

More about Paul Levy



Though born in Lexington, Kentucky in 1941, Paul Levy has lived almost all his adult life in England. (He is the author of *Finger-Lickin' Good: A Kentucky Childhood*, London, 1986.)

He was educated at the University of Chicago, University College London, Harvard (Ph.D. 1979) and Nuffield College, Oxford.

In 1974 he abandoned academia, and began reviewing books for *The Observer*, the British national Sunday paper, with which he was associated until 1991. In 1980 he leapt over the filing cabinets that separated the literary pages from the feature pages, and began writing a column on food. (He first wrote on that subject in 1977 for *Harper's & Queen* and *The New York Times*.) His was the first non-recipe column on food, and it attracted a large male readership as well as the existing

readership for cookery columns. By the third year of the column, it had won every British prize for food journalism at least twice, and in 1985 and again in 1987, he was commended in the British Press Awards, the equivalent of the Pulitzer Prize.

During his time on *The Observer* he introduced the *nouvelle cuisine* chefs of France to the British public, and many informed people felt that his journalism had an influence on the changing eating habits of the country.

By 1984, when he and Ann Barr wrote the notorious, best-selling *Official Foodie Handbook* (and coined the word "foodie") he was well known in food and wine circles in France and the USA as well as Britain. Throughout the 1980s and early 90s he was a featured speaker at conferences on food and wine in Britain, Australia, India, the USA and France. He travelled widely in those years, repeatedly visiting China, South-East Asia, Australia, India, South Africa, Latin America, the former Soviet Union, several Eastern bloc countries and most of the countries of Western Europe, as well as making frequent trips to the USA.

In 1986 he was the sole judge of the Best Restaurant in Australia competition. The judging was interrupted by a national airline strike, and he therefore criss-crossed the continent in the private jet belonging to the sponsoring magazine's publisher, Kerry Packer. In the early 1990s he gave a seminar on wine service and storage for about thirty executives of the Taj Hotel chain in India, which resulted in their instituting a new and effective set of quality controls. He has acted as a paid consultant for supermarket chains, organizing meetings to discuss food trends, and has been a consultant for several restaurants, on both the food and wine sides, especially enjoying writing a wine list for an upmarket Indian restaurant.

Most recently he was consultant to Raymond Blanc for his Anglo-Franco-American 2004 conference and festival at Le Manoir aux Quat'Saisons, "The American Food Revolution."

He was on the staff of *The Observer*, as Food and Wine Editor, for more than ten years, and then wrote for *The Mail On Sunday*, Britain's largest circulation respectable tabloid. For five years he was contributing editor, writing a restaurant column, for *Travel & Leisure*, during which time he was several times a James Beard Award nominee. *Out to Lunch* (London and New York, 1986), a collection of his food and wine journalism, won an IACP award in the US, and was reissued in a fourth edition (ravecrouton, London, 2003). He wrote a concluding chapter for the 2003 Penguin re-issue of Philippa Pullar's *Consuming Passions*.

His most recent food and wine book is *The Penguin Book of Food and Drink* (ed., London and New York, 1998), and he has written an introduction to a new Folio Society edition of M.F.K. Fisher's *An Alphabet for Gourmets* (2005).

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A frequent broadcaster, he wrote and presented the 1992 5-part Channel 4 series “The Feast of Christmas” (and the book with that title, published in London by Kyle Cathie, 1992), which was transmitted again by channel 4 in 1993, and in Canada and Australia.

From 1991 to 2001 he wrote a weekly column on the arts for *The Wall Street Journal Europe*, covering drama, books, the visual arts and architecture, music and from 1999-2001 a weekly piece on food or wine. He was a regular contributor to the Friday “Personal Journal” pages, where he wrote on art, opera, theatre, books and occasionally, food. He formerly wrote a weekly piece for the Arts & Leisure page of *The Wall Street Journal* in the USA. He reviews books for *The New York Review of Books*, *The Spectator*, *The New York Times* and *The Times Literary Supplement*, and writes obituaries for *The Independent*, *The Guardian* and *The Telegraph* that sometimes add new terrors to death. He has written for *Reader’s Digest* and has contributed occasional pieces to all the British broadsheet daily newspapers and has written many entries for the *New Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*.

In 2002 he served as rapporteur to the Franco-British Council’s conference on Genetically Modified Food, and wrote the conference’s official report. He was a trustee of the Jane Grigson Trust, a registered charity that maintains a research library of cookery books now housed at Oxford Brookes University, where he was formerly a Member of the Court. In 2003 he became a founding trustee of another charity, the Oxford Symposium on Food and Cookery, and, along with Dr Theodore Zeldin and Claudia Roden, a co-chairman of the 2003 Symposium at St Antony’s College, Oxford. With Claudia Roden he chaired the 2004 Symposium, the first at Oxford Brookes, and did the same for the 2005 Symposium, whose theme was “Authenticity.” They co-chaired the event, until 2015, when Claudia Roden became President and Paul Levy, Chair Emeritus. See www.oxfordsymposium.org.



Paul Levy has been one of the Strachey Trustees and co-executor (with Michael Holroyd, who has been succeeded by Mark LeFanu) of Lytton Strachey’s literary estate since the founding of the Strachey Trust, a registered charity, in 1972. He was chosen by the Trustees, from among several candidates, to edit Lytton Strachey’s letters.

He edited *Lytton Strachey: The Really Interesting Question* (London and New York, 1972); is the

author of Moore: *G.E. Moore and the Cambridge Apostles* (London and New York, 1979); and, with Michael Holroyd, edited *The Shorter Strachey* (London and New York, 1980). He was awarded the Ph.D. by Harvard University – in lieu of a dissertation - for *Moore*, which went through five editions, and is still used as a text in colleges and universities, especially in the USA. He also wrote the chapter on “The Bloomsbury Group” in Milo Keynes, ed., *Essays on John Maynard Keynes*, the introduction to *Eminent Victorians: The Definitive Edition* (Continuum, London, 2002) and his name is well-known to Bloomsbury buffs and scholars.

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Paul lives with his wife Penelope Marcus (m. 1977), an art historian and former publisher, where they are often visited by their two daughters and son-in-law, at their listed farmhouse in Oxfordshire, with a large, well-stocked kitchen garden and three elderly cats named Fish, Chips and Mushy Peas. He is also a long-time former resident of Hampstead.

The Letters of Lytton Strachey was published in Britain by Viking Penguin on 31 March 2005, and in the USA by Farrar Strauss Giroux in November 2005. The corrected Penguin paperback, with a new letter to Virginia Woolf, was published in April 2006. Paul Levy's next project for Farrar Strauss Giroux is a book about what we eat, and what we don't eat, and why. The provisional title is *Why We Don't Eat Worms*.

(He long entertained the futile hope that he would one day write, *The Perfect Ring*, a travel-cum-opera book in which he would have detailed dozens of the major productions of Wagner's Ring cycle between the November, 2004 Adelaide Ring, which he attended and wrote about in *The Times*; the first Brazilian Ring, which he attended in Manaus in 2005 and reported on for *The Mail on Sunday*; and the Bayreuth production of 2006, which he covered for *The Wall Street Journal Europe*. This was not to be, but he has been thrilled by the low-budget, high-talent productions of *The Ring of the Nibelungen*, at the local Wagner-fest at Longborough.)

Paul is writing the post-childhood chapters of his memoir, from being Saul Bellow's pupil; to being persuaded finally to give up the study of philosophy at Harvard (in compensation for which he was given a Harvard Teaching Fellowship, followed by a Harvard Travelling Fellowship); his election to Nuffield College, Oxford, as a sociologist, a subject about which he knows little; to meeting and being befriended by the survivors of the Bloomsbury Group; to starting a new career as a journalist and broadcaster; and subsequently as the all-purpose culture critic for *The Wall Street Journal*.

Every winter since 2013 he has spent a few weeks in Palm Beach escaping February. In 2016 this idyll was interrupted by the election of Donald Trump, whose Secret Service team is stationed in the drive of the house in which Paul has been a guest for several years. On 2nd February 2019, he had a stroke, in which the assistance of the paramedics, sheriff's officers and secret service personnel were most welcome, as he was whizzed to the JFK Medical Centre, where he rapidly made an apparently complete recovery – which he celebrates most evenings by cooking dinner.