

Meitner takes a poetic school 'Inventory'

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By Mary Jane Ryals
SPECIAL TO THE DEMOCRAT

Book: "Inventory at the All-Night Drugstore," by Erika Meitner.
Publisher: Anhinga Press, \$12. paper.

When you read former middle-school teacher Erika Meitner's poems you wonder why teachers aren't paid CEO salaries for what they slog through daily.

Meitner, a 2002 Anhinga Prize poetry winner, will be part of a reading Tuesday at the Warehouse. She shows us the real deal in her first book, "Inventory at the All-Night Drugstore." A gifted wordsmith with a feel for music in language, she delivers incisive insights in her first book.

Meitner walks us into South Brooklyn where our narrator teaches. She compares the area with the game Monopoly in the poem "Lavender Lake." Of Gowanus Canal, she doesn't mince words, writing it "divides the projects with their gunshots/and salsa music, from Carroll Gardens,/ where Italian men in sidewalk lawn chairs/ play pinochle each evening, the canal/ their backdrop - a gorgeous cocktail/of sludge, toxic waste, even live typhus/rushing through the run-off grates /on Baltic, Atlantic, the cheap colors/in Monopoly when you land on them/ with our metal shoe, cast-iron car."

Meitner has a distanced voice, and she documents clearly the dire, fateful, seemingly impossible circumstances in the classrooms of these neighborhoods. She cracks open the classroom door for her readers, letting us know how it really goes in neighborhoods such as these. She breaks your heart with stories of her students in "Homeroom." Curtis "punches/Julio with all his might, straddling/ his curled-up body because Abel Pena/ told him Julio said, Your dad's a crackhead,/which he was before he died. But Julio/never speaks, which Curtis can't know/because he rarely shows up to class."

In "Teaching the Sixth Grade," Meitner describes student Ashley Carrasquillo writing that Ashley is "eleven, has a small zirconia stud through her nose,/can barely write a full sentence or read/ above third grade level - but she's beautiful,/a curse in this neighborhood/ where most girls are pregnant by fifteen."

Meitner never lets up on us by giving a chance for any false hope. She writes: "I wish I could say the sun washed/into our trailer class then/somehow made it through the meshed pinhole windows to fall/on her face feeding her as three-dimensional/ Carrasquillo, chiaroscuro, hiding in darkness,/dappled with light."

Mary Jane Ryals writes poetry, fiction and non-fiction and teaches at Florida State University.