The son of a grape grower, Larry Levis was born in Fresno, California, where he spent his early years doing farm work, an experience he writes about in "The Poet at Seventeen." He attended Syracuse University and the University of Iowa, where he received his Ph.D. After school, Levis began to teach English and creative writing, in addition to writing poetry. He is noted for using strong, concrete images to explore various ideas in a fresh, original way.