

## Paula Fox: A Certain Depth

**Paula Fox** is a master whose work, by whatever combination of ill luck and oversight prevails in these affairs, did not receive a timely invitation to the canon. The long neglect of her writing has been no one's loss but our own. The winds of attention at last began to shift when, in the mid-nineties, Jonathan Franzen came across her brilliant short novel from 1970, *Desperate Characters* ("Among the best things we have in contemporary literature"—Shirley Hazzard; "A towering landmark of postwar realism...a sustained work of prose so lucid and fine that it seems less written than carved"—David Foster Wallace), and decided to make it the centerpiece of his essay in *Harper's* magazine about the state of American fiction. Fox had made quite a successful career as a prolific writer of children's novels, but her novels for adults were out of print. An editor at W.W. Norton read the essay and convinced his colleagues to re-issue Fox's six novels with new introductions by Franzen, Andrea Barrett, Jonathan Lethem, and others. Fox has always had her fans; now they knew they were not alone.

When you ask someone today if they've read Paula Fox, they are likely to say "*Desperate Characters*," and then, after an appreciative pause, make some quiet declaration of awe. Too few readers, however, have enjoyed the skewering insight, the understated humor, the sentence upon perfect sentence, or the absolute *aliveness* of her five other novels to date. In 2002, Fox published a memoir, *Borrowed Finery*, in which we learned something of her own uncommon life. Born in 1923 in New York City, she was deposited by her parents in a foundling home, scooped up by a relative, and re-deposited with one of the many families of strangers who became "a fire brigade that passed me along from person to person until I was safe." Her parents were intermittent presences in her life, summoning her for brief intervals to Hollywood, to Florida, to a Manhattan hotel, only to abandon her again. Her Cuban grandmother, who took over her guardianship for a while, brought Fox to live on the sugar plantation of wealthy relative, and then back to a tenement in New York when they were forced to flee the revolution of 1933. Still a teenager, Fox made her way out to Southern California, where she moved between the worlds of Hollywood writers, communist ideologues, and unskilled service jobs. She married a sailor, who left; she divorced him. When she was twenty she gave birth to a daughter, whom she put up for adoption. She changed her mind, but was told (falsely) that it was too late. That story, however, has a happy ending.

Paula Fox's remarkable first novel, *Poor George*, was published when she was forty-four. She is still writing, beautifully. -Jesse Lichtenstein

**Loggerhead Reading Series:** When you began *Desperate Characters*, did you know it would be a short, charged novel? I guess I mean, did

the qualities that have been so admired in the book—its clarity, economy, tension—emerge in its generation or in a careful process of subtraction?

**Paula Fox:** No, I never do know what kind of novel I will write. Those qualities you mention did "emerge in its generation." I didn't reduce it at all, in my sense of the story, and it wasn't longer in an earlier stage. I wrote it about six times, parts of it more than that.

**LRS:** I'd like to ask you about *A Servant's Tale*. Luisa, the first-person protagonist, is someone who insists on limiting her ambitions, and the ambitions those around her have for her, by becoming a maid. I read it as an act of defiance against the circumstances of her life, and most particularly against her father. But long after the sting of that defiance wears off, she continues to limit her options, to avoid opportunities, to close doors. Her world shrinks with time; her passivity is willful. She can be hard to 'root for' in the way that we are used to rooting for our narrators, even when they're liars or louts. She seems, from what your readers know of you, your opposite. Was it ever difficult for you to understand this woman's reasoning? Or to 'live' with her while you wrote the book?

**Fox:** Luisa is in the grip of a passionate wish to return to the place of her childhood—until she recalls in the last paragraph someone other than herself. But her grand obsession is not so different, spiritually, from other folk who attend college or not, and follow their mysterious internal intentions, to make money, to rule over others, to wield political power, etc. It was as "difficult" for me to understand her reasoning (or the lack of it) as with all the people I've written about.

**LRS:** The first part of *A Servant's Tale* is rich with detail of Caribbean village and plantation life. As a child, you lived for a time in Cuba. Was this sufficient fodder? Was the research for this book distinctive from your research for others?

**Fox:** I did research for *A Servant's Tale*, reading widely about techniques of sugar cane, processing it into sugar and how plantations were maintained. None of the other novels except *The Slave Dancer* required that intense research.

**LRS:** What about the descriptions of the homes—the *bohíos*—of the town's poor residents, and daily village life? Was it fresh enough in your memory?

**Fox:** Everything about the island (perhaps I already told you about the inside joke: Luisa goes to get a visa, and the clerk says, as he gives her one, something on the order of: we both know it's only an imaginary island anyhow) I recall with clarity—as if I had only just left Cuba! And I recall the plantation where I lived in a way that isn't 'recall' at all, but as if I am just seeing it for the first time.

**LRS:** Didn't you used to read Spanish novels for a movie studio in Hollywood to see if they had any movie potential? Have you kept up your Spanish?

**Fox:** Yes, although I forget certain words at times. But then I also forget English words, too!

**LRS:** *A Servant's Tale* follows a character from early childhood well into middle age. *The Western Coast* explores five coming-of-age years in a young woman's life. *Poor George* and *The God of Nightmares* last a few seasons. *Desperate Characters* takes place over a long weekend. *The Widow's Children* unfolds in less than twenty-four hours. What are the challenges of working with such different time spans?

**Fox:** The stories seem to me to determine the different time spans in which they take place. There are different problems with different time spans, and different pleasures. A few hours require a tremendous effort of compression, and people then are changed by circumstance, not time. Longer periods make me mad with power! To be able to move ahead 30 years! Just like that! But more seriously, the change then is not only due to circumstances but time itself.

**LRS:** Words pop out at me as I read the reviews of your books: "devastating," "grueling and brilliant," "unsettling talent," "her images break the flesh," "relentlessly honest," "brave, witty, alarming," "merciless." These are all employed in highest praise, but does the tenor of these remarks ever surprise you? Do you feel it fits your work?

**Fox:** The quotations from reviews always surprise me. It's as if I emerge from a cave to daylight to be greeted by a group of people saying such things.

**LRS:** Is the surprise pleasant? "Brilliant," "honest," and "witty" are greetings that any writer would welcome, however unexpected. But do you, once it's been pointed out by others, recognize something in your work that is "merciless," "unsettling," and "alarming"?

**Fox:** Yes, I do recognize something, merciless, etc., in my work when it's pointed to in reviews. But then I recall that in *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, Thomas Hardy has a man sell his wife for a bowl of cereal on the first page! I seem to abjure sentimentality—judge it to be a free emotional ride, like audience members luxuriously weeping at a death in an awful movie. I know my view isn't a prevalent one in this country. As **Solzhenitsyn** is reputed to have asked: Why do all Americans grin so much?

**LRS:** Because we think we're winning?

**Fox:** I don't think Solzhenitsyn meant that quite—a kind of adamant, stupid insistence, on the essential cheerful outcome of events—no matter what. I suppose it is a kind of winning but who is it, or they, who loses?

**LRS:** With their peripatetic, international lives, their alcohol and arguments, their orbits around the worlds of books and film, your parents sound like such Fitzgeraldian characters. The perhaps too-oft-quoted line from Fitzgerald is that there are no second acts in American lives. That seems to apply much more to your parents' lives and careers than to yours, which has seen dramatic reappearances and reversals. Do you have any sense why this has been the case? Where does your resilience come from?

**Fox:** I think I've driven on through "dramatic disappearances and reversals" despite them. I would guess it's the stubbornness of the storyteller who goes on even though some leave the campfire or never join it. I can't explain that persistence of mine except that I feel it as a mostly honorable trait.

**LRS:** Do you feel you are more or less political now than you were as a young woman in the '30s and '40s drawn into the world of L.A. communists?

**Fox:** I feel very differently now about politics than when I was a girl. My husband, Martin Greenberg, says I suffer from what he calls 'indignitus.' That is, I'm indignant now rather than vaguely ideological, in the way I view the government, the evangelical movement, etc.

**LRS:** What, if I may ask, has caused the most acute flare-up recently?

**Fox:** Tom DeLay giving the order to remove the feeding tube of his own father fifteen or sixteen years ago (as reported in the NY Times)! Then presenting himself as he does.... In fact, my indignitus is in an

acute state whenever I even think about such a person, especially when I write down his name!

**LRS:** How long have you lived in Brooklyn?

**Fox:** Three years in a Boerum Hill rental, 36 years in our narrow house in **Cobble Hill**, which we own.

**LRS:** When people from out-of-town visit, what do you want them to see and know about Brooklyn?

**Fox:** My neighborhood and surrounding neighborhoods. Martin and I walk through them nearly every day—they are so eye-calming, soul-warming, if there are such things as souls.

**LRS:** Do you think of yourself as a Brooklyn writer? Does that have any significance to you?

**Fox:** No.

**LRS:** Yet does your life in Brooklyn inform your work?

**Fox:** It is the place where I've done most of my work, and it has provided me with friends and support during the last forty years.

**LRS:** Do you feel your voice has changed much over the course of your career? Did your stint as a journalist in the '40s in post-war Europe have a lasting effect on the way you write?

**Fox:** I have a book due out in autumn about Europe. My experience there did indeed change me, and I suppose the voice I write with is more detached than it might have been had I not gone. And as I have grown older and older, there have been changes in the way I experience and understand my life.

**LRS:** What about Europe at that time—or what about your time there—helped bring about this detachment?

**Fox:** I write about the answer to that near the end of the book. It is that I saw something "other than myself." Not larger, the usual sentimental conclusion, but other. And it was that other that freed me from a certain kind of self-preoccupation.

**LRS:** I've read elsewhere that you never felt 'voice' could be taught, and (I'm paraphrasing roughly here) that writers could be encouraged

by a teacher, but not essentially improved. Do you believe this because of the way your own voice came into being? Did your experiences in teaching writing yield any insights into your own process, or the mysteries of your own voice?

**Fox:** No.

**LRS:** Anyone reading your memoir, *Borrowed Finery*, will hear a chorus of echoes from your novels. Many of the Hollywood situations and characters from *The Western Coast*, for example, or the familial dramatis personae of *A Servant's Tale* and *The Widow's Children*, contain at the very least seeds of the events and people you describe in *Borrowed Finery*. All memoirs are acts of re-visitation, but in this case you were sometimes revisiting memories you had already returned to and re-imagined as fiction. Was there a fundamental difference in reconstructing people, places, and moments as a memoirist as opposed to as a novelist?

**Fox:** Yes, there was a difference, perhaps in the sense of light placement—what is lit differently in my fiction and in my memoir.

**LRS:** Could you give an example of this "lighting" technique?

**Fox:** I'll try. My Uncle Fermin had married a peasant woman whom I wrote about in *A Servant's Tale*. In the novel, she dies of heart trouble. She swats at cockroaches in the dismal kitchen. I 'used' her in a certain way by exaggerating her qualities, putting her, Elpidia, in a different light, or by moving a light, casting different shadows that emphasized different aspects of what I imagined to be her nature. By the time I had finished writing about her, she would have been unrecognizable to her own children!

**LRS:** Speaking of lighting, both *Borrowed Finery* and *Poor George* have been made into **movies** (*Poor George* in Portuguese!). Did you have anything at all to do with the productions? And how did the films compare to your expectations of them?

**Fox:** I had nothing to do with either of them, didn't much care for *Desperate Characters* and never saw *Poor George*. Though I liked Frank Gilroy who wrote and directed the screenplay of the first mentioned.

**LRS:** Has anyone thought to make a film of any of your other books?

**Fox:** No, though Frank said he'd love to make a film of *The Widow's Children* if he weren't so old!

**LRS:** On days that you write, do you read as well?

**Fox:** Yes, after work. I tend now and then to work in the AM when my energy is highest. I read thrillers when I'm at work, like **Georges Simenon** and the Swedish writer **Henning Mankell**, and I used to love Eric Ambler.

**LRS:** What are the books you've returned to over the years as a reader—your essential texts?

**Fox:** Thomas Hardy, Willa Cather, Tolstoi, Scott Fitzgerald, George Eliot, Proust, and **Turgenev**. I got such delight from *The Mayor of Casterbridge* and ***A Sportsman's Sketchbook***; *Death Comes for the Archbishop* and *Shadows on the Rock*; and *Tender is the Night*, *Anna Karenina*, and *War and Peace* (I only just finished reading it for the second time recently).

**LRS:** What are you working on now?

**Fox:** I have the book—*The Coldest Winter*—about my year in liberated Europe being published in the fall. I'm working on a novella, *A Light in the Farmhouse Window*.

**LRS:** The writer Steven Millhauser has said of novels that they are "hungry, monstrous. Their apparent delicacy is deceptive—they want to devour the world." The attraction of the novella, for him, is that "it lets the short story breathe. It invites the possibility of certain elaborations and complexities forbidden by a very short form, while at the same time it holds out the promise of formal perfection." What has been your experience so far?

**Fox:** No, I don't feel he's right about "hungry—monstrous." But about the novella, I do agree.

**LRS:** Your novels don't want to devour the world?

**Fox:** I'm utterly devoured by them when I'm at work on them—my time, my thought—I'm likely to write down a few words on a napkin I've been using, anything that's handy to write on, a matchbook cover, a damp sliver of paper....It's like a ferocious wakeful dream, all-encompassing.

**LRS:** At the end of *The Western Coast*, Annie is about to leave New York for Europe but wants to visit the same hostel she went to before she left the city five years before. She says that she is "one of those people who are always backtracking on themselves." Could she have been speaking of you, as well?

**Fox:** All writers backtrack, I think. If they're fortunate, the going back gives what they write about a certain depth.

**LRS:** As it ends, your memoir *Borrowed Finery* skips over what must be nearly forty years of your life to your reunion with your daughter Linda. How did you decide to close the book with that movement?

**Fox:** I don't know why I skipped all the years to my reunion with Linda. It seemed right at the time of its writing.

**LRS:** I was struck by the moment in your childhood where you were reading to neighborhood children and then looked up at some point to see that they had drifted off, and that you were alone, telling the story to yourself. It's tempting to read this episode symbolically for your life as an artist, but it's a symbol that might contain some ambiguity. I wonder how you read it....

**Fox:** Sometimes it feels like that—as if I looked up and saw that my listeners (readers) had drifted off. My life as a writer has been filled with such moments.

**LRS:** You will be 82 next week. Did you ever imagine that you would still be writing books (and for an eager audience) at this point in your life?

**Fox:** I didn't dream I'd be writing books when I was "not waving but drowning," at 16 or 17 when I got my first job. A lifetime isn't so long after all, and here I am still singing, in a raspier voice than when I began. My view of the future is now what it has always been, with some variation—the future is now. ❖