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Hunger in America

David Cates

New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992.

\$19.95; cloth.

Reviewed by Earl Ganz

Hunger in America, David Cates' remarkable first novel about a single night on Kodiak Island, begins with a one-page description, a prologue that establishes mood and sets scene, and also makes a claim for the authorial voice.

When it's overcast, Kodiak is an island of ten thousand gray shades, and it's almost always overcast . . . out that way is the ocean and the ocean goes on forever. In back of us . . . is the wilderness . . . Resting on shore pilings and little hills, town is a relative megalopolis, a cluster of canneries, bars, shops, boats—humanity squeezed mercifully between the forevers. Built on a rock, of course, a bit of solidity, the present tense . . .

The last images go about as far as you can to describe the human condition. Between "the forevers" of ocean and wilderness, humanity is "squeezed," a verb suggesting pain, but pain eased somewhat by the adverb "mercifully." The next sentence expands on this authorial claim to wisdom with an image of man's work "built on rock," but rock cut down to "bit" size, then changed altogether into something less solid though perhaps more enduring: words, grammar, "the present tense." The author seems to be saying that he is the island and the mercy, and all questions implied in his survey-sounding title will be answered in the pages that follow

So we begin the story of Jack Dempsey Cliff, a newcomer to Kodiak Island who's working as a cab driver and who is, as we quickly discover, undergoing actual, physical hunger. A complaining phone call from his hypochondriac mother in Wisconsin has caused him to miss his dinner and, in a moment, he will discover he's too late for a free spaghetti feed at a local bar. Jack's fruitless search for food will be a running joke throughout the long night of

his shift. But in a story that moves from random fare to random fare, Jack's search for food is the only real plot we will get.

Yet there's another kind of search going on, a search that got Jack to Kodiak Island in the first place. He's trying to find out about his father, who he never knew. This search began when Jack first learned of his absent father's death in a fishing accident fifteen years before, and is motivated by the question of why Kid Cliff walked out on his family. Was it in any way Jack's fault or was it because the man had endured the nightmare of the Bataan death march? Jack knows it's an impossible search, that the past is irredeemable, but he also knows he has to go on with it, if for no other reason than that it brings some meaning to his life.

He's wondering if anybody truly mourned his father's death . . . He knows this is a dangerous way to think, but he's thinking this way anyway. Rationality is nice, but it can weaken the compulsion to make up stories about the stars. There are days, sometimes years, when wonder at the unknowable is all that feeds you.

Paradoxically, though Jack's hunger is real, his "wonder at the unknowable" makes him seem less hungry than his fares. And Kodiak's nightlife are a very hungry bunch. There's Edna, the forty-year-old Aleut virgin, powerless in the real world but who, in her own mind, is able to change her shape at will. There's Pretty Gertie, the mean drunk with the massive head who wants to become pregnant. There's Donald Sutherland, Jack's movie-star name for the coke-happy fisherman who keeps getting into his cab. And there are many others: prostitutes, bartenders, waitresses, Filipino cannery workers and Japanese sailors, two-hundred pages full of hungry people.

But no one is hungrier than Neil Pasternak, the Vietnam vet who blithely tells Jack that he sailed with Kid Cliff on his last voyage and that the man saved his life by making him get into a life raft. It seems

to Jack that his father has treated Neil Pasternak as a son, so Neil becomes, in Jack's eyes, a kind of brother. But Neil is also the fare who, at the beginning of the novel, eats Jack's dinner and who will be, in each subsequent section, the cause of Jack not getting anything to eat. Neil is Jack's fate, an alter ego, a scavenger and waster who constantly courts disaster and who, through perverse luck, constantly escapes it.

As he walks towards town, Neil's thinking of Susan out there somewhere with a gun; he's hoping the Mecca has opened already for breakfast; he's thinking of how the world seems to shrink whenever the fog blows down past the reservoir—even with that pretty spot of sun over there; he's thinking of himself and Susan long ago, trying to remember a wonderful dream, yet all the time keeping his eyes on the skyline for signs of mutual destruction.

“Mutual destruction” is Neil Pasternak's vision, and from his experience, it's a valid one. In fact, most of the characters are given such insights, beautiful glimpses of the truth of their own experience.

And, when I finished reading, I found I was doing it too, interpreting my experience of the novel. Realism, I decided as I felt the pain of its people. But realism didn't explain the almost ritualistic workings of fate in the story. And thinking about ritual led to allegory and Kodiak Island became a kind of purgatory for the testing of souls. But I couldn't sit still with that. Allegory led to parable and the novel moved on to become a cautionary tale of wasted lives. Now, as I remember those first enthusiastic readings, I realize that what I was really doing was working off the excitement the book had generated in me.

I'm told David Cates spent over ten years writing *Hunger in America* and that the novel underwent three major revisions. Perhaps, for a talented writer, waiting for a publisher isn't such a bad thing. It

explains how authors burst on the scene as overnight sensations with first books that have taken years to write. Think of Joseph Heller's *Catch 22* and its publication history. *Hunger in America*, though a very different novel, might well be in the same class as Heller's. It's not just a first book that shows great promise. It might have been that once. But the publishing powers-that-be gave David Cates time to write a first novel that will stand as a fine piece of work for any stage of his career. Deceptively simple, surprisingly taut, and quietly humane, *Hunger in America* is, in fact, one of the best novels I've read in a long time.