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Desperate Characters

By Paula Fox



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"A towering landmark of postwar Realism. . . . A sustained work of prose so lucid and fine it seems less written than carved." ? David Foster Wallace

Otto and Sophie Bentwood live in a changing neighborhood in Brooklyn. Their stainless-steel kitchen is newly installed, and their Mercedes is parked curbside. After Sophie is bitten on the hand while trying to feed a stray, perhaps rabies-infected cat, a series of small and ominous disasters begin to plague the Bentwoods' lives, revealing the fault lines and fractures in a marriage?and a society?wrenching itself apart.

First published in 1970 to wide acclaim, *Desperate Characters* stands as one of the most dazzling and rigorous examples of the storyteller's craft in postwar American literature ? a novel that, according to Irving Howe, ranks with "*Billy Budd*, *The Great Gatsby*, *Miss Lonelyhearts*, and *Seize the Day*."



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Desperate Characters By Paula Fox Bibliography

- Sales Rank: #52173 in Books
- Brand: W W Norton Company
- Published on: 2015-03-30
- Original language: English
- Number of items: 1
- Dimensions: 8.30" h x .60" w x 5.50" l, .0 pounds
- Binding: Paperback
- 192 pages

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Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review

Meet the Bentwoods, Sophie and Otto, "both just over forty," living in Brooklyn sometime in the '60s with neither hope nor children to encourage them to work on their suffocating marriage. Such are the central subjects of Paula Fox's enthralling *Desperate Characters*, first published to much acclaim in 1970. The novel's action unfolds in a single weekend, and includes Otto's torturous breakup with his longtime business partner, Charlie, and a visit the Bentwoods make to their country home, which they find vandalized. Everything pivots around an occurrence so ordinary as to make us marvel at the power it wields under Fox's brilliant pressure: a cat bite.

Despite Otto's protests, Sophie puts out a dish for a stray that roams the Bentwoods' neighborhood--an area which is also home to enormous poverty, and in which they, in their renovated townhouse, sit like distant royalty. The cat sinks its teeth into her hand and instantly we are plunged into the heart of what plagues every aspect of this couple's lives: the threat of rabies. Where the cat is concerned, it's literal rabies, but the book is also steeped in the sense that a kind of social rabies lurks just outside the Bentwoods' and indeed the whole world's door. As Sophie suddenly realizes at one point: "Ticking away inside the carapace of ordinary life and its sketchy agreements was anarchy."

Throughout Fox's gorgeously crafted, unflinching portrait of a dying marriage and a country at war with itself, the Bentwoods fight the desire to self-destruct like everything around them. At one point, Otto screams at Sophie: "What in God's name do you want? Do you want Charlie to murder me? Do you wish the farmhouse had been burned down?... *Do you want to be rabid?*" She doesn't, of course, but in a certain way, that outcome makes sense. "*God, if I am rabid, I am equal to what is outside,*" she said out loud, and felt an extraordinary relief as though, at last, she'd discovered what it was that could create a balance between the quiet, rather vacant progression of the days she spent in this house, and those portents that lit up the dark at the edge of her own existence." How fortunate and rare to discover such a perfect articulation of the human condition. --*Melanie Rehak*

Review

"[*Desperate Characters*]?tense, quick, prickling with suppressed panic?is very much of its time and has a lot to say to ours, too. If you've never read it, or if, like me, it's been a while since you did, now is an excellent moment to pick it up." (Alexandra Schwartz - The New Yorker)

"A masterwork of economical prose...Remarkable...[O]ne can only wonder who is more fatally deluded?the desperate characters of the Bentwoods' era or the hyperconfident ones of our own." (Andrew O'Hehir - Salon)

"Absorbing, elegant." (Charles Winecoff - Entertainment Weekly)

"Packed with lucid insights." (Isabella Biedenharn - Entertainment Weekly)

"A perfect short novel...As in Tolstoy's *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*, everything crucial within our souls bared." (Andrea Barrett)

"This perfect novel about pain is as clear, and as wholly believable, and as healing, as a fever dream." (Frederick Busch)

“The first time I read *Desperate Characters*...I fell in love with it.” (Jonathan Franzen)

“Fox dissects a marriage and a social class with the sharpest of knives, cannily undermining not only one couple’s false pieties and deceptive comforts but our own as well.” (Marisa Silver)

About the Author

Paula Fox (1923?2017) was the author of *Desperate Characters*, *The Widow’s Children*, *A Servant’s Tale*, *The God of Nightmares*, *Poor George*, *The Western Coast*, and *Borrowed Finery: A Memoir*, among other books.

Users Review

From reader reviews:

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