

## Q&A with the Author (cont.)

alongside the other languages from his family home. The trip to Palestine occasioned my earnest attempts in studying Arabic really for the first time, and you can see little bits of my everyday dictionary incorporated into *Concordance*. You may see as much or more my reading of Mahmoud Darwish as my limited knowledge of Arabic embedded in the poem.

I chose the title *A Concordance of Leaves* because “concordance” contains multiple meanings that rhyme with the text—agreement, union, an index, etc. The “leaves” are not just the pages themselves (and each page is titled “leaf” in Arabic), but also the various flora woven throughout the poem, as well as the problematics of exile, which haunt Palestinian life.

**Q: What would you like readers to learn about Palestine from this work?**

**A:** Those who know an iota of Palestinian life are well aware of the onslaught of defamatory representations of Palestinians, the general misery of life under military occupation, and the various resistance to that occupation—from *sumud* to *muqawama*.

I did not have any political intention when I began this work. Really, Palestine is too big for any poem. And I don't have the right to say what Palestine is or is not. All I wanted to do was pay attention to the life of this village, in all its complex and textured geography (human and natural), on the occasion of this gathering of two families together. I wanted to testify to what I saw and felt, to the love of a village for a native son and for the family of strangers they greeted as their own.

To read more from this interview with Philip Metres, visit: [arabamericanmuseum.org/IPMQ](http://arabamericanmuseum.org/IPMQ)

2014

## ARAB AMERICAN BOOK AWARD

The Arab American Book Award is a literary program created to honor books written by and about Arab Americans. The program, managed by the Russell J. Ebeid Library & Resource Center at the Arab American National Museum, generates greater awareness of Arab American scholarship and writing through an annual award competition and educational outreach. Learn more about past and present winners at [arabamericanmuseum.org/bookaward](http://arabamericanmuseum.org/bookaward).

The goal of the Reading & Discussion Guide project is to increase the audience for Arab American literature and stimulate discussion about the winning books' themes and topics.

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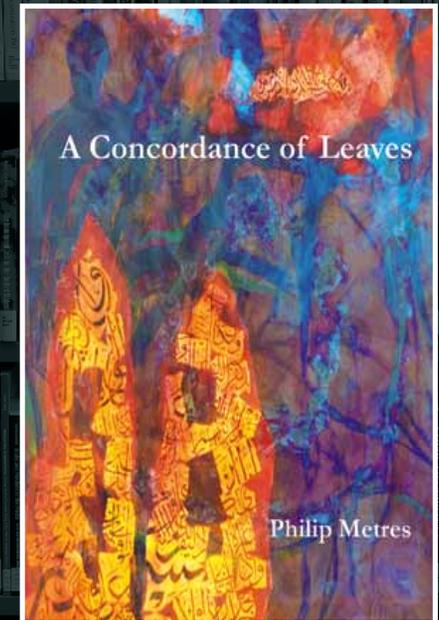
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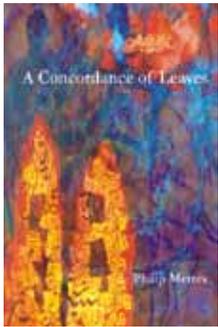
George Ellenbogen  
Poetry Award Winner



## READING & DISCUSSION GUIDE



2014

ARAB AMERICAN  
BOOK AWARDGeorge Ellenbogen  
Poetry Award Winner**A Concordance  
of Leaves**by Philip Metres  
Diode Editions**SUMMARY**

*A Concordance of Leaves* is an epic poem that chronicles the poet and his family's 2003 visit to the village of Toura in the Palestinian West Bank, on the occasion of his sister's wedding to a resident of the village. The poem encompasses both Arab and Arab American experiences, working brilliantly within self-imposed literary constraints. The reader is introduced to people, places, customs, and words through the poet's exchanges with his in-laws and his observations of life under occupation.

**HISTORICAL & CULTURAL THEMES IN THIS WORK:**

- Returning/traveling to the Arab world
- Arab wedding traditions
- Village life
- Palestine under Israeli occupation

*About The Author*

**PHILIP J. METRES** is an award-winning poet, translator, scholar, and activist. His most recent poetry books include, *Sand Opera* (Alice James Books, 2015), *Compleat Catalogue of Comedic Novelties: Poetic Texts of Lev*

*Rubinstein* (Ugly Duckling Presse, 2014), and *abu ghraib arias* (Flying Guillotine Press, 2011). His work has appeared in *Best American Poetry* and has garnered two NEA fellowships, the Thomas J. Watson Fellowship, five Ohio Arts Council Grants, the Beatrice Hawley Award, two Arab American Book Awards, the Cleveland Arts Prize, the Anne Halley Prize, the PEN/Heim Translation grant, and the Creative Workforce Fellowship. He is Professor of English at John Carroll University in Cleveland.

**DISCUSSION  
QUESTIONS**

1. **The author commemorates his sister's wedding in this epic poem. Is there an event in your life that you would want to write an epic poem about?**
2. **Who is "The Question Factory" in this work? Can you remember being in a similar role as them? What techniques does the poet use to make their situation relatable to the reader?**
3. **The author uses many words from the Palestinian dialect. Where is the use of vernacular most successful and compelling? What new words did you learn?**
4. **How do you interpret the use of parentheses throughout this work?**
5. **The poet delicately relays the realities of life in the West Bank. What details about life in Palestine surprised you most and why?**

*Q&A with the Author***Q: What inspired you to write this book?**

A: *A Concordance of Leaves* details a 2003 visit to the village of Toura in the Palestinian West Bank, on the occasion of my sister's wedding to Majed Abbadi, a resident of the village. Though I kept a thick journal from that trip to Palestine and Israel, many years passed before this poetic sequence came to me. I'd been educating myself for years about the region, ever since my sister spent a summer in Ramallah in the early 1990s, and tried to make sense of the realities that she had lived and witnessed, and that other friends and acquaintances had lived through...

The bits of language translated from my journal remained in an untouched Word file for many years, before I returned to the poem—for reasons that I can't quite reconstruct. My dear teacher Catherine Bowman once said that her Tarot reader had told her that the soul lags seven years behind the present, and that's been my experience, more or less. That the lag of the soul rhymes with the poetics of recollection. In other words, some poets may be doomed (or blessed) to work over the past.

**Q: This book holds one epic poem. Was working within this form freeing or challenging?**

A: Ever since reading Robert Hass' multi-sectioned poems from *Sun Under Wood* (1998), I've been attracted to the idea of the poem as an intersection or occasion for multiple meetings. The poetic sequence, the long poem, the epic poem—all have been attractive extensions of the lyric and narrative impulses in poetry. In this poem, the form became its own occasion; if at first, one tries to find the form, after a certain point, the form begins to find you. In other words, what first may have been obstacle later becomes invitation. A certain momentum takes over.

**Q: How does your knowledge of other languages, specifically Arabic, influence your writing?**

A: My knowledge of Arabic is incredibly sketchy—mostly the range of niceties and curses that my father would deploy befitting the appropriate occasion,

(continued)