



The Descent of Alette (Penguin Poets)

By Alice Notley

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In *The Descent of Alette*, Alice Notley presents a feminist epic, a bold journey into the deeper realms. Alette, the narrator, finds herself underground, deep beneath the city, where spirits and people ride endlessly on subways, not allowed to live in the world above. Traveling deeper and deeper, she is on a journey of continual transformation, encountering a series of figures and undergoing fragmentations and metamorphoses as she seeks to confront the Tyrant and heal the world. Using a new measure, with rhythmic units indicated by quotation marks, Notley has created a “spoken” text, a rich and mesmerizing work of imagination, mystery, and power.

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The Descent of Alette (Penguin Poets) By Alice Notley Bibliography

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

Often considered a second-generation New York School poet, Notley (*Closer to Me and Closer...*) offers a vividly imagined book-length poem. The work reads like a postmodern, mytho-feminist combination of Dante's *Inferno* and the Old English *Beowulf* from Grendel's point of view, in which the explorer/warrior is female and the monster/devil an evil, charming, sophisticated man called "the tyrant." The narrator, Alette, descends into a surreal, subterranean landscape, which is highly charged with metaphysical and sexual symbolism—a grotesque subway system, a series of caves and a darkened forest inhabited by "the snake" (a Mother Goddess-like symbol of feminine spiritual energy). She discovers the purpose of her journey is to kill the tyrant, who once nearly succeeded in destroying the snake. Throughout, lines are segmented into phrases with quotation marks, lending a hypnotic rhythm and spoken-word atmosphere, as the book's opening lines suggest: "one day, I awoke" "& found myself on" "a subway, endlessly."/"I didn't know" "how I'd arrived there or" "who I was" "exactly." Notley's raw sensual language and imagery ("fetal flesh," "flower skin") imbue the transformation of landscape and Alette's own body (she becomes, at one point, part owl) with a startling psychological resonance. (Apr.) FYI: Notley, who now lives in Paris, was once married to the late Ted Berrigan.

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From [Booklist](#)

Working in an avant-garde mode, Notley seeks epic stature literally and figuratively in this new collagelike work. Her underground world of subways and lost souls cannot escape comparison to Dante's *Inferno* but does have its own agenda, both feminist and personal. The multilayered depths are the first and last similarities between Dante and Notley. This epic is a story of transformation and travel, a journey of imagination that is firmly rooted in the reality of urban, modern living. War veterans, the mentally disturbed, homeless people—they are real witnesses and participants in our travel, and we deny or affirm their existence by passing or stopping for them when taking a train or bus. Notley uses this real experience to give strangers voice and to create exchanges so often feared in daily life. Using rhythmic units that resound like dialogue, Notley weaves a conversation of motion and mystery. Underlying Alette's heroic travel to confront the Tyrant who torments souls are keen observations about people and life struggles. Throughout this epic are brief and perceptive comments that restate universal truths and reinforce the urge toward all that is right.

Janet St. John

From the Back Cover

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