

City of Stories
By Denise Provost
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Review by Dennis Daly

WHILE READING DENISE PROVOST'S NEW BOOK, *City of Stories*, I marveled not only at her well-wrought pieces, but the witty, contagious joy pooling in each one, which charmingly overflows and inevitably drenches the reader in its artistic charm. Sure, there are moments of sorrow and maddening dysfunction in her observations. Hope, however, and the poet's offbeat stoicism always seem to save the day.

"What oft was thought, but ne'er so well expressed" said Alexander Pope, in describing wit. Provost's formal poems fit that description entirely. She often takes pedestrian observations, gives them context, and decks them out with agreeable and sometimes laugh-out-loud meaning.

In her poem *Full Disclosures* Provost sees what we all see in the public walkways: someone, seemingly mad, talking to himself or herself. We soon discover that these apparent lunatic wanderers are plugged in to their mobile phones and indulging in deep and presumptively private conversations. The poet's persona overhears a scandalous story and comments on the droll irony. Here is the end of the story,

*he'd logged on to his father's computer
and accidentally found a secret life—
some sordid messages and photographs,
until then hidden from the guileless wife.
Mom's now filed for divorce. I'd almost laugh,
but Dad's indiscreet habits seem passed on
to his obviously blurting son.*

The *Bus Queue*, Provost's paean to the long-suffering commuters utilizing public transportation, follows the before, during, and after sequence of tribulations endured by these local bus travelers. She sets her gorgeous couplets in wintertime maximizing the misery. The poem opens this way,

*Old and young stand in freezing rain,
await connection to our train:*

*two women, with umbrellas furled,
stalled in their journey to their world—*



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*a skinny student lingers next,
gloves fingerless, so he can text;*

*his friend is next to him, perhaps
hunting through the "Where's My Bus?" app.*

*Hats and hoods swathe our heads twice;
some boots sport crampons, for the ice-*

*the treacherous ice, that claimed the foot
of she who wears a "walking boot."*

Nostalgic scribblers sometimes ramble on about the good times that weren't very good. Or about how hardy people were, and how they persisted through the dark periods of their lives and eventually triumphed, despite near impossible obstacles, through self-determination and independent effort. Well, maybe. But more likely there were other, now-outdated, institutions that kept things afloat, like one's neighborhood. Provost considers how that worked in her two-stanza poem *Commiseration*. Look at the simple but stunning enjambment, delivering both irony and theme, between the fifth and sixth line: ...Life was good/ enough for most.... Here is the heart of the poem,

*We stuck together, fighting off the gloom
of bereavement and loss; the way we stood
with Millie, when her only son died young.
Helen had fallen and broken some bones,
so we had to bring her walker along
when we drove to the wake for our friend Joan,
who had never had a bit of luck...*

Reception of mail entails both delight and anxiety. In her poem *No Delivery* Provost's persona (Who else could it be?) finds herself in hell, lacking the necessary grace to "make the cut." Like most human beings faced with an eternity of inscrutable torment, she obsesses on something annoying but easily comprehensible. In conclusion she laments-- somewhat wryly-- her fate,

*It was with ample measure of chagrin
I found myself being escorted in
to classic Dante-esque topography.*

*I'm more or less resigned to being here.
I couldn't squelch the impulse to transgress,
but if I'd left a forwarding address
I could at least hope postcards would appear
sometimes. Too late—I lived life as a rogue—
and now, I'd sell my soul to receive Vogue.*

As she writes her poems Provost exhibits unabashed amusement. She clearly likes the process of what she is doing. Copping a quote from Marxist critic Terry Eagleton's *How to Read a Poem*, "Poetry is a superior form

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of babbling," she turns the table on him by making a cogent argument on poetry's necessary place in the human condition, which, in a sense, proves Eagleton's point. In her piece Eagleton's Credo she posits,

*Just by existing, Poetry fulfills
our deeply held Utopian desires
-a form of life that's not so much in thrall
to duty, but turns obligation's call
back towards indulgence of our wayward will
to flirt among unattached signifiers.*

My favorite poem in this collection, secreted by Provost near the end, is Easter 1916, Reimagined for Maud. Provost, displaying unmitigated presumption and wit, rewrites the famous Easter, 1916 by William Butler Yeats. As a prelude to the poem, she reprints Maud Gonne's letter to Yeats in which Gonne (Yeats's love interest) complains about the quality and sincerity of his poem. Provost's reimagined poem answers Gonne's criticism by doubling down on reality at the expense of romanticism. Yeats, as imagined by Provost, openly considers his troubled relationship with individual rebels, now martyrs,

*I would see them at close of day,
With stiff or angry faces,
Self-proclaimed leaders of our grey
City's unhappy masses.
Perhaps a curt nod of the head
Towards men who aimed spiteful words
At me – for, with all they had said
What choice but fight with words?
With a thought to hold my own
Or, better, to press forth my side
In this unmannerly town,
Certain it was worthwhile to fight
Against detractors of my work
Back when motley was still worn:
But all changed suddenly—
My discourse must rise beyond scorn.*

The poem ends as it must with the rebels transfigured by an overly sincere, unduly frank (and imagined) Yeats.

This is Denise Provost's second otherworldly book in a row. Her reputation as a poetical alchemist continues to grow