



Ambition and Survival: Becoming a Poet

Christian Wiman

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"That calling, at once religious, ethical, and aesthetic, is one that only a genuine poet can hear—and very few poets can explain it as compellingly as Mr. Wiman does. That gift is what makes *Ambition and Survival*, not just one of the best books of poetry criticism in a generation, but a spiritual memoir of the first order."

—*New York Sun*

"This weighty first prose collection should inspire wide attention, partly because of Wiman's current job, partly because of his astute insights and partly because he mixes poetry criticism with sometimes shocking memoir ... The collection's greatest strength comes in general ruminations on the writing, reading and judging poetry." —*Publishers Weekly*

"[Wiman is] a terrific personal essayist, as this new collection illustrates, with the command and instincts of the popular memoirist ... This is a brave and bracing book." —*Booklist*

"Blazing high style" is how *The New York Times* describes the prose of Christian Wiman, the young editor transforming *Poetry*, the country's oldest literary magazine.

Ambition and Survival is a collection of stirring personal essays and critical prose on a wide range of subjects: reading Milton in Guatemala, recalling violent episodes of his youth, and traveling in Africa with his eccentric father, as well as a series of penetrating essays on writers as diverse as Thomas Hardy and Janet Lewis. The book concludes with a portrait of Wiman's diagnosis of a rare form of incurable and lethal cancer, and how mortality reignited his religious passions.

When I was twenty years old I set out to be a poet. That sounds like I was a sort of frigate raising anchor, and in a way I guess I was, though susceptible to the lightest of winds. . . . When I read Samuel Johnson's comment that any young man could compensate for his poor education by reading five hours a day for five years, that's exactly what I tried to do, practically setting a timer every afternoon to let me know when the little egg of my brain was boiled. It's a small miracle that I didn't take to wearing a cape.

Christian Wiman is the editor of *Poetry* magazine. His poems and essays appear regularly in *The New Yorker*, *The Atlantic Monthly*, *Harper's*, and *The New York Times Book Review*.

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