



Vice: New and Selected Poems

By Ai

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Winner of the 1999 National Book Award for Poetry.

Collected here are poems from Ai's previous five books? *Cruelty*, *Killing Floor*, *Sin*, *Fate*, and *Greed*? along with seventeen new poems. Employing her trademark ferocity, these new dramatic monologues continue to mine this award-winning poet's "often brilliant" (*Chicago Tribune*) vision.

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Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review

You know the age-old question: Suppose you could handpick a cast of living or dead characters and have them all to dinner. Who would you ask? In this searing collection, Ai does the difficult work of choosing for us. She invites a whole host of often less-than-presentable guests, including presidents ("I have a deep affection for my wife, / but also for sweet, big-haired girls... who never complain of tired jaws"), paparazzi ("I am there for you, / a friend, not an enemy, / stalkerazzi, or a tabloid Nazi"), and prurient priests ("Lord, I crave things"). Elsewhere, Ai gives voice to Lenny Bruce, a grief-stricken Marilyn Monroe, and the spurned lover who confesses "A man could never do / as much for Imelda / as a pair of shoes." Donning the mask of our most famous (and infamous) politicians and celebrities, as well as our most vilified antiheroes, she gives new life to the dramatic monologue. And in poems "by" rapists, murderers, looters, hit men, and stalkers, she puts words in the mouths of the thoroughly muzzled. Like Whitman, she writes from the conviction that every voice--no matter how despicable or seemingly insignificant--deserves the chance to be heard. --*Martha Silano*

From Publishers Weekly

It is impossible to reconstruct the explosive initial impact of this poet's early work, which toys with American stereotypes, myths and truths in dramatic monologues that make everyone uncomfortable: "I move off. I let her eat,/ while I get my dog's chain leash from the closet./ I whirl it around my head./ O daughter, so far, you've only had a taste of icing,/ are you ready now for some cake?" In books like *Cruelty* (1973) and *Killing Floor* (1979), a midwife describes how "a scraggy, red child comes out of her into my hands/ like warehouse ice sliding down the chute," and the poet recounts how the dead brother of her lover "slides from the black saddle/ like a bedroll of fine velvet" while she makes love on the porch. In her third book, *Sin*, Ai (pronounced "I") struck an equipoise between narrative force and lyrical grace, represented here in poems such as "The Good Shepherd: Atlanta, 1981" and in several Chaucerian "Tales." The highly compressed lyric poems further evolve into extended narratives over the course of this selection, and by *Fate* (1991), they begin to turn more regularly toward cultural icons like Jimmy Hoffa and James Dean, while supplying enough of their own wattage to make it work. The newer poems, however, deteriorate into little more than lineated tabloid reportage of the likes of O.J., Monica Lewinsky and David Koresh (labeled "fictions"). While there seems to be an ambitious blurring of art and life attempted in these and other poems on lesser (!) figures, they don't quite yield fresh perspectives, or even the can't-take-your-eyes-from-the-screen force of the originals. Readers will nevertheless appreciate this summary of an impressive career as they await its next installment.

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From Library Journal

Ai's poems provide an absorbing, gritty anatomy of desire you cannot satisfy. In this selection of 18 new poems and 58 from five previous books published from 1973 to 1993, agents of emotional and mental abuse describe horrific journeys into malice and the old fear. Transfigured by desire, speakers (a heroin addict, a paparazzo, a racist) who take extreme measures try to unravel the strands of equivocal motivation. What I always wanted/ was release from my own pain/ but theres only the terrible surrender to it, confesses the police officer who committed suicide before he was to receive a medal for rescuing people after the Oklahoma City bombing. Ai's willingness to explore moral values in collision shines into the hearts of those doomed to be crushed. In *Ice* and *Rwanda*, she highlights the dignity and suffering of ordinary women, victims of inexplicable violence. Redemptive empathy transforms these unadorned narratives into documents that reveal the intense disintegration of body and soul. Richly rewarding, but not for the squeamish. Frank

Users Review

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Donna Cook:

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