

# Rx for the lost and hurting

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Charles Demers comes to his first novel from a career in live and broadcast comedy. His savvy is evident from the first pages. Ty Bergen, stand-up artist, is about to move from Vancouver comedy clubs to a six-figure salary in L.A. voicing the leads in a satirical cartoon series. With the show's vocal star in a coma following a car crash, Ty's "sound-alike retainer" with the producers is all set to pay off, provided the injured star fails to improve. The break is beyond big, but is tied intimately to another man's recovery or decline.

Then we switch gears. The feint-and-punch rhythms of a funnyman give way in Chapter 2 to the introspective voice of Daniel, who, after a childhood of severe allergies, was diagnosed at 23 with obsessive-compulsive disorder, leading to a roller-coaster of drug therapies and body-racking withdrawal symptoms. Obsessive-compulsives, Daniel advises, are cursed with an inability to "move beyond the dark lapses, the left-field thoughts - 'What if, instead of helping this old lady put up her missing kitty poster, I pushed the thumbtack into her eye?'"

When too beset by his demons, Daniel takes refuge at the home of his caring lesbian cousin, Sara, and her partner, sometimes babysitting their son, Robeson. His first big gaffe as a sitter is to entertain the eight-year-old with Kubrick's *A Clockwork Orange*. The lad is still whimpering when the moms arrive to pick him up.

Demers's take on the domestic trauma is delightfully pitched: funny-sad, with a bonus of incisive ironies. Then follow three pages of observations on the rich cultural ferment of central Vancouver neighbourhoods, a brisk riff of demographic analysis inserted in between the moms' departure and Daniel's ensuing phone call to his landlord. As a bridge from one narrative moment to the very next one, it's odd, more like a passage cut and pasted from a non-fiction book on urban issues

Daniel is a political lefty, if more the armchair than the direct-action kind. His Trotskyite friend and landlord, Gary, has "a way of speaking in Trot history, using it as shorthand for his feelings. 'Dalai Lama,' 'Social Democrat,' 'Moscow,' 'reformism' and 'Kronstadt' ... each symbolic of whole swaths of information, struggle, disagreement, and even, though he'd never approve the term - too Hegel, too *early* Marx - zeitgeist."

Committed Leftists (or recovering committed Leftists) will have an edge in these passages. Demers's point is satirical - Gary as a retro-red ostrich with head buried in old dogma - but he also pulls a neat emotional twist, placing Gary's political motor-mouthing inside the frame of his estranged brother's crisis with cancer.

With Daniel, we watch Gary get drunk enough to give in to sobs. We feel his tears soaking Daniel's shirt, then look up to see a fading poster "of Nelson Mandela and Fidel Castro tacked beside the bookshelf." The scene evokes circles within circles of suffering and hope, failures personal and global.

These arresting characters, and scenes humming with note-perfect dialogue, alternate with passages that read like detours from a narrative road under construction. At one point, a three-page detailing of Daniel's job power-washing parking garages gives way to a page-long quote of a turgid lecture on "the Anarcho-Terrorist Roots of the Baku(ninist) Tendency of Fatalist Sabotage."

It sometimes feels as if Demers was unable to shed his affection for swaths of first-draft impulsiveness. Then he'll again strike to the heart of a human encounter. Daniel goes to a therapy appointment: "I pull useless old words like coins and Kleenexes from the pockets of unwashed jeans and pile this debris in front of her in hopes that she'll cut me off."

We rejoin Ty in L.A. as he's about to start officially aping the vocals of the hospitalized cartoon actor. His comments to a packed press conference ("think of me as a bookmark") are a model of the slick humility/homage that passes for emotional truth in Tinseltown.

Meanwhile, we hope for the moment when Demers will decisively link his two protagonists. Thankfully, *The Prescription Errors* gathers to a finale that redeems the scattershot with an unexpected act of integration. With little Robeson as the catalyst, Demers movingly consolidates his themes of seeking and healing.