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Martha Conway

THE HAND THAT FEEDS YOU*

If one of the characteristics of a great novel is the ability to set up two apparently contradictory ideas and convince us that they both hold true, the short novel *Desperate Characters* by Paula Fox achieves greatness many times over. Yet one hesitates to call it a novel of ideas, since its starting point and impetus is a very simple action: the bite of a cat.

Sophie Bentwood, a forty-year-old woman living with her husband Otto in Brooklyn, New York, gives a stray cat some milk and the cat, possibly rabid, bites her. From that act all subsequent action and meditation springs cleanly and consequentially—I want to say easily, though that word can mislead. Over the course of a weekend, the time span of the novel, the bite almost entirely dominates the story. Sophie attends a party, meets friends for lunch, buys kitchen equipment—trying it might seem to make the bite into a non-event while all the while her hand swells and aches, forcing her attention back to it. Is the cat rabid? Is Sophie facing insanity, death, or (no less frightening) painful shots in the abdomen? The bite is either something, or nothing. Or possibly both.

First published in 1970, *Desperate Characters* has at its center the social upheaval—real or imagined—of the time. Yet its timely re-publication this spring by W. W. Norton—with its chatty, insightful introduction by Jonathan Franzen—is eerily appropriate for the end of the millennium; once again we wonder if we are in the midst of “things falling apart,” when the dogma upon which we’ve built our lives can seem fragile and perhaps even foolish. Sophie and Otto Bentwood are a respectable if stolid middle-class couple with no children and continental tastes, who are living a life that is somehow apart from the times. By their own accounts the world outside their renovated brownstone is turning over on its side: “Don’t you know you can’t get a doctor anymore? Don’t you know this country is falling apart?” Sophie, the least resisting of the two, tells Otto. It is the late 1960s, and the Bentwoods cannot adapt—or do not want to adapt—to changes in society, neighborhood,

**Desperate Characters* by Paula Fox, W. W. Norton, 1999.

work, even marriage, though the changes are nearly thrust upon them. Nearby neighborhood houses are decaying, trash and excrement line their street, a stone is thrown—randomly it seems—through a bedroom window during a party, vandals break into their country cottage, and, more personally, Otto's longtime business partner is acrimoniously departing. Chaos is everywhere.

All of this the Bentwoods resist, deny, decry, notwithstanding their flashes of self-doubt and fear. But Sophie's yellowing, swollen arm lends an urgency for some kind of response. In one sense the bite is symbolic of intrusion, disloyalty, the unexpected, the chaotic; yet it is also, simply, the bite from a stray cat, which is frightening and painful enough. Still, it perfectly complements the Bentwoods' internal predicament. Are they so unyielding that they will they crack up? Or will they conform? Will they enter the chaos themselves, and is that a desirable outcome? "Americans . . .," mutters Otto as they witness a hand dropping garbage from a moving car, "softly dropping their turds wherever they go." It is a telling juxtaposition—do "Americans" include himself and Sophie, or not? They are either foul or displaced, and so lose either way. Perhaps, even, the choice is not theirs; the Bentwoods are remarkable for their impotence.

While it seems clear that Sophie and Otto's own characters prevent them from either living apart or joining the fray, it seems equally clear that the world, or society, or the neighborhood, or friends prevent them also. Fox sets up a beautifully taut situation in which we see character unaligned with setting. There is no relief. Perhaps, thinks Sophie, "once she had stepped outside rules, definitions, there were none. . . . Ticking away inside the carapace of ordinary life and its sketchy agreements was anarchy." She would like to ignore the anarchy, just as she tries to ignore the bite on her arm, but cannot.

It is due to Paula Fox's tremendous skill as a writer that the cat bite dominates the story both physically and metaphorically; she never drops either thread. Her craftsmanship is so great that the novel, out of print for nearly twenty years, has during this time not sunk into obscurity but rather is still passed from writer to writer like a passkey or rite of initiation. Her words "seem less written than carved," wrote David Foster Wallace, and Irving Howe likened the novel to *Billy Budd* and *The Great Gatsby*. Fox is one of those rare writers whose sentences are precise and unusual, yet they keep your mind on the story and not on the writer. *Desperate Characters* is both compelling and provoking, and to read it once is not enough.

In the end I do not know which was more baffling: the rigid, tasteful, and more or less principled life the Bentwoods maintain (or try to) in increasing isolation and uncertainty, or the free-falling and often inhumane society outside their home. Should one be afraid, or stoic? Choose order, or chaos? The Bentwoods in 1969 suspect that the center cannot hold, and thirty years later we still have the same fear. However, ironically, by dint of it being 1999 and not 1969, there is in this re-publication a glimmer of hope—the center for better or worse *did* hold, and so may hold now. This, of course, is either promising or frightening. Or both.