



BIOGRAPHY

Dorothy Dodds Baker (1907–1968) was born in Missoula, Montana, and raised in California. At UCLA she met the poet Howard Baker, whom she married in Paris in 1930. Her first novel, *Young Man with a Horn* (1938), about the white jazz musician Bix Beiderbecke, won a Houghton Mifflin Literature Fellowship and was made into a 1950 movie starring Lauren Bacall, Doris Day, and Kirk Douglas. In 1942 Baker received a Guggenheim Fellowship. She and her husband adapted her next novel, *Trio* (1943), into a screenplay, but just a few months after its Broadway opening in December 1943, the play was shut down by protesters outraged by its lesbian themes. Baker wrote two other novels, *Our Gifted Son* (1948) and *Cassandra at the Wedding* (1962). She died of cancer in 1968.

CASSANDRA AT THE WEDDING

by Dorothy Baker

Afterword by Deborah Eisenberg

978-1-59017-112-7

“It’s hard not to be caught up from the very first page by the first-person voice of the speaker... this is the compulsively readable story of Cassandra’s unwilling trip home to attend (or prevent) her twin sister Judith’s wedding. She’s one of those neurotic, intelligent women, trying to understand the direction her life has taken.” —Nancy Pearl, author of *Book Lust: Recommended Reading for Every Mood, Moment and Reason*

ABOUT THIS BOOK

Dorothy Baker’s *Cassandra at the Wedding* is a dazzlingly intense novel about a disturbed, brilliant young woman determined to sabotage her twin sister’s wedding.

Twenty-four-year-old Cassandra Edwards and her twin, Judith, have always been exceptionally close. Raised in a family that never seemed to feel the need for outsiders, the two have always relied on each other and have few other friends. Their mother has been dead for three years and their reclusive father, a retired philosophy professor, long ago left the university to live in seclusion with a bottle of Hennessy on the family’s ranch. Ever since Judith left the apartment that she and Cassandra shared in Berkeley nine months ago, Cassandra has been falling apart. She is thin as a rail, drinking far too much, indulging in meaningless flings, and entertaining thoughts of throwing herself off the Golden Gate Bridge. When Judith returns from New York to marry a doctor she has met there, Cassandra drives back to the family’s ranch in the foothills of the Sierras for the wedding. There she joins their father, as well as her affectionate and charmingly plainspoken grandmother who tries—to little avail—to draw the family toward a more normal life. As she battles with her very real anguish, Cassandra exercises every ounce of manipulative charm she has to try to stop her sister’s wedding and preserve the life that they used to share—a life that she believes cannot be whole without Judith.

FOR DISCUSSION

1. There is a great deal of darkness and angst in *Cassandra at the Wedding*, yet it is lit by Cassandra’s wit and intelligence and by the love that the members of the Edwards family have for one another. How would you describe the tone of the novel?
2. For all her charm, wit, and intelligence, Cassandra is often manipulative, volatile, and selfish, and she often seems unable to separate herself from her performance of herself. Judith says that “problems and character being in her case so bound up together that you can’t have one without the other; she’s a problem character” [p. 139]. How, in spite of all of this, does Cassandra remain a sympathetic character? What qualities and feelings redeem her?

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

- Jorge Luis Borges, *Labyrinths*
- Leonora Carrington, *The Hearing Trumpet*
- René Daumal, *Mount Analogue*
- Stanislaw Lem, *Solaris*
- Alberto Manguel, *The Year of Reading*
- David Markson, *Wittgenstein's Mistress*
- Haruki Murakami, *A Wild Sheep Chase*
- H. G. Wells, *The Island of Dr. Moreau*

OTHER IDEAS FOR YOUR READING GROUP

Last Year at Marienbad
directed by Alain Resnais;
screenplay by Alain Robbe-Grillet
(France, 1961)

OTHER NYRB CLASSICS OF INTEREST

The Glass Bees
Ernst Jünger
(introduction by Bruce Sterling)

Count d'Orgel's Ball
Raymond Radiguet
(introduction by Jean Cocteau)

Asleep in the Sun
Adolfo Bioy Casares
(introduction by James Sallis)

Fancies and Goodnights
John Collier
(introduction by Ray Bradbury)

3. When Cassandra and Judith are small children, they discover the body of their pet cat, Tacky: "We saw him at the same time, understood it, and fell intuitively into each others' arms and knew for the first time what it is to feel complete together with our backs against the wall of bitter outrage. We learned, the day we found our favorite, where hurt lies and where comfort against it" [p. 85]. Cassandra still seeks comfort from Judith, but what is the current source of her bitter outrage? Is Judith's departure from Berkeley the cause of it, or has Judith's departure merely brought Cassandra's inner turmoil to the surface?
4. Judith tells her father, "There is only one thing that would help Cassie...really save her—and that would be for me to go to pieces in the same way she has" [p. 169]. Do you think this is true? Why or why not? How is Judith able to believe this and still love her sister? Why has Judith been able to create an independent life when Cassandra has not?
5. What role does music have in the novel? What does it say about the type of family the Edwardses are? What is the significance of the Bosendorfer? How is it ironic that Cassandra is the one who is the musician?
6. Judith tells Cassandra, "I know how you are. It's all right. It's one way to be." How is Cassandra's lesbianism treated in the novel? Why is it referred to only obliquely? How much of a source of her angst is it?
7. The first and last sections of the book are narrated by Cassandra. How reliable is she as a narrator? How does Judith's point of view in the middle section of the novel influence your opinion of Cassandra?
8. Is Cassandra purposefully manipulative or merely so charismatic that people fall under her sway? What similarities are there between the conversation that Cassandra has with Judith out by the pool on her first night home and the conversation that Cassandra later has with Vera Mercer when Vera comes to the ranch after Cassandra's overdose?
9. Cassandra mentions her analyst fleetingly a few times throughout the book, but we only actually see them interact for a short time. How would you characterize Cassandra's relationship with her therapist? What "impulses" is Vera Mercer referring to [p. 202]? How much do you think that Vera's visit influences Cassandra's recovery?
10. Jane Edwards is described as having been headlong and reckless, yet deeply devoted to her husband. In what ways is Cassandra like her? How does her ghost haunt Cassandra, particularly in terms of Cassandra's ability to find meaningful work? How much is her mother's death the cause of Cassandra's emotional paralysis?
11. "She sounds to me like a bad bad girl," Jack said, and when I caught from his voice that he didn't include me I could not possibly have loved God more, nor nature, nor all bounty. And along with the relief I was flooded with forgiveness" [p. 148]. What is Judith afraid of? Why is Cassandra so powerful? Why is Judith able to forgive her sister?
12. Judith asks: "And the question came again, as it had before, the big question: why can't she love someone, the way I love someone? Why can't she love anybody but me?" [p. 187]. Why can't Cassandra love anybody the way she loves her sister? What prevents her? Why is Cassandra unable to feel whole on her own? Does Vera Mercer come close to answering this?
13. Can the book be read as a struggle to reconcile conventional and unconventional people, conventional desires and unconventional desires? Which characters are conventional and which are unconventional? How? Which characters are most likable as people or interesting as characters?
14. Why does Cassandra have a change of heart about Judith's wedding? Why, in the end, does she want it to be as conventional a wedding as possible, at a church, in the presence of friends and acquaintances? How sincerely are we to take her change of heart?
15. The novel is compressed into just a few days and features only a handful of characters, which helps to create its intensity. Do you think that Cassandra's voice could have been sustained over the course of a longer novel? Would it have been possible to build the same sense of crisis?