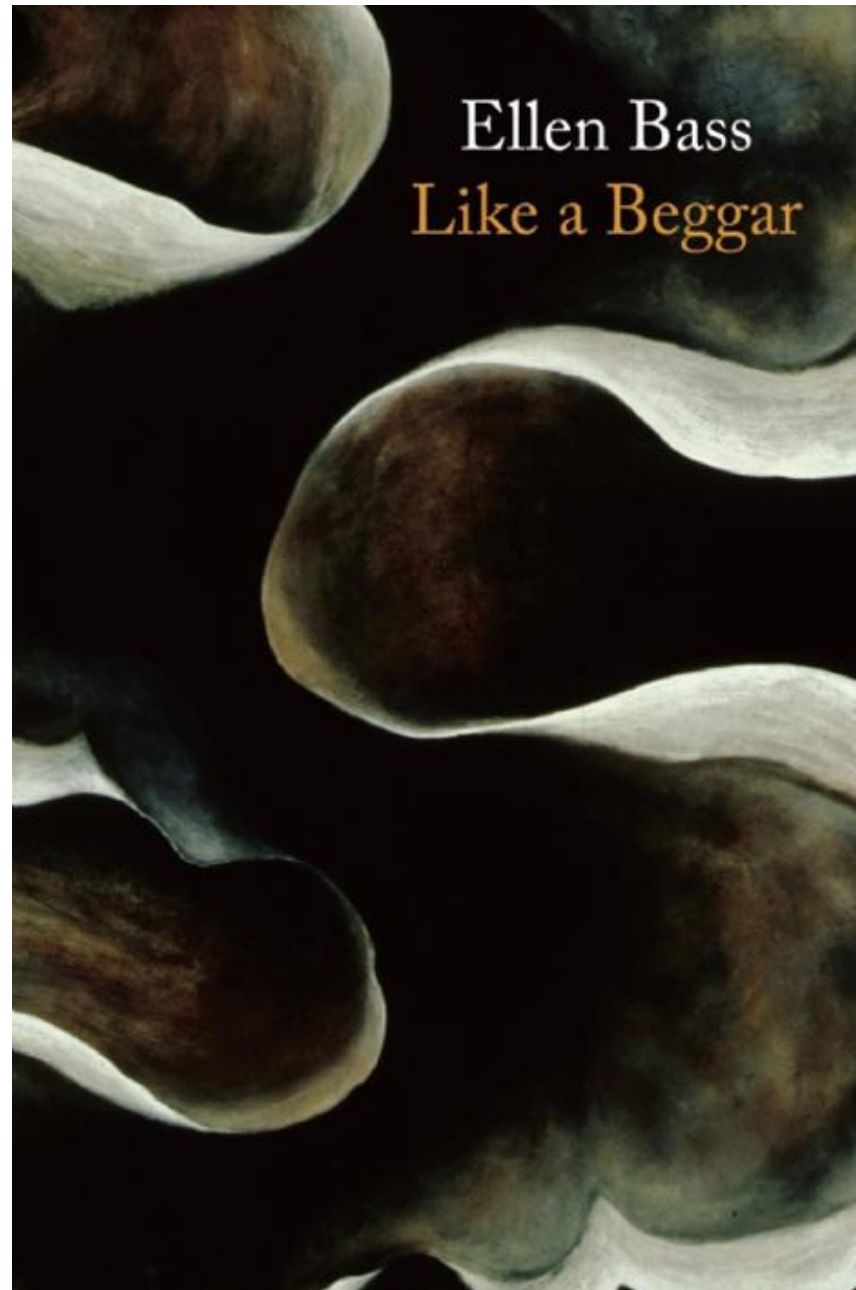


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The Write Place At the Write Time Book Review- Hot off the Presses



Cover Image of Like a Beggar

Author bio: Ellen Bass has published several award-winning books of poetry, including *The Human Line* and *Mules of Love*. Her poems have appeared in *The New Yorker*, *American Poetry Review*, *The New Republic*, *The Kenyon Review*, and many other journals. She coedited the groundbreaking anthology of women's poetry *No More Masks!* and her non-fiction includes the best-selling *The Courage to Heal*. She teaches in the MFA program at Pacific University.

***The Write Place At the Write Time Book Review Presents:
Like a Beggar by Ellen Bass***

Review by Nicole M. Bouchard

The poetic voice of Ellen Bass seems to elicit a humble, inviting covenant between poet and reader: Come as you are, learn from me what you will. Drawing inspiration from the intimate tone of this book, I'm inclined to treat this not as a formal review, but rather as an opportunity to talk about a work that I found, read and loved—or perhaps, just perhaps, one that found, read and loved me. *Like a Beggar* seems capable of that kind of animated intuition that allows it to be discovered when needed. It's the hair of the dog that bit you. A tonic so strong, you almost have to need it to truly appreciate its efficacy.

It does not speak of extreme perils. These are not the far off threats relegated to fitful sleeps to be tossed off with the blankets in the morning. This collection of poems hits at circumstances all too real, too close and common. Whether they pertain directly to the reader or someone they know, they all live in the same neighborhood; they're both universal and specific. What at first glance seems to be a raw, tell-it-like-it-is contemplation of the ordinary and extraordinary struggles we're forced to face is actually a marveling ode at our capacity to endure and find the beauty in life. As much as it seems to warn, to truth tell and prepare us for the days we think we'll somehow avoid, it encourages us to stand, brush the dirt away and look around for what sustains us through it all. It's a frank conversation with a

dear friend or loved one where we might be shaken by the shoulders and embraced all in the space of an hour.

It is a deft disguise, set up in the opening poem, "Relax". A wry account of all that could possibly go wrong, it ends quite literally with a bittersweet taste. Yet it starts to become clear what the real message is going to be in "Reading Neruda's 'Ode to the Onion'". First advocating groundedness, it shifts to the wonders of singular focus and finally becomes a celebration of the individual moment. "French Chocolates" isn't only true to form for dealing with illness, but with any heartbreak that is misunderstood, suppressed and choked back with the platitudes or dismissals of those who can't or won't empathize. It's a cheer-worthy guide of how to lend support and what not to say. There is a heart-wrenching redemptive quality to "Jazz", a song likened to a life. "Cold" is a realization of what good we can receive:

...For a moment

it seems possible that every frailty, every pain,

could be an opening, a crack that lets the unexpected

reach us...(24)

We are granted perspective on our place in the scheme of things, using the stars and the sea as reference points to our heart's compass. There is an importance to how we see things, as demonstrated in a number of poems, notably "Cheetah". Though the difficulties aren't diminished, the grace of acceptance is present on major themes such as aging. "Ode to Invisibility" seems a beautiful next stage of growth. The simple things are enough in "More":

But when I ask if she's really had it,

she says no, she wants another day.

She wants a new black sweater—and earrings. (25)

I think of my French grandmother, her subtle strength, her sense of knowing and what little it took to sustain her. She took pleasure and happiness so easily. She could realign and renew with the basics. Ever elegant, a swipe of lipstick and tasteful earrings would restore any order the circumstances of her later years had robbed us of.

Like a Beggar, is described as the “ongoing exploration of life’s essential question: how do we go on?” These poems show a myriad of answers; some might be the poet’s, others might be shared, but the fundamental elements are recognized in the human condition. Despite the chaos, we want this world so much. The book even “ponders the uses of adversity” and toward the end, may convince us in reverse through “When You Return” that there are necessary things that come of change, destruction and letting go. There is unflinching imagery, eloquent language and accessibility. There is a power to hope and a power to admit:

But to this angel of wishes I’ve worshiped
so long, I ask now to admit
the world as it is. (53)

In all its complexity, it is life bared to the bone, seen through the eyes of a poet who removes distance to give us what she can of tools for survival.

To read an excerpt, visit:

<http://www.ellenbass.com/books/like-a-beggar/>

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