



# The Great Feminist Beat Poet's First Book in Decades: A Review of Diane di Prima's *The Poetry Deal*

Title: *The Poetry Deal*, by Diane di Prima. Poet Laureate Series Number 5. City Lights Foundation, San Francisco. 109 pages.  
Reviewed by: Stephanie McKenzie

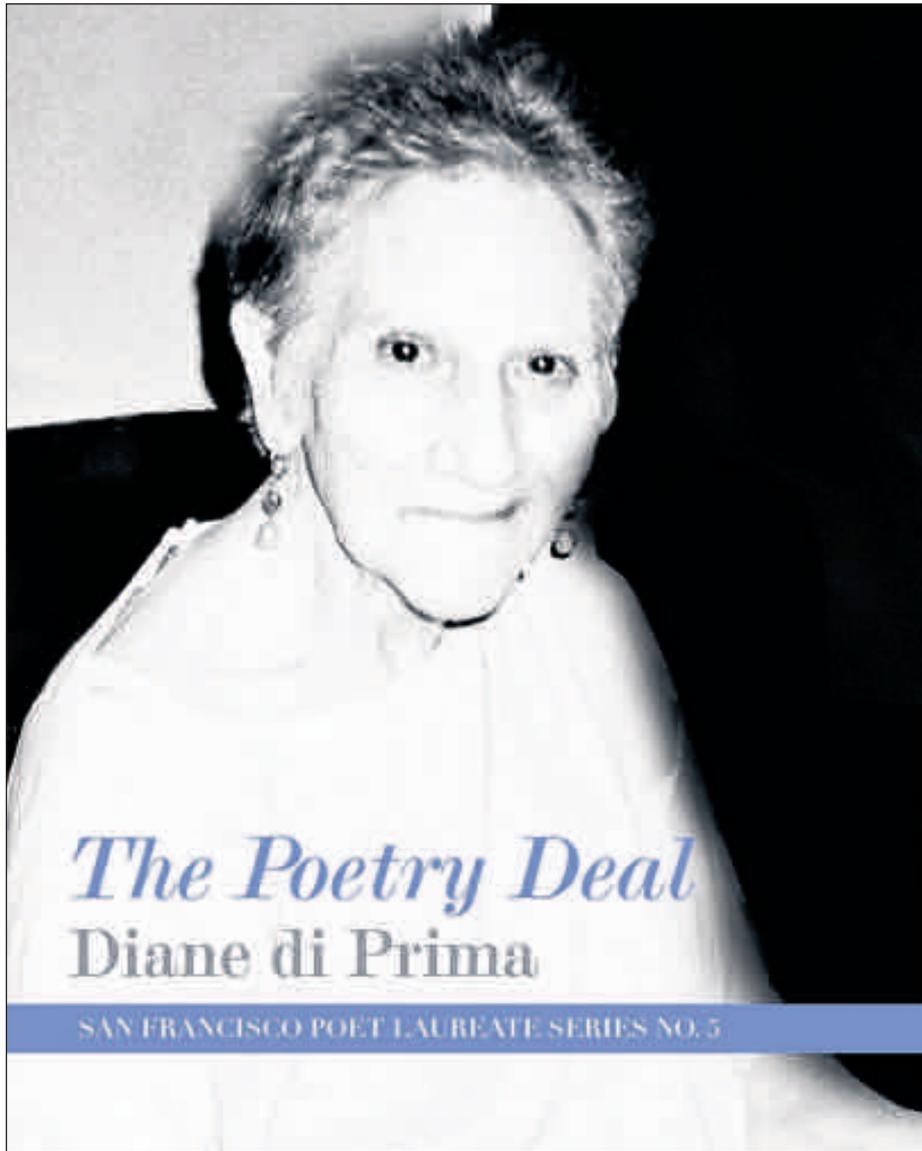
**F**eminist beat poet Diane di Prima's latest collection, *The Poetry Deal*, is a refreshing critique and celebration of life. This is di Prima's "first volume of new poetry in decades" (back blurb).

Born in New York, di Prima moved to San Francisco in 1968. She has "published more than 40 books. . . . With Amiri Baraka, she co-edited the literary magazine *The Floating Bear* from 1961 to 1969. She co-founded the Poets Press and the New York Poets Theatre and founded Eidolon Editions and the Poets Institute. A follower of Buddhism, she also co-founded the San Francisco Institute of Magical and Healing Arts. Di Prima was named Poet Laureate of San Francisco in 2009. (<http://www.poetryfoundation.org>).

Having come to San Francisco for the first time, I headed to City Lights Bookstore - the iconic symbol of the beat poetry movement - almost immediately. This was the land of Kerouac, Ginsberg, Ferlinghetti, and, of course, di Prima, and City Lights was the harbinger of revolution and risk. I couldn't wait to hit the stacks.

How strange it was, after all the stories, to wander through North Beach onto Columbus Ave. amongst money and privilege. This is not to denigrate the area: North Beach, where City Lights is located, is, like the rest of city, amazingly friendly. For all its money, San Francisco is remarkably kind. But it's just that, well . . . To go into City Lights amidst the wealth and rumours of what it would cost these days to live in the neighbourhood - or anywhere else in San Francisco, for that matter - made me wonder how this place could ever have given birth to the "angelheaded hipsters" (Ginsberg "Howl") whom Ginsberg wrote about; today's hipsters seem to pay a fortune to look ironically akin to the "poverty and tatters" ("Howl") of the sixties, and I couldn't imagine Ginsberg or any of his crew dining in North Beach or being let in to many of the establishments for that matter.

However, I did find a vestige of that past: that daring devotion to ideals that typified that generation who ceaselessly fought for human rights. It is found in di Prima's *The Poetry Deal*. Perhaps not surprisingly, then, the book is, above everything, a love letter to poetry itself - an art form many have associated for centuries with a quest for truth. The collection begins, "[i]t is the poem I serve" (from "First Draft: Poet Laureate Oath of Office" 17), and, in "Some Words About the Poem," di Prima suggests that to serve the poem means to tell the truth: "Poets speak truth when no one else can or



will. That's why the hunger for poetry grows when the world grows dark" (di Prima 107).

Di Prima speaks the truth in a spare, sparse style reminiscent of modernist verse but pounding with the heartbeat of the San Francisco di Prima recalls with nostalgia: "I came here" from New York, di Prima explains in the book's introduction, "to work in new ways for change: the grace of possibility that had opened on this coast" (2). For di Prima, San Francisco, back in the day, embodied the resolute desire to fight for these things: "I came to new dreams . . . [b]ecause in the New York of the 1950s, where I came of age as a poet, one wrote one's dreams, but didn't try to make them happen" (2). Notably, di Prima makes clear that City Lights housed the hope people still search for:

How many late nights did we haunt the Store  
buying scads of new poems from all corners of the  
earth  
then head to the all-night Tower Records full of  
drag-queens  
& revolutionaries, to get a

few new songs (from "City Lights 1961") However, beginning with her introduction--a transcription of her inaugural address as poet laureate--until the very end of the book, di Prima protests. She praises the San Francisco she came to but laments what, for her, the city has lost and become: "How did we allow ourselves to be derailed? So badly derailed that I read in the *Chronicle* last week that if you can't pay your rent in this town and you have school-age kids, you won't be evicted until the school year ends - how stupid is that?" (15) "Remember," di Prima cautions in "Memorial Day, 2003," "life hangs by a thread . . . Remember it's not a safe time & all the more reason / To do whole-heartedly what you have to do" (64).

Di Prima's honesty and convictions remain firm. One of the strongest pieces in this collection, "¢ About Obama," shapes the president not as a politician rendered compliant and constricted by a Senate but as a human being overpowered by love - what *The Poetry Deal* suggests is the greatest human condition:  
if you were living  
in the enemy's house  
wife & kids there too  
.....

what wd you be willing  
.....  
to pay?  
  
to see them  
.....  
walk out of there  
whole  
not widowed  
or orphaned (71)  
"Haiti, Chile, Tibet," the book's strongest poem, reminds one that the spirit that drove the beats was not-for di Prima--a fleeting trend. "LET'S STOP FOR A MOMENT TO REMEMBER WHAT WE ARE" (73), the poem begins, and, then, reflects, "ALL BORDERS DISAPPEAR IN CATASTROPHE" (74). Di Prima commands "GIVE UP CONFUSING YR PROPERTY WITH YOUR LIFE" (75).

*The Poetry Deal* is a polished, raw tribute to voices that remain revolutionary. This verse smacks of the unapologetic wisdom of Marley, the vision of Blake and Yeats, the stylistics of Langston Hughes. I wondered, for a second, if di Prima should maybe move to Jamaica, the real cutting edge of talent where, in di Prima's words, true artists

. . . keep  
a hair  
ahead  
of the

beat (from "The Poetry Reading" 80) Then I reflected on those poems dedicated to di Prima's friends who died of AIDS, and I remembered the rights, including gay rights, for which di Prima and her friends fought and how they sought inspiration from Civil Rights activists. I recalled this generation's new Jamaican visionary Kei Miller and his portrait of homophobia in Jamaica, housed in his powerful collection of essays *Writing Down the Vision: Essays and Prophecies*. I couldn't shake knowing that Jamaica's laws would have condemned a large chunk of friends with whom di Prima locked her voice in a struggle for all human rights.

That's the deal with poetry, I guess. It makes you unable to lie.

*The Poetry Deal* ends with a poetic anecdote remindful of the riddles Marley and Miss Lou often relied upon: "At a reading for the Sandinistas long ago, my son Rudi said: *All artists are warriors, aren't they, Mom? That's because there's so many parts to art.*" (109)

This is a collection well worth getting, though it is obvious di Prima's voice can't really be bought.

*Stephanie McKenzie is an associate professor, English Programme, Memorial University of Newfoundland (Grenfell Campus), Canada.*