

# Frenchy & Cuban Pete

and Other Stories

by Bobbie Louise Hawkins

(Bolinas, Calif.: Tombouctou, 1977; 77 pp.; \$3.50)

# Back to Texas

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(Bear Hug, 1977; \$4.50)

Barbara Wilson

The only way to convey the breezy, thoughtful spirit of the stories in *Frenchy & Cuban Pete* is to start out quoting Bobbie Louise Hawkins immediately:

THERE'S AN OLD...

There's an old Texas saying that I think I may be the only one who remembers it.

It goes 'I've enjoyed just about as much of this as I can stand.'

It's a magic formula that lets you head for the door past all the frenzy of any minute now it's going to get significant. It's a way to say that whatever you had in mind this ain't it. It lets you stop eating slop that needs a palate and a vocabulary.

I've enjoyed just about as much of this as I can stand.

*Frenchy & Cuban Pete* is a small, squarish book, and none of the stories in it are longer than six pages. Most of them are considerably shorter—just the length of an anecdote that's half an aside. You could swear that Bobbie Louise with her Texas accent (and I just know she has a Texas accent) is sitting across the table from you telling you these great little stories about selling magazines at seventeen ("There's a gap in the greater American consciousness about the low-downest level of the magazine business, and I'm going to feed a little into it out of my own true-life experience" ("Pitches and Catches")), about the first stripper club in Albuquerque, about the wife of a British civil servant somewhere "in the colonies" who slits her wrists.

Bobbie Louise Hawkins is the western Grace Paley, able in just a sentence of two to turn an ordinary event (a promotional letter from an insurance company advising her to insure her college-age daughter) into a wry meditation on life, death, and everything in between.

It's no accident that one of the pieces in the book is entitled "Don Cesar's Moral Tale." Hawkins is profoundly concerned with the reverberations of her own and other people's actions. Don Cesar keeps posing this dilemma to his sons: "There are two people lost in the desert. They have exactly enough water to keep one of them alive until help comes. What should be done?" He

is enraged at their ambiguous answers, their answers that are questions: "Are wives and children involved? Is one man much older than the other? Can one man take more than half the water and go for help?"

For Don Cesar there is only one answer, and that answer follows the "law of survival."

Survival is what matters to Hawkins too—moving on, getting over, bandaging up the slit wrists. She says in the title story, "Frenchy & Cuban Pete":

You know the brainwash goes that loss of innocence is a one-timer and thereafter you're left sadder and wiser. But in my experience it's cyclical; the place like the San Andreas Fault where your life makes a necessary dimensional shift. And it's not such a loss, more often it's a trade.

And the pain of it is the least interesting thing about it.

*Back to Texas* is also about survival, and, if the word were not so hopelessly meaningless by now, about roots. It's not strictly a novel; Hawkins writes: "In a book like this,



Bobbie Louise Hawkins.

the 'plot' is whether it can come together at all. It might help to think of it as having gathered more than having been written. It's got about as much plan to it as tumbleweeds blown against a fence and stuck there."

*Back to Texas* is gathered together, then, in the form of a driving trip that Jessie, the narrator, takes with her mother back to the scenes of Jessie's childhood—little backwater towns in Texas where many varieties of grandmothers, aunts, and cousins still live.

*Back to Texas* is a slow-paced but rhythmic collection of scraps of dialogue, ghost stories, gossip, and family history, interspersed with Jessie's own perceptions. The sense of place, of Texas as a character in the book, is very strong:

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Many writers have gone back to visit their childhoods, and what we have most often read as a result is a kind of tortured nostalgia, compounded with a sense of superiority: "I'm sure glad I got away from all that." Hawkins is different. A lot of things about Jessie's childhood weren't pleasant ("What I remember, most often is that we were just the two of us living in a bedroom in somebody's house and my mother's salary would run ten dollars a week and the room plus board for me, and the landlady's looking after me, would run seven"), but Hawkins isn't bitter. She says, "I don't mean to make this sound pathetic." Jessie, the narrator, isn't judging her relatives, even when they ask her questions about her life. She's frankly enjoying their company.

There's a poem-like conversation, for example, among a group of women relatives about ways to cook liver. Another writer might have used the banality of the discussion to show how narrow these women's lives are; another writer might have made them cackle, might have laughed at them. Not Hawkins. She reproduces their conversation lovingly, because she loves them and their way of talking, and the result is warm, colloquial, and engrossing. There really are a lot of ways to cook liver . . .

Each section of *Back to Texas* has as its title the first words of the paragraph: "When we were living . . ." "What were we talking about . . ." "When Mama had pelligrisy . . ." The emphasis is always on the narrative voice; the book is a series, a progression rather, of ruminations, desultory talk, sudden insight. Hawkins has listened to her people talking and has found their speech wonderful. So do I.

A further note about *Back to Texas*: although its cover price is a little steep, it's one of the best-designed small press books I've ever run across. Chuck Miller has illustrated it profusely with black and white cross-hatched drawings of homely objects—laundry tossing in the breeze, a farmhouse on an endless horizon, the interior of a kitchen. The illustration, along with the warm wheat and earthy tones of the cover, add immeasurably to the subject without being distracted in the least. A beautiful book. ●