



## The Lotus Eater: And Other Poems

**Peter Dabbene**

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*Original wordplay and quirky rhymes vivify the illuminating poetry collection The Lotus Eaters.*

Peter Dabbene's musical poetry collection *The Lotus Eaters* clothes its sly cultural allusions in traditional literary techniques.

Illustrated with digital photographs, this collection of narrative verse begins with a series of eleven poems drawing on the mythology of Odysseus, Penelope, and their son Telemachus as a template for dialogues between a modern father, mother, and son who are caught in addiction's labyrinth. In this labyrinth, people "don't fall. They plummet." Featuring a different cast of characters, the remaining poems continue to address human experiences through dialogue. Their perspectives range from self-absorbed compulsive scratchers to shocked dinner party guests. Irony permeates, enhanced by original wordplay and quirky rhymes.

Frequent rhymes occur both within lines and at their ends. The long poem "Tele-machus" threads individual rhymes throughout entire stanzas, mixing exact rhymes and slant rhymes in as many as seven rhyming words in one stanza: *call, Vivitrol, all, enthralled, talked, withdrawal, false*. It's inevitable that with this density, some rhymes are forced, but such forced rhymes fit the bossiness of Telemachus's codependent parents, who are desperate to control the narrative. They cannot tolerate deviations, including sudden deviations in established rhyme patterns. The final stanza relies on pedestrian rhymes (*fears, hear, and ears*) before breaking open when a new, multisyllabic rhyme ("beautiful, dutiful son") pops up. It's an effective way to emphasize the parents' belief in a rosy image of their son and to emphasize how the son's moral compass has been set off-kilter by addiction.

Some deviations from norms are less effective. Syringes, for example, don't "pierce" skin; that's the job of the needle attached to the syringe. And in a confusing loop, the names Odysseus and Ulysses are used interchangeably, without explanation, sometimes in a single poem, as in "Hunting Son." More impactful are the book's cultural allusions: In "Soliloquy," Telemachus refers to himself as "an artist formerly known as prince," adding breadth to the addiction narrative by taking it beyond Telemachus's royal position. And there's a Prufrockian echo in "Mums," where moms "go and come" in a lunchroom discussing chrysanthemums.

Other instruments in the collection's toy box allow for darker performances with homophones and common phrases. In "The Donna Reed Party," an allusion to Donna, the ultimate mid-twentieth-century homemaker, is translated into the homophone "the Donner Party," where unsuspecting guests are served—in both senses of the word. And in "Scratching," a poem about compulsion, the harmless cliché "scratching the surface" is toppled in a visceral conclusion. Elsewhere, significant insights into human behavior bleed through the offhand humor and musicality of some poems, in particular those about the family disease of addiction.

*The Lotus Eater* is an irony-filled poetry collection that questions human gravitas by wrapping it in playful literary strategies.

MICHELE SHARPE (January 14, 2025)

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