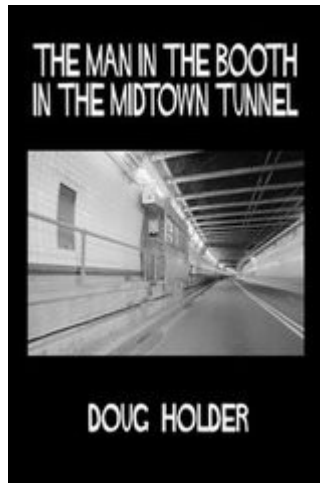


*review by Pamela Annas, PhD*

**Review of *The Man in the Booth in the Midtown Tunnel* by Doug Holder** (Cervena Barva Press POBOX 440357 W. Somerville, Ma. 02144)

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Doug Holder is above all an urban poet, an observer chronicling the everyday sights and absurdities of Somerville, Boston and New York City in plain talk flavored with cool irony and sudden startling bursts of imagery. His settings include hospital rooms, bars, coffee shops, Harvard Yard, the post office, buses and subway trains, the Boston Public Library, Shea Stadium, housing projects, city streets, and the Midtown Tunnel from Queens to Manhattan which is the location of the book's title poem. His characters are bizarre and ordinary like all of us. Several of

the poems are inspired by newspaper stories—about a woman who sat on a toilet for two years in her boyfriend's apartment, about an old man who murdered his equally aged wife, about a middle aged man who died on a subway train: "the Daily dropped/ From his hands. . . .The trains backed up/ From Cambridge to Dorchester."

I'm reminded in the pages of this collection of meeting, a year or two before her death, the artist Alice Neel, who painted gorgeously surreal ironic portraits of famous and ordinary people in the 1930s and 40s--and shivering as she looked me over. Doug Holder looks at the world through a similarly sharp and amused set of eyes. Yet there is no malice but a profound sympathy here—for the helplessness of aging and of poverty, for physical and mental illnesses, for the complexity of family relations—and most of all, for the isolation and loneliness lurking underneath tenaciously crowded city life. In the title poem of the collection, the man in the booth in the Midtown Tunnel "paces the perimeter/ Of his cage" while outside the cars whip by: "And we are/ Faceless and a blur,/ Behind thick plates/ Of light-bleached glass."

However, let me assure you this is not a gloomy collection of poems.

There are rich nuggets of humor and wry reflection throughout this collection and, to combat the isolation of urban life, in almost every poem a relationship is forged between the observing eye and the subject of the poem. So, for example, as the speaker of the poem observes a woman nursing in a restaurant in "Private Dining Under a Blouse":

I saw  
The infant emerge  
Sleeping  
Held in an untroubled  
Dream.

I sucked on my straw  
Flattening the plastic stem  
Still awake  
And troubled.

A few of the poems in this collection, like the one above, segue gracefully in subject from Holder's last book, *Of All the Meals I Had Before: Poems About Food and Eating*. Another is a poem toward the end of the book, "The Last Hotdog": "She brought it/ to his sick bed,/ He bit through/ The red casing/ The familiar orgasm/ Of juice/ Hitting the roof/ Of his mouth". And one more food-focused poem, "At the Fruit Stand," which is about bananas and melons and grapes and is too erotic to discuss in a family publication. However, you will enjoy it. And the whole collection.

\* Pamela Annas is a Professor of English at University of Massachusetts/ Boston and the author of *A Disturbance in Mirrors: The Poetry of Sylvia Plath*.