

The Great Lone Star Novel

Body and Bread

by Nan Cuba

Minneapolis: Engine Books Publisher, 2013.
240 pp. \$15.95 paper.

Reviewed by
Catherine Kasper

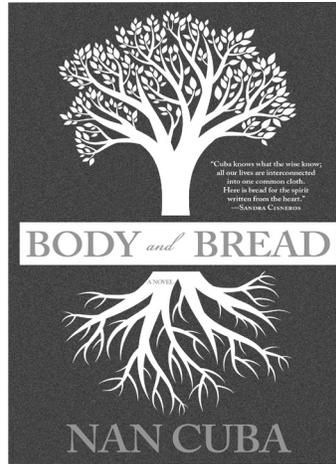
Nan Cuba's *Body and Bread* could be the quintessential Texas novel for the twenty-first century. *Body and Bread* focuses on several generations of the Pelton family, their relationship to Texas, and those issues of family, tragedy, illness, and kinship. Like Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha County, Cuba's Texas is rich with history and tainted with deceptions revolving around slavery and race relations in the South. Cuba's Pelton family also has structural parallels to Faulkner's Compson family in *The Sound and the Fury*. Like the Compsons, the current generation of Peltons consists of three brothers and one sister. In both instances, readers witness the marked differences in characters and how they face and avoid the reality of their lineage and the question of who endures and how. Whereas Faulkner's Caddie Compson is essentially voiceless and only "seen" by others, Cuba's Sarah Pelton is the novel's narrator.

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She is, arguably, from more privileged and educated circumstances, but still bound by her relationship to her brothers. Nonetheless, in *Body and Bread*, the sole Pelton daughter has a voice and gets to tell her own story, with all its horror and beauty.

Cuba's protagonist, Sarah Pelton has worked to become an Anthropologist and Professor, the Henry R. Fineman Endowed Chair of Mesoamerican Studies, no less. Her struggle for that

achievement is part of the arc of the novel, which begins with recollections of her childhood devotion to her favorite brother Sam. Their fates are paralleled throughout, as they commit



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to being "truth scavengers."

Sarah's quest for identity leads her to mimic her brother, pursue various religious beliefs, and finally, to a professional career with a focus on the spiritual aspects of *Nahuah* culture: "As a high school student, my uneducated use of the term [Aztec] and misinterpretations of the culture were logical. But society's repeated misuse of these terms only illustrates history's continual evolution." It is more than "evolution" that Sarah uncovers, as her family's history is intertwined with slavery, racism, and a general impulse towards deception. As a narrator, Sarah is unflinching in her demands for truth about the world and herself. Rather than create borders, Sarah finds that for her, family and history reveal their interconnectedness with everyone they come into contact with, from Otis to Sam's wife Terezie to Terezie's child Cornelia, and to Sarah's students. It is refreshing to read a novel with an intelligent and unsentimental narra-

tor, whose present is composed of the complicated and tormented past of her family, which has serious consequences and demands responsible actions from every member of the Pelton family.

The artifacts uncovered by the characters throughout the novel become a powerful symbol for those connections between people in the present, past, and future, as they intertwine varying concepts of spirituality, mysticism, and the politics and ethics of ownership. Without giving too much away, Sarah is not portrayed as hero or saint. She is troubled while she struggles to be the "truth scavenger" her brother Sam has inspired her to be, and truth here, is both artifact and weapon, tool and stolen property, opportunity and heartbreak.

Body and Bread unfolds in chapters that jump back and forth in time, a construction that takes artistry to pull off, which Cuba does effectively, stylistically creating a further Faulknerian echo. Like an archeological dig where one finds shards in layers of soil that must later be reconstructed, so does Sarah reconstruct the hidden pieces of her family's fractured past. This history is rooted in the landscape of Texas and made real through Cuba's precise sensory descriptions: "A stand of mesquites bordered a fence in the distance next to the highway. Straight ahead, the sky's edge seemed only a few miles down the road, its blue abutment a vast backdrop to the familiar stretch of concrete," and little later: "A few yards away, bluebonnets peeked through baffle, mountain laurel smelled like cider, and an owl hooted in a little leaf sumac near the horses." Place is connected to spirituality for Sarah, and the ancient spiritual rites of her studies become the rhythmic pulse of her pursuits. Life, death, past, and present: all are woven together by Cuba's deft narrative ability in Sarah's voice:

I gathered a fistful of groundcover
and sniffed: dust, alkali, metal. So,
I thought, this is time, its dark ele-

CONTINUED ON PAGE 19

Women on the Border

Anay's Will to Learn: A Woman's Education in the Shadow of the Maquiladoras

by Elaine Hampton

Austin: University of Texas Press, 2013.
159 pp. \$55 cloth.

Reviewed by
Jane Manaster

When you can't overturn the system, you figure out a way to work within it. Anay (pronounced like 'an eye') Carrillo, a young Mexican woman who is disadvantaged from several standpoints, was resolute. Come hell or high water she would pursue an education. Once successfully through elementary school in her small home town in southern Mexico, no further schooling was available. At sixteen, she trod the path toward Ciudad Juarez where she found a job at a *maquiladora*, a foreign-owned factory. She chose well, for the company (like some but not all others) provided opportunities to take classes and receive a measure of

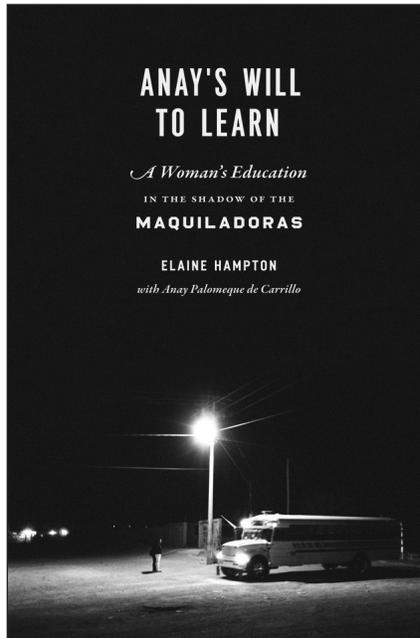
Altogether a remarkable book, it scores highest for being pragmatic, closely detailed, and unsentimental. But at the same time, every revelation Anay makes is heartfelt by the author.

health care. Although the daily work was repetitive and mind-numbing, and certainly not well-paying, she saved to buy the series of textbooks, took all the necessary exams, and achieved the equivalent of a high school diploma. And this was not the end of her story, but closer to the beginning.

In 2002, Elaine Hampton, an emerita professor at the University of Texas at El Paso, met Anay in the course of her own research on the status of women on the Mexican border. The meeting evolved into a close and lasting friendship. Hampton recognized the importance of Anay's ambition. As well as broadening her personal outlook, she was able

to enter a world only suspected until this time, a world divided in two by a river. Altogether a remarkable book, it scores highest for being pragmatic, closely detailed, and unsentimental. But at the same time, every revelation Anay makes is heartfelt by the author.

Anay takes Hampton to meet her family in Huixpan, a pseudonym for the town where she was raised by a large part-Indian family. was raised. The



pages reveal the horrific background of sexual abuse experience, suffered also by her equally mother who gave birth to her at fourteen. The wounds were psychologically embedded, and physically led to Anay's cancer caused by the violence of the rapes.

Anay treats her hardships as challenges and the experiences are mitigated by her decade-long friendship with Elaine Hampton and the blessing of her husband, Enrique, a youth minister who allows some benefits through the Church of Christ in Texas. The epilogue, revealing Anay's present status, is quite wonderful.

Hampton insists repeatedly on the positive aspects of Mexico and Mexicans. Then—almost abruptly—in the

last pages she turns savagely to the violence in Ciudad Juarez that all but destroyed the city. This is an intellectual, or should I say academic book? Blessed by few footnotes and end notes and a substantial bibliography. And (dare I say it?) unlike so many books published by university presses, it is a compelling, enjoyable, and rewarding read. ★

Jane Manaster is a writer and reviewer originally from England. She lived in Austin many years but now resides in Dallas.

GREAT LONE STAR NOVEL
CONTINUED FROM PAGE 6

ments, and I'm like Jonah inside the whale's belly, like the mouse inside the bass's sac, like Sam inside his paralyzed body. Was this cave anything like the one at the Caley Creek battlefield, where 240 Caddoes, Kickapoo, and Comanche had been *routed*? Was my father's kettle of bones so different from the shrines atop the pyramid? I pictured the man in his overalls, hanging, then Otis lying stiffly, and the cadavers in my father's lab. Like Houston, they'd all lifted, become stars.

It is important to add that Sarah has an acerbic wit, and the dialogue throughout the novel often captures realistic humor in unexpected places. Although I understood that nothing, not history, nor family are ever neatly reconstructed, I was not ready for the novel to end when it did, and I wanted to hear more from this honest and unflinching narrative voice. *Body and Bread* is a worthwhile read and a stunning achievement, one, that the acknowledgments tell us, was "twenty years" in the making. ★

Catherine Kasper is an associate professor of creative writing at UTSA. Her novella, *Notes from the Committee*, won the 2008 Noemi Press Fiction Chapbook Prize.