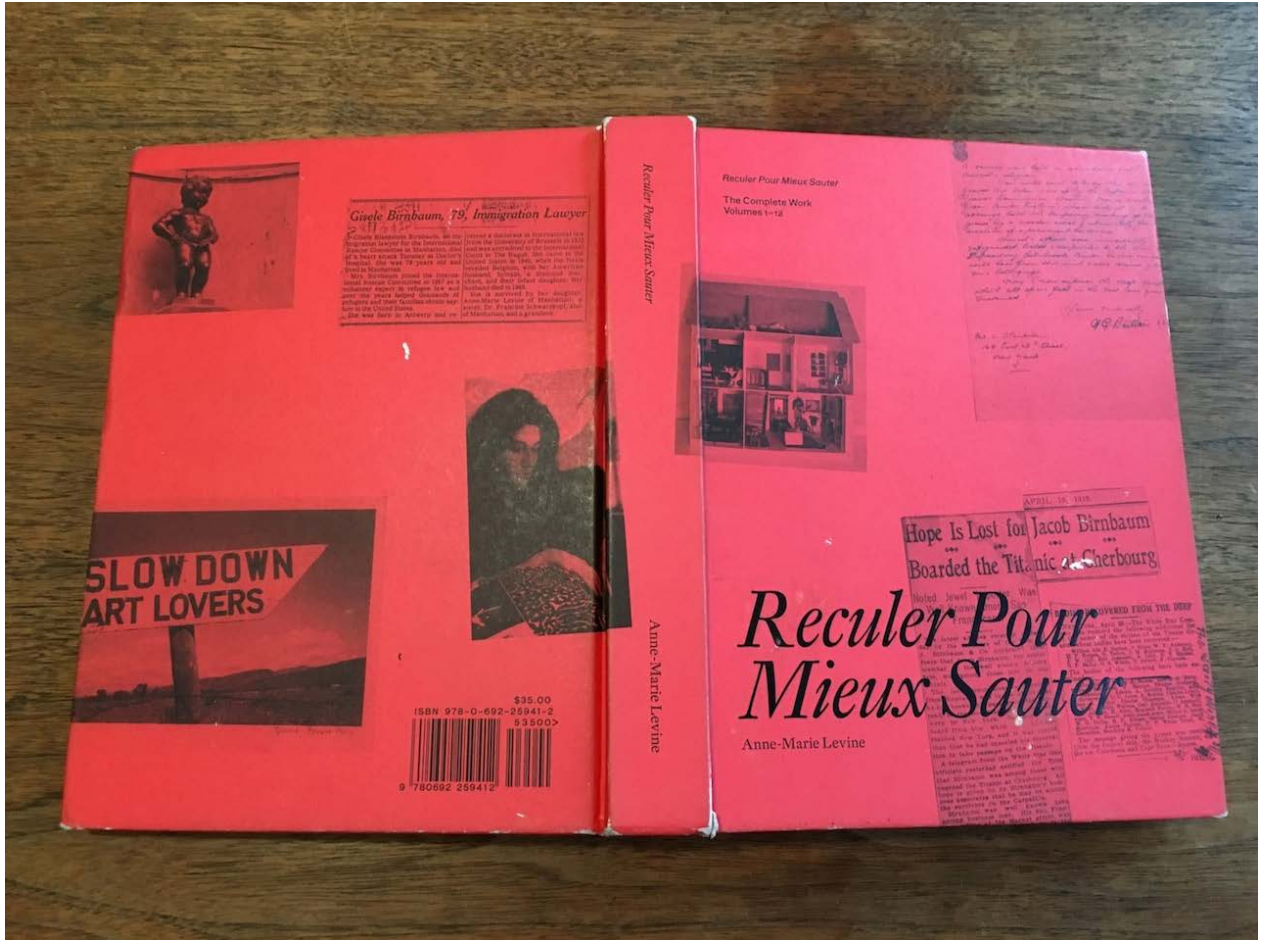


## An Autobiography in Notes and Edits

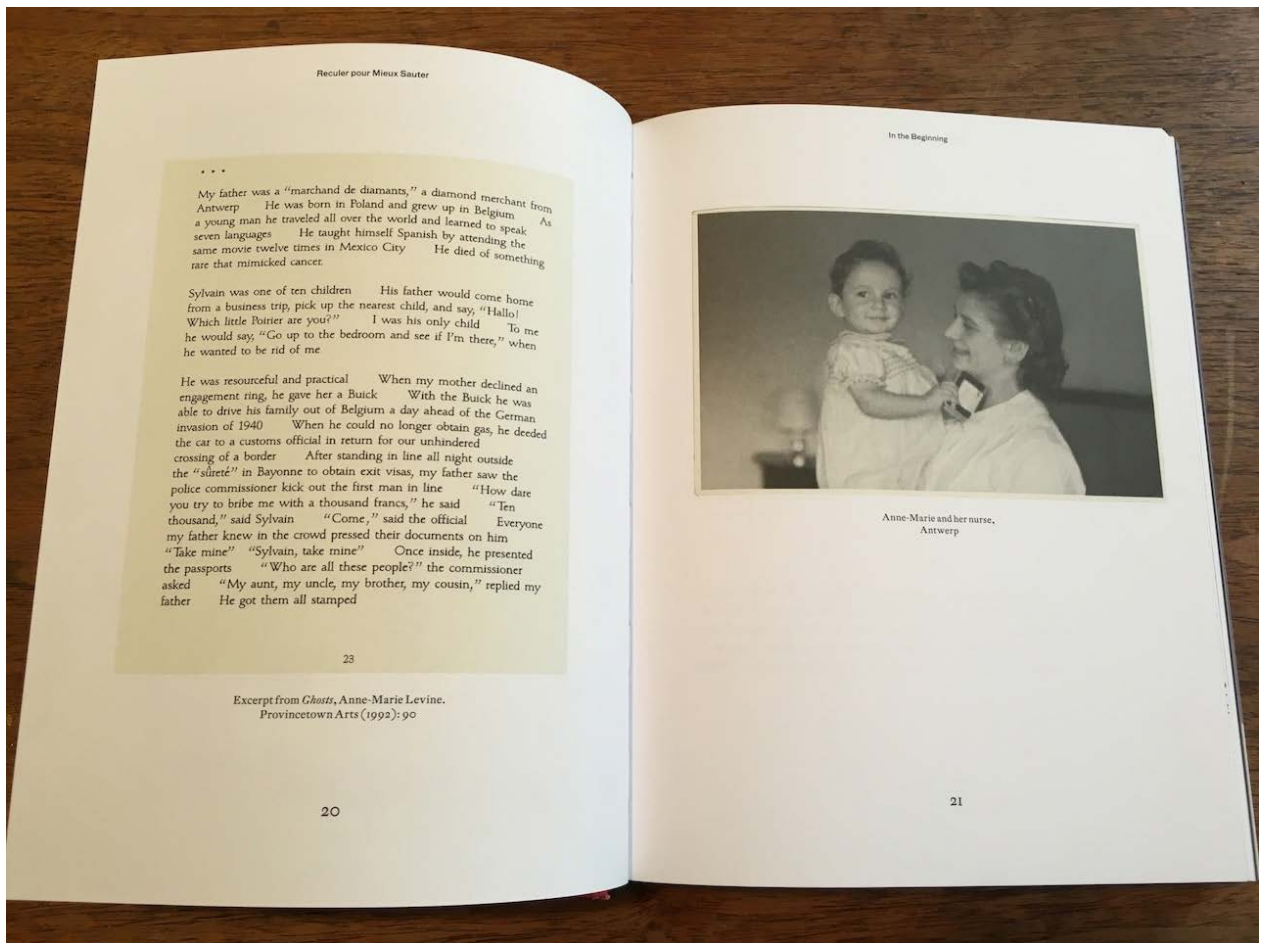
by [Megan N. Liberty](#) on [November 23, 2015](#)



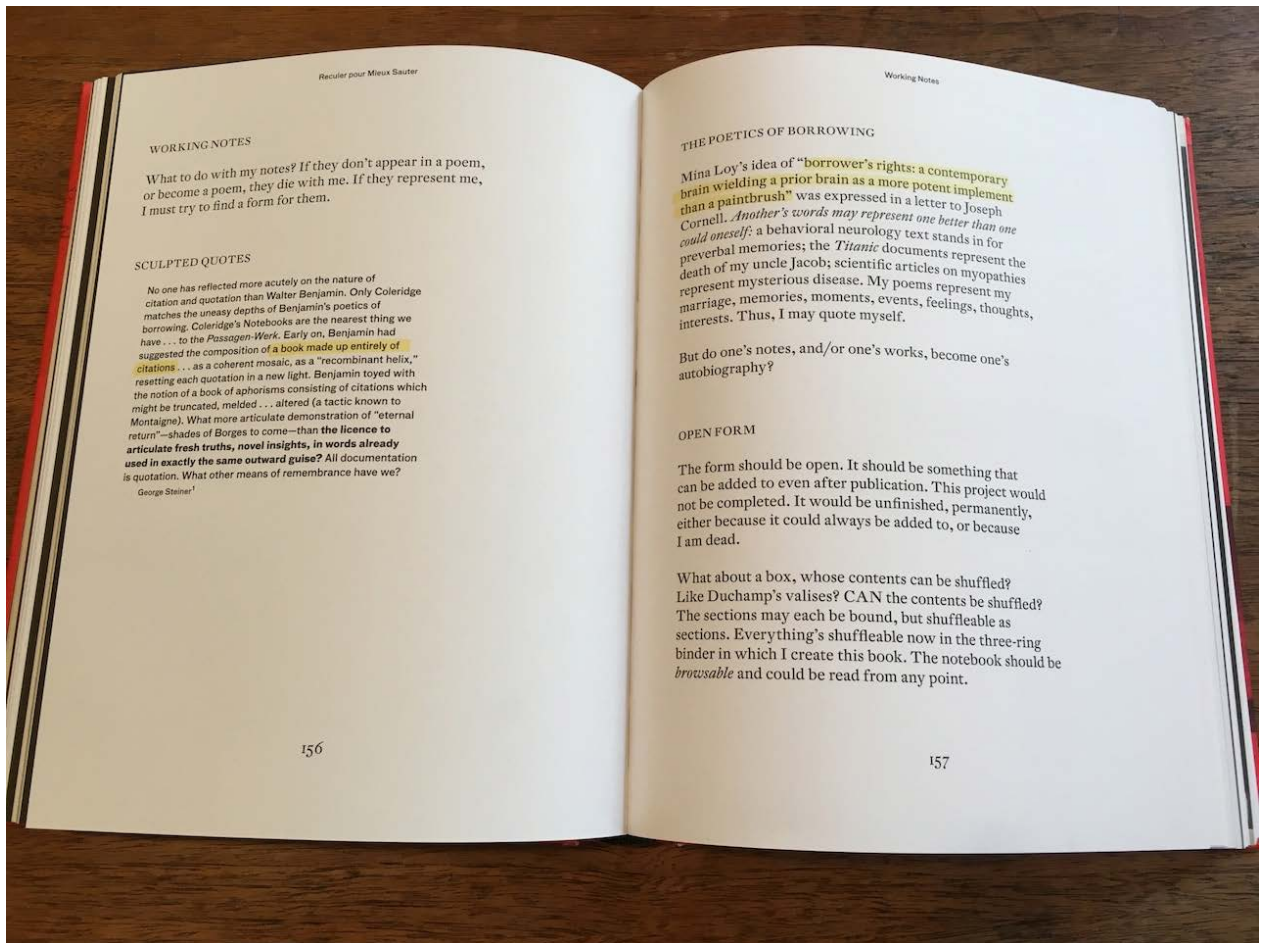
Cover of 'Reculer Pour Mieux Sauter: The Complete Works Volumes 1–12' by Anne-Marie Levine (all photos by the author for Hyperallergic unless otherwise noted)

Poet, pianist, and visual artist [Anne-Marie Levine](#)'s collected memoir, [Reculer Pour Mieux Sauter: The Complete Works Volumes 1–12](#) (Project Projects), takes the form of a collaged scrapbook. Between the scraps of newspaper clippings, family photographs, lengthy quotations of her writing and other pasted ephemera, Levine intervenes with highlighting and notes in a different typeface to distinguish them as her editorial voice. Levine intriguingly begins with documents related to the death of her uncle on the *Titanic* — newspaper clippings about the sinking, a list of her uncle's recovered personal effects, luggage tags, and correspondence related to the transportation of his body. These documents are introduced by a single line on an otherwise blank page, in her editorial typeface: "The S/S Titanic sank on April 15, 1912, with my father's brother Jacob on board." Beginning with these documents, rather than her own birth certificate or photographs of her early childhood, emphasizes that personal identity is not formed at birth, but rather long before it with what's inherited from familial and cultural backgrounds. Thus, Levine frames her own narrative first with her family history — one of the many external factors of her identity that predates her birth.

She does have a particularly unique and tragic history to share. Born in Belgium on the night of Kristallnacht, her parents fled just before the Nazis invaded. Throughout the book, Levine discusses this history — her status as a woman, a Jew, an immigrant, and a child of exiles — not overtly, but by cleverly arranging the words of others from popular culture, historic documents, and family photographs — words and notions that must have surrounded her whole life. The moments that do reveal her own feelings often come in the form of self-appropriation, pasting in pages from her previously published books of poetry. For example, Levine addresses the complex relationship between growing up comfortably in affluent Beverly Hills and her family’s immigrant roots by juxtaposing one of her poems from a 2003 collection alongside an advertisement for Adobe Acrobat displaying a ripe avocado with an emerald in place of the pit. The first line of the poem reads: “My father ate an avocado half with his dinner every night.” Several stanzas below she continues, “Vegetables were plentiful and fruit too, / in Beverly Hills, Southern California” and finally, “We had come from Belgium, all of us. / We had fled in the first days of the War. / In those winters you had only endive and cauliflower.” This paring occurs in the chapter titled “Surviving Paradise.” Even her chapters are well-titled, adding another layer of framing to her tale.



Spread of 'Reculer Pour Mieux Sauter' by Anne-Marie Levine



### Anne-Marie Levine's highlights in 'Reculer Pour Mieux Sauter'

It is Levine's method of framing throughout the collection that makes it so successful and enticing. Before she even begins her story she starts with a series of "preambles" that all touch on memoir's false premise of providing a true and authentic version of the self and why she's selected to confront this problem through collage. The very first preamble, by **Edmond Jabès**, appears even before the title page, "One reads the book in fits and starts, just as it was written." There is **Fredric Jameson**: "... an autobiographical scrapbook in which various real-life experiences . . . Are reformulated and reassembled in a more satisfying memorial than any photo album." And of course Walter Benjamin on collecting: "Collecting is a primal object of study. The student collects knowledge." While these quotations run the risk of being too heavy-handed, Levine rescues them — and this book — from that fate by using them to genuinely question her own project: her attempt to relate the idea of book-making to the notion of building a self.

In one of the middle chapters, "Writing Notes," which is a version of the notes she took for writing this book, she begins by questioning in her editorial typeface: "What to do with my notes? If they don't appear in a poem, or become a poem, they die with me. If they represent me, I must try to find a form for them." The chapter continues with longer versions of the preambles that began the book and her typed thoughts about what form this book should take and the problems associated with each form. She writes, "Highlighting. Appendices. Arrange the pieces in a such a way that the story will emerge without being told." And towards the end she worries and realizes, "I seem to be more interested in the notes than the . . . Are the notes the book, despite the autobiographical component, as originally imagined? Yes, the notes are the book."

Here, finally, emerges a version of herself not created by external factors but that she's internally



formed: herself as the editor, looking back and shaping her own history and her past selves. The book, under the pretense of “autobiography,” is about its own making — the struggle to edit the documents and detritus of her life and in doing so taking control to form her self-identity.



Spread of 'Reculer Pour Mieux Sauter' by Anne-Marie Levine

A complete hardcover version of **Reculer Pour Mieux Sauter: The Complete Works Volumes 1–12** by Anne-Marie Levine is out by **Project Projects**.