

BODY AND BREAD

by Nan Cuba

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Reviewed by Marian Szczepanski

A brief, beautifully rendered prologue offers readers a metaphysical allegory of the expansive story that will follow in Nan Cuba's debut novel *Body and Bread*, winner of the PEN Southwest Award and Texas Institute of Letters Steven Turner Award. The narrator descends into the depths of a fifteenth-century Aztec temple and creates a godlike effigy from grains, beans, and blood, then tastes it—an act that blends pre-Columbian ritual with Catholic communion. In this strange setting, the veil between life and death, dream and reality, thins. The startled expression on the effigy's face hints at insight purchased only with the hard currency of self-sacrifice. The narrator, like the reader, waits, understanding that what will be revealed—a mysterious process of self-regeneration—will evade face-value explanations if, indeed, explanation is even possible.

Echoes of that eerie underworld permeate what is at once coming-of-age tale, family saga, and spiritual quest. Esteemed academic and Mesoamerican specialist, Sarah Pelton presents as a standoffish scholar, determinedly ensconced in her hermetic ivory tower. Beneath that prickly persona, however, beats the heart of a grieving sister, unable to come to terms with the suicide of her older brother Sam some thirty years earlier. She focuses on her research, keeping surviving brothers Hugh and Kurt and their families at arm's length until Sam's widow Terezie appears on her doorstep with disturbing news. Terezie's daughter Cornelia needs a kidney transplant, and the family has no medical insurance. Terezie's unexpected visit thrusts Sarah into a family drama that will unearth secrets that transform her understanding of both Sam and herself.

The narrative moves back and forth in time, introducing the Peltons, a central Texas family of physicians, and the rigid code of conduct that defines them. Decorum, duty, and clan

allegiance—traits personified by Sarah's grandfather and family patriarch are faithfully upheld by all but Sam, the maverick middle son, who seemingly delights in pushing the envelope in both behavior and belief. Here we meet a very different Sarah—young, precocious, and full of questions. Even as she frets about Sam's frequent run-ins with their father, she longs to follow his example and chart her own course. In the evocative opening chapter, the Pelton pecking order is on full display at a Sunday afternoon picnic on the sizeable family farm. Grandfather brooks no patience at any sign of insubordination or weakness, from his thoroughbred horse to his son, Sarah's father, belittlingly addressed as *boy*. When Grandfather goads Sarah's mother into taking the reins, their test of wills demonstrates to the nine-year-old girl that, despite everything she's been brought up to believe, Grandfather and, by association, her entire family are in the wrong. In that charged moment, her journey to self-discovery begins.

That journey will involve two other families. Like planets that orbit the Pelton sun, they are at once intrinsic members of this strictly ordered system and perennial outsiders: the Cervenkas, Czech-Americans who lease the Pelton farm, and the venerable Otis Settle, once a child slave of Sam Houston's, then the Cervenkas' farmhand, and, in his later years, a janitor in the Peltons' hospital. Otis's teenage bride Ruby, likewise, plays a role fraught with duality, one that evolves from a housemaid seen in biblical terms as a *good and faithful servant* by Sarah's grandparents to the keeper, with her parents, of a closely held family secret about Sam.

Sam's attraction to the blue-collar Cervenkas and, in time, to their daughter Terezie underscores his rejection of the Peltons' regimented lifestyle. In striking contrast to the toe-the-line family that owns the land, the family that works it exudes a big-hearted openness and respect for individuality that Sam finds irresistible. His wedding to Terezie forges a Pelton-Cervenka alliance that will have unsettling ramifications long after his death when Terezie, in dire need of funds to save her daughter, produces a will that ostensibly awards her a share

equal to that of Sarah and her brothers in the Peltons' considerable property.

Echoes of the novel's eerie prologue permeate the story as layers of this complex family narrative, much like those of an archaeological excavation, are painstakingly revealed. The reality of death and its legacy of relics are ever-present: a kettle of bones kept for medical reference in Sarah's father's study; ancient arrowheads unearthed from an Indian midden by Sam, Sarah, Terezie, and her brother Cyril; the preserved human organs and convict's cadaver viewed, with equal parts revulsion and fascination, by Sarah on a clandestine exploration with Sam of the hospital morgue. Time and again, it's Sam, adolescent Sarah's self-sacrificed idol, introducing her to the complexities of the human condition, urging her to always confront the truth, no matter how ugly. As an adult, she is spurred to do just that by the imperative of saving Cornelia, a spunky young woman who disarmingly, yet tenaciously breaches Sarah's wall of isolation. As Cornelia's unlikely champion, Sarah assumes Sam's role of family crusader to advocate for the wife he left behind. Thus, the ritual of death and rebirth enacted in the ancient tomb comes full-circle.

As Cuba weaves Sarah's journey from Christian commune to Mexico City's Ciudad Universitaria with the unfolding drama of Terezie's challenge to the Peltons' patrimony, she traverses complex emotional and ethical terrain, yet never loses a solid engagement with the physical world. The narrative is related with the keen eye of a natural scientist, from the precisely choreographed ambulation of a paraplegic to the rhythm of hoes chopping dirt in a sweltering cotton field. Balancing the metaphysical allusions is a veritable litany of central Texas' flora and fauna—huisache and Johnson grass, jackrabbit and cicada. While the narrator experiences inexplicable and unsettling hallucinations of ancient temples and rituals, the reader is always firmly anchored in the palpable here-and-now.

With similar deftness, the author blends the Peltons' story with that of the state's diverse peoples. The native Clovis and

Tonkawa tribes, early immigrants (Choctaws and Cherokees), Europeans like the Cervenkas that arrived later, freed slaves like Otis—all receive due respect for their roles in forging the state's vibrant culture. Richly deserving of its state and regional honors, *Body and Bread* is a true Texas novel, presenting both a nuanced exploration of one family's struggle to define itself and a testament to the intricate, often fragile, but ultimately enduring connections of Texans past and present.