (*San Francisco Chronicle*). “For all its insights into trans experience,” says the *Boston Review*, “*Advice from the Lights* is the brightest and most inviting of Burt’s collections for readers of any, all, and no genders.”



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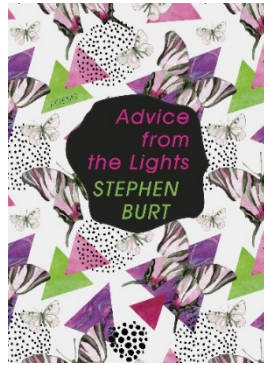
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About the Book

Opening Stephanie Burt's *Advice from the Lights* is like opening a time capsule from a 1980s American childhood. On any given page, you might find a kid wishing to be Spock from Star Trek; playing Pac-man, mini-golf, or Atari; wearing Mary Janes, Doc Martens, or jelly shoes; or being broken up with over a cordless phone. Underlying these staple childhood items, though, is a kid struggling to "fit in" and come to terms with an assigned gender identity. The collection includes memories of being raised as a boy, but wishing she was a girl. Other poems—poems with the name "Stephanie" in the title—imagine what her life would have been like if she had been raised a girl. Meanwhile, a seemingly random assortment of items—a hermit crab, kites, a pair of ferrets—pop up occasionally to introduce themselves and share the struggles of their respective existences. Together, the poems reveal glimpses of the curator's intimate thoughts and desires, realities and fantasies.



The collection is teeming with talking objects, plants, and animals grappling with the bodies and the circumstances they each inhabit. "We have the laments of a hermit crab at the mercy of its indifferent overlord, a damasked betta doomed to be named Scarlet, a water strider who has ceased to be amazed at its own feats of balance," and a roly-poly bug who "curls up in response to the crisis of its multiple identities" (*Boston Review*). Each object offers insights into its unique existence and, at times, sounds like both the object and Stephanie talking at once. "Everybody wants a piece of me," declares a block of ice in "Ice from the Ice Trade" (p. 3). When asked how she came to love "talking object" poems, Burt said a "talking sieve can stand for a lot of experiences ... and nobody's going to ask exactly how old the sieve is, or whether it became a sieve through nature or nurture, or whether you have the right to write in the voice of a sieve" (Fear Not Lit).

Poems called "After Callimachus" bring the third

century BCE poet into the twenty-first century with flipping Pogs and Minecraft. Like Burt, Callimachus embodied several roles at once: poet, critic, and scholar, among others. This time around, the poet-critic reads young adult novels, spills secrets on Tumblr, and wants "to go home, paint my nails until they iridesce, / clamp on my headphones, and pray to Taylor Swift" (p. 37).

A series of "My Year" poems look directly at Burt's childhood, each poem covering a specific year from 1979 to 1987. These poems, Burt says, are memories "that I actually lived, in some cases with names and details changed." They are "as close to a memoir as I have yet written" (Queer Guru TV). The eight-year-old Stephanie (then called Stephen) of 1979 "wanted to stay at Alison's house overnight / and wake up as a new girl, or a new mutant" but "wasn't allowed" (p. 7). After describing 1983—the year she gave lectures during lunchtime to equipment on the playground—she recalls her favorite teacher saying, "Steve, / ... you'll probably use / those theories someday and your future colleagues will thank / you for all of them, but we'd like you to think / about what might be interesting to your friends, / not just about what's interesting to you" (p. 32). At the end of this series of poems, in "My 1987," Burt describes the hopeful image of herself dashing across the lunchroom after overhearing a group of seniors say they wanted a keyboard player—presumably for their band—to tell them she could play the piano and would get herself a keyboard (p. 54).

Then there are "Stephanie" poems that first appeared in a chapbook published by Rain Taxi Editions called *All-Seasons Stephanie*. These poems imagine an alternate reality where Stephanie got to experience a wished-for girlhood wearing tulle dresses as a child and, as a teen, leggings and sweatshirts "big enough to hide half a person" (p. 36). "If I had been raised as a girl," Burt said of these poems, "if I always knew I was a girl and other people treated me as a girl, and I had been relatively lucky in my girlhood, what would that have felt like and looked like and what would the memoir poems of that experience—which I did not in

fact have—be?” (Queer Guru TV). Says *Poetry Northwest*, these poems “are dreamy and soft, like those sweatshirts, but not idyllic.” Poems in this series imagine a girlhood fraught with slight frustrations like “Why can’t I wear two different colored shoes?” and “What use is the adult world, it doesn’t have unicorns” (p. 9), but as the poems progress, like childhood, the distress becomes more complex. “Paper Stephanie,” for example, says “I am less flimsy than boys think” (p. 66) and “Final Exam Stephanie” explores an existence where no one questions what she chooses to wear or what name she chooses to go by (p. 87). “While Stephen came of age during this time of Velcroed Trapper Keepers and their slick invitations to compulsion,” writes the *Boston Review*, “Stephanie Burt, who went full time as a woman in 2017, never got to experience a childhood of ‘sparkly rainbow

crayons’ or an adolescence of ‘glitter pens.’” *Advice from the Lights* is the last book published under Stephanie’s former name, Stephen. In its early pages, Burt invites the reader to remember what it’s like to covet something during childhood—even if it isn’t gender-related. “I can remember when I wanted X / more than anything ever” she says in “A Covered Bridge in Littleton, New Hampshire,” and to the reader she says, “for X fill in / from your own childhood” (p. 10). She offers up some examples: “balloon, pencil lead, trading cards, shoelaces, a bow / or not to have to wear a bow.” Her advice “is to be, in your own eyes, what you are, / or to keep your own tools, so that you can pretend.” This book achieves “something rare,” says *Publishers Weekly*, helping “readers to ‘learn / how to live in this world’ more attentively.”

About the Author

Stephanie Burt (b. 1971)

Stephanie (formerly Stephen) Burt grew up in and around Washington, DC, the eldest of four siblings. Her mother was an English teacher in New Haven, CT before becoming a parent. She used her knowledge raising children to co-author two books on parenting and to co-host an award-winning syndicated radio show called *Parents’ Perspective*, producing over 500 episodes that broadcast to more than half a million listeners around the country and on military bases around the world (*Washington Post*). Her father was a lawyer at a large DC law firm where one of his greatest accomplishments, according to Burt, was making tampons more accessible to Russian women.



Photo by Jessie Bennett

“I was... not super fun, and sad a lot,” Burt recalled of her childhood to the NEA. She remembers sitting at the bottom of sliding boards crying for seemingly no reason and, according to her mother, once wrote an essay about “a little boy whose mother forced him to go out and play” (*The New York Times*). When asked if

her parents worried about her as a child, Burt’s father said, “to ask Jewish parents if they were worried about their children—it is a statement of fact! But were we more worried about [Stephanie] than about the other children? The answer is yes.” Burt says her sadness as a child probably came, in part, from growing up during the heavily gender-segregated 1970s and 80s. Her assigned gender at birth was male, but she wished she was a girl, she says, and didn’t think it was possible to be one.

Her intense curiosity for science led Burt’s parents to find a retired University of Maryland professor of chemistry to be her mentor. “My father, who was trained in economics, used comic books as a motivator for me, which was just right: by doing what I was supposed to do I earned *a lot* of superhero comics,” she told the NEA. “Of course I wanted to read the ones with girls, and teams (i.e. friends), and teenagers and mutants. I still do. Ask me about the X-Men if you’re ready for a three-hour conversation (with trans themes).” Burt knows a lot about a handful of niche subjects. She’s been called an “eclectic obsessive” by *The New York Times*. In addition to comic books, she can be found among the obscure fandoms of poetry, science fiction, women’s basketball, and

indie rock bands “nobody else cares about” (Queer Guru TV).

Things took a turn for the better in high school. Burt found her way into several friend groups, including the theater tech kids at her high school and a group who played table top RPGs (role-playing games) like Dungeons and Dragons, and another group she met from science fiction conventions. “If I had to pick a moment when I realized that I could be a happy adult in some way (even if I didn’t realize I could be a girl!) I’d pick my first science fiction convention, Evecon,” she told the NEA. High school was also when Burt began identifying with gay and lesbian culture, but didn’t know why and hadn’t yet realized the queer community expanded beyond gay and lesbian identities.

Burt initially wanted to write science fiction, which is also what led her to discover poetry. “I discovered that the science fiction writers I liked in middle school—Samuel Delany, Roger Zelazny, Ursula K. Le Guin—kept quoting famous old poems. So I looked up the poems and they were great! ‘Is There in Truth No Beauty?’ is even better as a line from a George Herbert poem than it is as the title of a *Star Trek* episode, though the episode’s not bad” (Poets & Writers). At age 17, she was reading almost exclusively poetry.

By the time she got to her undergraduate poetry seminar at Harvard University, Burt “knew more than anyone else in the class by far,” said her professor and literary critic Helen Vendler. She “gallantly held [herself] in check so as not to dominate the class” (*The New York Times*). Burt spent much of her time in college in the offices of *The Harvard Advocate*, where she was the poetry editor, and in the basement radio studio DJing for Harvard radio. “I didn’t know whether I wanted to be a professional writer or a literary scholar or a biochemist until I got to college and realized that I did not belong in any sort of laboratory,” she told the NEA. “I wanted to do the things Helen Vendler did. I still do.”

After Harvard, Burt spent a year at Oxford, where she began—on occasion—showing up to parties and public events wearing dresses and skirts, then

attended Yale in pursuit of her PhD, where she met her wife, Jessie Bennett. She made a name for herself as a poetry critic, and in 2012 *The New York Times* published a profile calling her “Poetry’s Cross-Dressing Kingmaker.” In 2017, the year *Advice from the Lights* was published, she made a public statement on social media announcing she’d be presenting as a woman full-time. *Advice from the Lights* is her last book published under her former name, Stephen.

Hailed as “one of the most influential poetry critics of [her] generation” by *The New York Times*, Burt has written a multitude of literary reviews and essays on poetry that have appeared in, among many other publications, *The New Yorker*, *The New York Times*, the *Los Angeles Times*, the *Boston Review*, and *The Times Literary Supplement*. She’s published several books of literary criticism, including *The Poem Is You: Sixty Contemporary American Poems and How to Read Them* (2016), *Close Calls With Nonsense: Reading New Poetry* (2009), which was a finalist for the National Book Critics Circle Award, and *The Forms of Youth: Twentieth-Century Poetry and Adolescence* (2007). She’s given a TED talk entitled “Why People Need Poetry” that’s been viewed over a million times, is the recipient of a 2016 Guggenheim Fellowship, is the poetry co-editor of *The Nation*, and is the author of four collections of poetry, including *Belmont* (2013) and *Advice from the Lights* (2017), both from Graywolf Press.

Now in Belmont, MA, Burt lives with her wife and two kids, and is back at Harvard University as a Professor of English. She likes cats, ferrets, cephalopods, and lizards (especially chameleons); getting fashion advice; flowers and plants, though she has no experience gardening, she says; and is still learning to be “an okay cook” (NEA). “Before transition I saw myself, very secretly, as like an ex-athlete who chose to forgo risky treatment for a bad knee, and could live with mild pain; now I compare myself to a piano that has, for the first time, been tuned, or to a kid with her first pair of glasses. Colors are brighter, my posture is better, many things are clearer, and certain emotional barriers have come down” (*The Times Literary Supplement*). “I’m happier.... It’s probably influenced the poetry that I want to write, but we’ll see” (Queer Guru TV).

Discussion Questions

1. The poems in *Advice from the Lights*, Burt says, “give false advice and true advice and advice from quite close to me and advice from far away and long ago” (Queer Guru TV). Can you find examples of the kinds of advice she refers to in her statement? Did you find any of the advice to be helpful or not so helpful? In what ways?
2. “Ice from the Ice Trade,” the first poem in the collection, refers to the industrial harvesting and trading of natural ice in America during the 19th and early 20th centuries, and is written in the voice of one such block of ice (p. 3). In what ways might the block of ice’s experience mirror or stand as a metaphor for the poet’s experience as a trans woman? Did you find this to be true about other poems in the collection in which the speaker wasn’t human? If so, which poems and how so? Why do you think Burt placed “Ice from the Ice Trade” first in her collection, outside of the five other sections that follow?
3. Many of the poems in this collection are written from the perspective of inanimate objects or nonhuman animals. Did they surprise you? Did you relate to any particular poem of this kind? If you were to choose an object and describe it in a way that mimics some of your thoughts and feelings, what would that object be?
4. Burt has said that the “My Year” poems come from her actual childhood experiences being raised as a boy, while the “Stephanie” poems are imagined from a girlhood she never got to experience. What is the effect of having both sets of poems together? Would you read the “My Year” poems differently if the “Stephanie” poems weren’t included?
5. What do you think Burt means in “My 1979” when she says, quoting Heraclitus, that she’d become convinced “character was fate” (p. 7)? Do you agree with this statement? Why or why not?
6. In “A Covered Bridge in Littleton, New Hampshire,” the speaker says, “I can remember when I wanted X / more than anything ever—for X fill in / from your own childhood” (p. 10). What did you want more than anything as a child—tangible or intangible—that you didn’t get to have? Do you think your life would be different if you had gotten it? If so, how?
7. When you want to inhabit a certain identity, but something is stopping you, Burt’s advice is “to be, in your own eyes, what you are, / or to keep your tools, so that you can pretend” (p. 20). Were there moments in the book where she (or an object or plant or animal) followed her own advice by using her imagination? What is an identity? Have you ever struggled with building, changing, or coming to terms with your identity? What advice would you give to someone going through a similar experience?
8. “After Callimachus” poems (pps. 25, 37, 57, 79) are poems written after the third-century BCE Greek-Libyan-Alexandrian poet. Like Burt, Callimachus was a poet, critic, and scholar. Why do you think Burt chose to write poems “after” Callimachus? If you were going to write a poem after someone, who would it be? Why?
9. “After Callimachus (Why do I write?)” is a meta poem—a piece of writing about writing (p. 57). Do you agree that writing helps to alleviate symptoms of shame? Have you ever aired a secret through writing? Would it matter or change things if you knew no one would read it? What are the benefits or challenges of writing in “code”?
10. The poem “Fifth Grade Time Capsule” ends with: “The people who pick me up can never be / the same as the ones who put me down” (p. 29). How would the meaning of these words change or expand if spoken by a human? Are there other moments in the book where the meaning of a line said by a nonhuman object would change if spoken by a human?

11. Burt recalls a favorite teacher saying her teachers would like her to “think / about what might be interesting to your friends, / not just about what’s interesting to you” (p. 32). Do you think this advice was more helpful or harmful? Has a teacher or mentor ever given you advice—either good or bad—that stuck with you?
12. The collection contains two palinodes—poems that retract what the poet wrote in a previous poem. What do you think the poems are taking back in “Palinode with Playmobil Figurines” (p. 26) and “Palinode with Study Guide, Spackling Knife, and Sewing Kit” (p. 56)? Why do you think the poet chose to write poems in this form?
13. “Paper Stephanie” imagines Stephanie as a cut-out paper doll with several different outfits and hairstyles. What do you make of the ending, “maybe I’ll never leave home” (p. 66)?
14. “What is this air, this space in which nobody ... / tries to tell me what my name should be” asks “Final Exam Stephanie”—the last of the “Stephanie” poems. What’s in a name? Do you think your given name accurately represents you? Has it shaped who you are now? Have you ever wanted to change it? If so, why?
15. “White Lobelia”—the last poem—ends, “[w]e tell ourselves / and one another that if you listen / with sufficient / generosity, you will be able / to hear our distinctive and natural sound” (p. 100). What does it mean to listen with “sufficient generosity”? Can you think of instances in which you’ve listened with “sufficient generosity” and were surprised by what you learned? Can you think of instances in which you or others you know (or know of) haven’t listened in this way? What were the consequences?
16. The notes at the end of the book help shed light on some of the references throughout the collection that are particular to Burt’s childhood in the 1980s. What items from your childhood would you highlight to symbolize your experiences? What year would you pick to write about?



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