

ADVANCE PRAISE FOR
USABLE TRUTHS

“Irving Feldman writes with an immediacy, vigor, and precision of insight that make this book an exhilarating achievement. Again and again, one is brought to consider the claim of unwelcome doubts as well as unsolicited truths. His discipline and economy of phrase can survive comparison with the masters of the aphorism.” —David Bromwich, Sterling Professor of English at Yale University

“Aphorisms, shrewd observations, rules to live by and rules to resist—such are Irving Feldman’s usable truths. Some produce short, sharp shocks of recognition; others need to be lingered over and lived with, unpacked like a line of metaphysical poetry. In each the fewest words enfold the fullest meaning. Like aphorists before him, Feldman looks at love and age and the way we live now, but he brings a poet’s touch to even his most philosophical insights. *Usable Truths* is thus what the French call a perfect *livre de chevet*, a book to keep on a bedside nightstand, ideal for those moments before sleep when we reflect on the strange turnings, the hits and misses, in our own lives.” — Michael Dirda, Pulitzer Prize-winning critic for *The Washington Post* and the author of several collections of essays, most recently *Browsings: A Year of Reading, Collecting, and Living with Books*.

“‘Usable’ because these aphorisms invite us to trace—with mordant wit but also pity, and a strange courtesy—the secret life of our loves, hatreds, wonders, lies, and vanities, our forms of praise and styles of doubt, to trace their secret gifts and secret wounds, wherein we and others around us may gain and lose more than we think. They ask you to work on your creaturely listening.” —Kenneth Gross, Alan F. Hilfiker Distinguished Professor of English, University of Rochester

“*Usable Truths* is an aphoristic treasure chest. It invites the reader to reach in up to the elbows, certain to retrieve marvels of insight, satire, deflation of our vanities, celebration of our generousities, wordplay for the play’s sake, sentences built to please, provoke, press us into self-knowledge.” —Alicia Ostriker, Author of *Waiting for the Light*, New York State Poet Laureate

“In *Usable Truths*, Irving Feldman joins Pascal, La Rochefoucauld, Blake, Emerson and a handful of other epigrammatists who alert us, with their laconic wit and wisdom, to the mansions that the mind can build in and from the smallest rooms of incisive thought. These nuggets contain a trove of riches.” —Willard Spiegelman, Hughes Professor of English, Emeritus, at Southern Methodist University

PRAISE FOR

IRVING FELDMAN'S POEMS

"It is an enormous pleasure to read through Irving Feldman's *Collected Poems*. The spirit of the mordantly exuberant Moshe Leib Halpern, best of all Yiddish poets, lives again in Feldman's work: a poignant comedy that is also the true history of both an intense life and a tragic era." — Harold Bloom

"*Collected Poems* is more than a book. It's a cornucopia. Out of it spill the most amazing poems, one after another telling us who we are—with joy in the telling, even when the truths told are painful. Feldman's is the joy of recreating with such virtuosity the world of his experience, which is also our world, the world of all of us here; it is the joy of invoking and fashioning our American language and its astonishing life to give us so much pleasure." — David Ferry

"Moving from stretches of savage indignation ... to moments of plangent lyric, Feldman's high and passionate diction often comes as close to nobility as one might dare to suggest ... Feldman is one of our very best poets, and he is certainly unique today in his access to a prophetic force." — John Hollander

"Irving Feldman's voice in this half-century collection is a choir of multiplicity, ranging from the cosmically Miltonic to the up-to-minute vernacular: he is a psalmist and satirist, elegist and stand-up comic, mandarin and graffiti artist, philosopher and town-crier, romantic and skeptic. His heartbreaking 'Pripet Marshes' will stand, in its intimate and afflicted grandeur, with Auden's 'September 1, 1939' as one of the great poems of the twentieth century." — Cynthia Ozick

"If one measure of poetic greatness is the ability to redefine the limits of what poetry can do, *The Life and Letters* is a great book, astonishing in its range of language and invention, and utterly enthralling in its combination of irreverent humor, linguistic play, and deadly insight. Feldman's sensibility combines and integrates in remarkable ways intellectual suspiciousness and lyric, almost visionary, reach. ... He is America's postmodern Alexander Pope. He is outrageously funny, profoundly wise, and wholly free of the fashions, pieties and pretensions that limit the work of most of his contemporaries." — Alan Shapiro

"[Feldman is] one of the most engaging and powerful poets of his generation."
— Lionel Trilling

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IRVING FELDMAN

WAYWISER

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To

RICHARD HOWARD

Brother in Art

Old Friend

ALSO BY IRVING FELDMAN

WORKS AND DAYS · 1961

THE PRIPET MARSHES · 1965

MAGIC PAPERS · 1970

LOST ORIGINALS · 1972

LEAPING CLEAR · 1976

NEW AND SELECTED POEMS · 1979

TEACH ME, DEAR SISTER · 1983

ALL OF US HERE · 1986

THE LIFE AND LETTERS · 1994

BEAUTIFUL FALSE THINGS: POEMS · 2000

COLLECTED POEMS, 1954–2004 · 2004

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*Courtesy came before joy.
The greeting preceded the recognition.*

To be responded to is as close as one comes in this life to immortality.

The work that sustains itself surpasses itself.

The prisoner of dialectics can never cease rattling his chain.

The fullness of possibility is not abolished by any actuality.

The language isn't saved by style but by a tale worth telling.

How much complexity is brushed aside by a courteous greeting.

No atheists in foxholes? No theologians, either.

Every time a truth is told the world is larger.

Asceticism is properly directed not toward diminishing desire but toward preventing satiety, thereby preserving desire.

What is at work in fun is purity of heart.

It is good to feel my feelings, exquisite to feel yours.

At every instant, we will one another alive, and should one die, it is, beyond loss, our defeat.

Our least gift to our heirs wills them an entire world willing them here.

No state can be governed without law and order and graft.

A taste for satire gives one, particularly in youth, the illusion of having a personality.

Of her cancer the dying courtesan contrives a charm.

We boast to triumph over our hypersensitivity by rendering it insensitive.