

BOOK REVIEWS

The Poor Children

by April L. Ford

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177 pages

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Reviewed by George Hovis

The title of April L. Ford's debut collection of stories, *The Poor Children*, promises irony and double meanings, and the book fulfills that promise many times over. The children in these stories are, indeed, often impoverished, materially and spiritually. They are the victims of all kinds of neglect and abuse. But they are rarely helpless. Quite the contrary—these dragon's teeth grow into deadly adversaries of their parents and each other. Take M—, for example, the protagonist of “runawaybitch13,” whose parents are guilty of little more than constant self-absorption, arguing over what movie they will watch, while their disabled child, D—, wallows on the carpet, regurgitating his supper. D—'s older sister, M—, is no less self-involved than her parents (but she's only thirteen!), and her sass and verve make us forgive her excesses, at least until the very end of the story, when she and her boyfriend, who believes he is a three-hundred-year-old werewolf, brutally murder her parents and then consummate the deed by having sexual intercourse on her parents' bed. Ford provides that last bit of content in the form of a news report; in her good taste she tends to render the most salacious content “off stage” or to suggest its trajectory rather than make it fully explicit. And often, as with Flannery O'Connor or Dale Ray Phillips, the most heartrending trauma borders on the darkly comic. Don't be mistaken: there's plenty of edge to this collection, but Ford senses how far a reader is willing to peer into the abyss, and she teeters right on the knife's edge of innocence and its utter loss.

Only slightly less Gothic than “runawaybitch13” is “A Marmalade Cat for Jenny,” in which the titular protagonist, at thirteen, is impregnated by her twenty-one-year-old foster brother, Mark.

“Marmalade Cat” begins when Jenny is nine and being routinely raped by her Pa, while both her biological brother Scott and her foster brother Mark (both seventeen) stand by as witnesses. Whereas Scott is helpless to intervene, Mark routinely stands up to Pa and eventually murders him, which results in his being sent away for four years to a minimum security prison. With Mark and Pa out of the way, Scott assumes the role of Jenny's caretaker, and their lives approach normalcy. But Mark's release coincides with Jenny's entrance to puberty, and the brother and foster brother square off to see who will become the new patriarch.

Like Mark, minors in other stories are frequently in and out of institutions, and Ford convincingly explores the relationships between these troubled teens and the adults who attempt to care for them—not always with good intentions. Consider, for example, Madame Jasmine of “Isabelle's Haunting,” who takes in foster children solely for the purpose of staffing her tourist destination that doubles as haunted house and bordello. By contrast, in “Bleary,” the well-intentioned Avril learns that only by treating the institutionalized teens at Bleary Center for Today's Youth as fully human can she induce them to come to show promise of rehabilitation, and yet such trust comes with tremendous risks to herself and her charges. Similarly in “Bananas and Limes” (which appeared as “Project Fumarase” in *New Madrid*, Summer 2014) Peggy jeopardizes her career with Child Protective Services by helping a teen mother named Karaleen attempt to nurse her infant. In so doing, Peggy experiences a level of intimacy that challenges her ability to see Karaleen merely as a member of a religious cult and an informant who might assist in the cult's demise. In “Layla,” Andrea simultaneously navigates the early stages of pregnancy and her entry-level position at the Clermont Girls' and Boys' Correctional Facilities. At stake is her willingness to participate in bringing a new generation into a world that is already glutted with “little rapists and murderers, the future arsonists and other monsters being preened for society.” In the midst of such unadulterated evil, though, Andrea meets “beautiful Layla,” a girl with a prosthetic leg

who drinks "an entire bottle of bathroom cleaner during chore hour," just for the chance to be touched with gentleness by her caretakers. Andrea tempers her anxiety for the new life inside her by concluding that if it is a girl she will name it Layla.

Throughout *The Poor Children*, our gaze is held on the lives of children who demand our empathy but will not tolerate our sentimentality. In this hard-edged debut, winner of the Santa Fe Writers Project Award and shortlisted for the Scott Prize for international debut story collections (Salt Publishing, UK), April L. Ford shows promise of a brilliant career.