*M-Theory: A Novel* by Tiffany Cates rev. by Kamila De La Fuente Baobab Press

Tiffany Cates is the founding editor of a literary journal, *Townsend*, devoted to seasoned, committed fiction writers. Graduating from Loyola University Chicago in 2012 with a degree in philosophy, she spent five years immersed in Chicago’s weather and transit networks. Cates then moved to Oregon and earned her MFA in Creative Writing from Oregon State University, where she also earned a Certificate in College and University Teaching. She is currently living in Corvallis, Oregon, and writes around the themes of the distance between self and other, personhood, and matters of free will. Her latest book, *M-Theory*, is from Baobab Press.

In the heart of this unsettling, tense, and inventive novel*,* the setting of Chicago is a key aspect in terms of both the plot and how effectively Cates has implemented it throughout her narrative. The Chicago transit system is the epicenter revolving Detective Lee Powell’s investigation of two seemingly unrelated murders. The author has intricately woven a mystery into the world of buzzing, vibrant city of Chicago. Drawing from her own experience in Chicago transit, she takes to combining a dominant, powerful use of setting with craft fiction elements, to execute a story of many layers and depth-element to its own dynamic setting:

“Standing among the crowd of people bulked by the layers necessary to survive a Chicago winter, he felt momentarily cocooned by their anonymity until other remembrances of the blue coat and yellow hat began to tickle his conscious mind.”

This example speaks to the characterization of the Chicago winter, tied in with Cate’s artistic use of sensory detail and vivid diction. Traveling through the Chicago Commute, the narrative thrives off its setting where the people that inhabit it all interconnect, becoming one at the center.

Another aspect of Cate’s repertoire is her use of characterization woven throughout her narrative plot. Cates uses vivid diction in the physical descriptions, actions, inner thoughts and feelings, reactions, and dialogue of M-Theory’s profound accord of characters. Donovan James, our protagonist, is an excellent example. On page 47, we find ourselves in his inner thoughts while in dialogue with a colleague Lily:

“Flaming hair. Eyes like the earth. Wrap yourself in blue and yellow and gray and then expose what’s hidden underneath. Have a smile that says you understand and pinks lips that could whisper secrets I wanted to hear. Electrify me with your presence. Have constellations of freckles will lead me places I never want to return from….”

Cates has an endless repertoire of characters with depth, which all speak for themselves, in their own, unique portrayal, throughout the novel, as it unfolds. In terms of point of view in the narrative, the novel alternates between different perspectives of unique characters: our protagonist, Donovan James, his colleagues, Lily, M, scenes with Detective Powell and his partner at the station, among others. This constantly shifting focus or point of view creates an atmosphere of urgency and wonder. One example of this urgency that will continue to build up throughout the narrative is in the chapter “Interference,” with this jabs scrutinizing police procedures to later showcase the thrill of them: “Standing in the police station, the mother ripped off her gloves and wrestled a phone from the coat’s pocket, “See *this* problem then.”” With candid dialogue in the police station scene woven with a great use of sharp diction, this point of view is effective in this particular instance at hand. With a mind of its own-grasping the reader’s intrigue and attention, *M-Theory* reels us into Detective Lee Powell and his partner’s investigation in how they unravel how such cases connect to finally obtain justice.

The use of structure Cates uses to distinguish each chapter and progression of time, through the commute creates for an innovative, captivating read. Pauses, separations and line breaks can be found throughout the novel, as well as in the markers of transit stops used as a tool to create a timeline for the work of fiction. I would classify the novel as a form of crime fiction, that is primarily in a omniscient narrator voice. Cates delves in this point of view with help from a multifaceted focus approach, enriching the reader’s experience. It allows the reader to get close to characters, heightens intrigue and suspense, since we can see characters from a individual focal point, then see them interact as the story progresses. The novel is roughly 300 pages long.

The narrative speaks to the impact on the reader and on characters as the novel progresses. Events and characters converge in a variety of unexpected, dark ways, upholding the truth that human nature is as tangled as it is complex. A buzzing narrative with elements of noir and romance, this form of crime fiction concerns with themes of humanity among America’s societal, spiritual, and moral motifs. *M-Theory* carries a clever title that blossoms to its multifaceted meaning, after reading the novel. Relative to the theory that unifies all consistent versions of the superstring theory, and to the crucial role of M, one who is the center of the investigation that ultimately weaves everything all together like that if of its physics precedent. All in all, taking in her entire work is element to absorbing that titular creative choice to its fullest.

The novel’s climax brings all the narrative’s threads or strings together in a way that is component to a worthwhile read while leaving a dynamic aftertaste of leaving a room for interpretation. I personally would recommend this book to people who are looking for realistic fiction mystery novel, crime fiction type, providing commentary on humanity, the thrills and scrutiny of police procedures. *M-Theory* is a complex work of fiction accessing a taste of multiple genres that rounds every corner in what embodies a dynamic read.