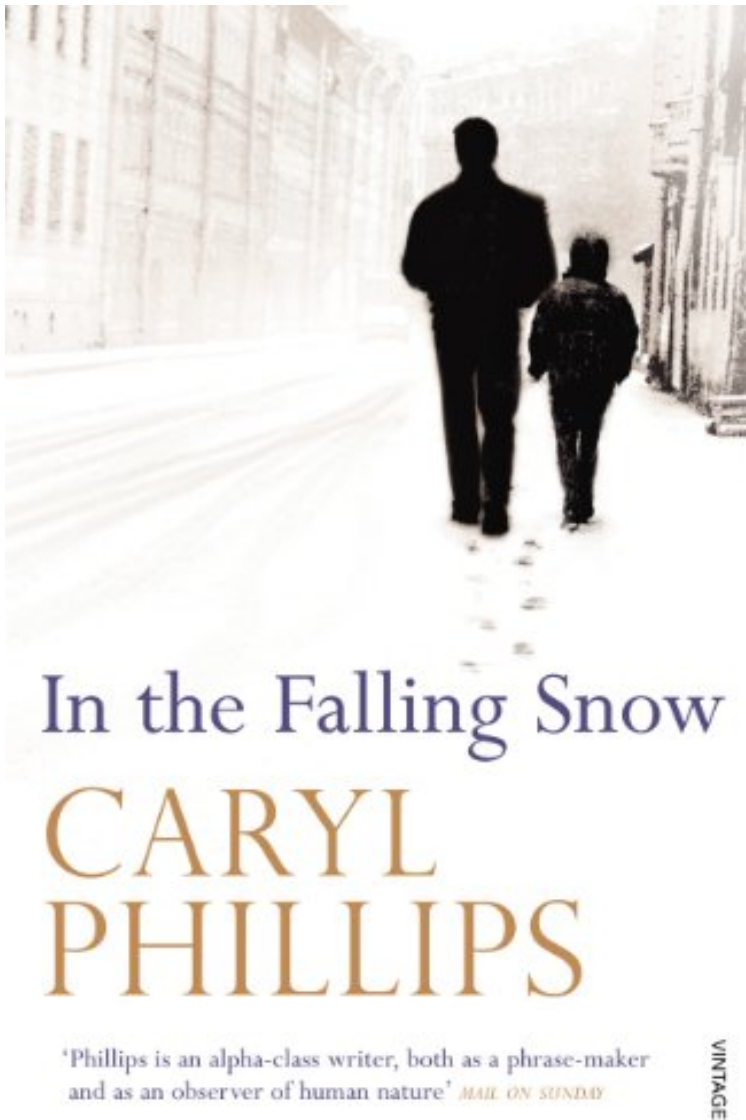


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In the Falling Snow



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Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurSocial worker Keith, separated from his wife and their teenage son, is floundering in a world of fraught sexual politics, parental responsibilities and class expectations. He takes refuge from his domestic problems in a long-cherished writing project and a renewed relationship with his aging father, who came to Britain as part of the windrush generation, but for the first time in his life he begins to feel extremely vulnerable as a black man in English society. Meanwhile Annabelle watches the man she married against the wishes of her parents struggle with his grip on reality. Despite their three year estrangement, she realises that they have no choice but to close ranks if they are to protect their son from a world of street gangs and violence.ExtraitHe is walking in one of those leafy suburbs of London where the presence of a

man like him still attracts curious half-glances. His jacket and tie encourage a few of the passers-by to relax a little, but he can see that others are actively suppressing the urge to cross the road. It is painfully clear that, as far as some people are concerned, he simply doesn't belong in this part of the city. As he turns into Sutherland Road, he reaches up and peels off the dark glasses. There is no sun to speak of, and autumn has long ago dispatched the lukewarm summer for another year. The wind suddenly rises and dislodges a flurry of leaves from the over-hanging trees, and he feels a chill ripple through his body. Despite the cold, the dark glasses make him feel more comfortable on these streets, for he is able to look at people without them being able to see his eyes. He fishes the slim plastic envelope from his inside jacket pocket and folds the glasses into their case, before tucking the envelope back into the same pocket. He stops by the small gate and takes a deep breath, and then he reaches down and lifts the latch. He passes through and watches as the wooden contraption swings back into place with the assistance of a tightly coiled iron spring. The half-dozen steps along the crazy-paved pathway are undertaken joylessly, and then he pushes the bell, which sings out with a lyrical two-toned peal whose lingering echo suggests that nobody is at home. He hears footsteps padding down the stairs, and he listens as she fiddles with the bolt and chain before throwing open the door. "Keith?" He is never sure what to make of the greeting. It is not really a question, for they both know who he is. "You all right, Keith?" He says nothing in reply. She tosses back her tangle of black hair and tilts her chin upwards, and then she quickly tips her head to one side and invites him to kiss her on the cheek. He leans in and dry-kisses her, and then as he stands tall he lets the end of his tongue draw a wet line against the side of her face. "Dirty sod." "What do you mean, 'dirty'?" She laughs out loud. "I'm only kidding. You look good, babe." He steps through the door and notices her looking anxiously over his shoulder to make sure that there are no prying eyes, and then he hears what he imagines is a businesswoman hurrying by whose footsteps click primly against the pavement. She slams the door shut and he resigns himself to the fact that once again he is marooned in her dismal hallway, at the bottom of her stairs, in her small terraced house in north-west London. He watches as the late afternoon light fades behind the sky blue curtains. She should use heavier fabric in the bedroom. At first he stayed overnight, and in the morning, as the birds started to sing, he would lie quietly beside her and wonder if his wife was also waking up next to somebody else. And, if she was, where was their son? Who was looking out for Laurie? In the mornings he tried hard not to move as the last thing he needed was Yvette talking to him, but because the curtains didn't block out the light it was impossible for him to sleep beyond dawn. He thought maybe she liked it this way, with nature giving her an automatic wake-up call, but he didn't want to ask any questions because that would be to suggest an intimacy that he was keen to avoid. A forty-seven-year-old man and a twenty-six-year-old girl. He understood the detached role that he was playing, and he was determined to stay in character. These days there is a predictable pattern to these more acceptable afternoon visits. Yvette likes to take charge. She carefully turns out the light in the downstairs hallway, and then she leads him upstairs. Once they reach the top landing she lets the silk robe slip to the floor. Initially he found the drama arousing, thrillingly so, but after his third or fourth afternoon visit (or "service call" as she likes to refer to them) she abandoned the black lace corset that he relished and replaced it with a red push-up bra and a matching thong. Clearly she imagined this to be an improvement--more of a "turn on"--but he couldn't find the words to fully express his disdain for the crass vulgarity of this silly piece of string. Yvette continues to wear this tart's uniform, and as her robe pools on to the floor his eyes drop down and focus first on her legs and then on her ankles (which he knows are cocoa butter smooth), but try as he might he can't bring himself to look at her underwear. Once inside the bedroom, Yvette locks the door by sliding a small brass bolt into place, and then she eases her hands into his jacket and up towards his shoulder pads, stripping the garment from him as though peeling the skin from a piece of fruit. He may not have found a way to talk with her about the underwear, but he has been forced to tell her that scented candles make him gag. After the second coughing fit, Yvette quizzed him, and although at first he denied that there was a problem he eventually confessed, and she laughed and assured him that a hint of jasmine or honey peach was something that she could happily live without. Having removed his jacket she allows him to undress himself while she lies on the top sheet of the bed and unclips her bra so that her breasts, while not totally abandoning the infrastructure of the wired cups, perch mischievously on the threshold of liberation. Yvette's enthusiasm is almost theatrical, but she is genuinely aroused and achieves a climax with speed and great vocal excitement. He used to worry about the neighbours, but she assured him that they seldom returned home from work before nine o'clock. Besides, she and Colin never had any complaints from them, and she never hears their lovemaking, so she assumes that the walls between these houses must be quite thick. She closes her eyes, lies back on the bed and continues to catch her breath, while

he props himself up on one elbow and carefully tunnels his free hand through the rough nest of her hair. He knows that she "relaxes" it, for he has seen the full artillery of creams and lotions in the bathroom, but her heritage is most evident in the battle between Europe and Africa that is being waged on her face where full lips and emerald green eyes compete for attention. Under the most intense scrutiny she could easily pass for white and suntanned, but her penchant for kente cloth scarves and wooden beads speaks eloquently to the fact that she has never tried to deny her mixed background. When she is ready, Yvette opens her eyes and smiles gently. Then she jackknifes her leg and runs her instep against his thigh, which is his cue to mount her again and this time slowly tease her by conjuring pleasure out of gestures so subtle that only those locked together in the most claustrophobic of embraces might sense movement. Rather than quickly capitulate in one furious yelp of gratitude, Yvette punctuates the "second round" with a continuous low burble of half-whispered imprecations and throaty gasps which diminish in volume as she approaches climax, and then she falls silent before releasing a cry of distress and shuddering against his body. For a minute she holds him tightly, as though she might burst into tears, and then she slowly spurns him and rolls to the far side of the bed and curls into a tight foetal ball. He watches as she loses herself in what he imagines is the familiar entanglement of female feelings of guilt and vulnerability, but he is untroubled by her temporary plight. Annabelle has left him yet another urgent message about Laurie and the problems he is experiencing at school, having fallen in with what she likes to call "the wrong set." He knows that he should have called her back, for she has been insisting that their seventeen-year-old son is growing increasingly "bolshy" with her, although it is unclear what Annabelle expects him to do about it. After all, they are both fully aware that Laurie seems somewhat indifferent to the idea of spending any time with his father. On the second message, the anxiety in Annabelle's voice had alarmed him. Since their separation some three years ago, she has made it her business to carefully construct a steely facade around her emotions as a way of distancing herself from him. These days she is usually meticulous about keeping both her wit and her levity of spirit well out of sight. For his part, he is fully aware that through nobody's fault but his own he now lives alone in a small flat, and his wife and son have every reason to be annoyed with him and every right to protect themselves emotionally. However, he is still not sure why he told Annabelle about sleeping with his annoying co-worker at the office New Forest retreat, for it was a nothing encounter, semi-drunken, and not pleasurable in the least. It was the first time that he had even thought of cheating on his wife, and once it was over he knew immediately that there would never be any repetition of his infidelity, yet two weeks later, and after he imagined that he had successfully negotiated the awkwardness of the workplace situation, he suddenly felt some foolish compulsion to confess everything to Annabelle as she stood ironing tea towels and watching Newsnight. He is unsure what kind of a reaction he expected, but having heard him out she calmly replaced the upturned iron on the ironingboard and told him that in the morning she wanted him to leave her and their fourteen-year-old son alone in order that they might get on with their lives. "Go away and sort it out," she said contemptuously, "because after everything you and I have been through I really don't deserve to have to put up with your pathetic midlife crisis. So just go, okay?" She abruptly unplugged the iron and left the room, and he realised that he would be spending the night alone on the sofa. In the morning he would do as she suggested and leave, but three years later he still questions himself as to why he felt the urge to put in jeopardy everything that they had worked so hard to build. What he is sure about, and doesn't have to question, is the reservoir of resentment that Laurie is drawing upon whenever his mother suggests spending any time with his father. He turns over on his side and looks at the late afternoon light behind the thin curtains in Yvette's bedroom, and then at his jacket which lies in a discarded bundle on the floor. He hears the roar of a passing aeroplane and he imagines the thin, wispy trails of departure in its wake. There is no longer any escaping the fact that today he will have to talk to Yvette and end their arrangement. While she is in the shower he surveys the small, cluttered bedroom and wonders about the young woman whose bed he is lying in. He knows that her ex-husband Colin was her lecturer at college, and that he is twelve years her senior. She shared this piece of information the first time they went to the pub together. "He left me for an older woman," she said, "somebody more his own age. But at least I got the house." She paused, moved the plastic stirrer to one side, and then took a noisy sip of her vodka tonic. "Well, we never really argued. It just became clear that we didn't have that much in common and we'd even stopped, you know. Well not completely, but I had to ask for it." She blushed slightly and then tried to smother her nervous laughter with her hand, but she coughed as though something was stuck in her throat. He gallantly climbed to his feet and went to the bar for a glass of water, which she drank in a series of rapid gulps. She paused, as though eager to belch, but eventually she simply swallowed deeply then reached up and began to stroke and flatten her

hair with the palm of her hand. "Too much information, right?" He smiled and shook his head. "Don't say much, do you?" He laughed as he took in the gentle curves of her young body. Since Annabelle had put him out of the house there had been no other women. It's not that he'd lost interest. He would still sit on the bus and try and sneak a look without being seen, and he would frequently follow a girl down the tube escalator and make sure that he got into the same compartment and casually sit opposite her. But he was too old to go to the places where he imagined men went to meet girls. Visiting clubs or going to parties lacked a certain dignity, and the idea of internet sites or, even worse, singles evenings with all that speed dating business filled him with dread. Computer porn was all right as far as it went, and he'd somewhat resigned himself to the reality that an occasional furtive log-on would have to do for now. At his age, it was better than making a fool of himself by going out on the pull, or gently soliciting friends for introductions. However, as he sat in the pub opposite her, he realised that Yvette could solve a problem for she had a vibrant personality and a well put together body, and she appeared to be interested. He liked her energy, and the fact that she didn't seem to be afraid of saying whatever came into her mind, but Yvette worked for him. Unlike the New Forest encounter with the co-worker who was his professional equal, he was actually Yvette's boss and, although she appeared to be unfazed by recent developments between them, he kept reminding himself that he was the one who ought to be responsible. Of course, what made their situation even more complicated was the fact that it was actually Yvette who was determining both the pace and the nature of their courtship. By the time she strides out of the shower and back into the bedroom, with the towel tubed tightly around her body, she expects him to be dressed and sitting on the edge of the bed ready to watch her step into her clothes. She walks from one side of the room to the other and makes a performance of turning on all the lights, including the bedside lamps. He knows that this part of the encounter is all about her vanity, for she simply desires him to concentrate on her. *Revue de presse* "Caryl Phillips is an alpha-class writer, both as a phrase-maker and an observer of human nature" (Max Davidson Mail on Sunday)