

Defying Your Wiring: On D. Foy's *Patricide*

By David Rice

Categories : Literature

Date : 21-10-2016

Patricide by D. Foy

Stalking Horse Press, 2016

398 pages - [Stalking Horse](#) / [Amazon](#)

D. Foy's second novel, *Patricide*, is about fate, not in the sense of cosmic destiny but in the sense of the faulty wiring that's passed down through families and that each individual struggles against, as much or as little as they can. Like his debut, 2014's *Made to Break*, it deals with the ways in which people on the fringes of American society teeter between transcendence and ruin in a haze of drugs and alcohol. Unlike *Made to Break*, *Patricide* is an epic.

Alternating between first and third person, it tells the life story of Pat Rice (a lightly condensed version of the book's title), a boy born into a lower-middle-class family somewhere in the West or Southwest, somewhere in the 60s or 70s (time is hazy and most place-names are reduced to "Y"). Foy traces this boy's relationship with his overtly abusive mother and more passively abusive father, from his early discovery of weed and alcohol, through his reckless adolescence and young adulthood as an obscure, sometimes suicidal musician, in and out of jobs and relationships, then in and out of institutions, and finally in and out of touch with his father. In the later chapters, as both men age, their relationship moves toward total collapse or some 11th-hour reconciliation.

It starts out as a book – semi-autobiographical perhaps, or fully, who knows? – about a boy seeking vengeance on the man who failed to be the powerful, nurturing 'Father' he needed. But, over the course of 400 pages of strife, it turns into a book about forgiveness. Like Hesse's *Siddhartha*, it traces a self-involved individual's journey toward enlightenment, which only comes after he recognizes his own failings and forgives the man who supposedly passed them on, seeing him, instead, as a fellow-sufferer – a weak man, certainly, but not an evil one. In this way, the individual awakens to a deeper awareness of his place within the human family of fools, and stops wondering how he alone was dealt such a losing hand. Though it pulls no punches, *Patricide* summons great empathy in its examination of the ways in which we all err, and are united more by our shortcomings than our successes.

In tracing this journey, Foy's prose achieves a beautiful fusion of the casual and the portentous, turning one man's squalid life into a fable of exile and return, without ever losing the sense that these events really happened, or are really happening as we read them. When Pat Rice first realizes the depths of his father's cowardice in the midst of a violent confrontation on "New Year's Day of 1982," Foy writes, "The process I'd been hurled into roared through its cycles – rage to censor, censor to need, need to hope, hope to clarity, and on again to panic, to sadness, to anger, hatred, rage ... Round and round I spun while through the cosmos planets burned, quanta met, stars bore and died."

This fusion is so strong that epigraphs from W.G. Sebald, Thomas Hobbes, and R.D. Laing, among

many others, don't feel ironic at the heads of chapters about playground fights, petty theft, and electric guitars. Consistently working in both registers, *Patricide* is a formidable work of art, bridging the conversational intimacy of memoir with the ambition of a large, complex novel of ideas.

Just as Faulkner turned his Mississippi backwater into a stage for Biblical reckonings, Foy finds something grandiose, even visionary, in Pat Rice's quest for experience – first through drugs, sex, and music, then through philosophical inquiry and meditation – without losing track of the grimy terrain on which that quest plays out. As his life takes its course, he becomes a wanderer in the desert of a declining America.

More than anything, Foy conveys the weight – all the wisdom and all the accrued pain – of a life fully lived. Not a life lived especially well, perhaps, but one in which experience registers, and, by the end, amounts to something. This is not a cautionary tale, nor any kind of how-to manual, but rather an unvarnished account of the ways in which life breaks a person down, cutting through all his illusions until his innermost wiring is laid bare.

"I wondered," Pat Rice tells us near the end, after he's given up on seeking vengeance, "how my father could possess such virtuous traits even as he possessed such despicable traits, the traits of the coward and failure and liar and cheat and thief and fool ... my father was generous and gentle and considerate and patient and kind ... my father's virtue could as easily have won out, he could as easily have succeeded as failed at anything he chose ... [but] I understood perfectly well ... why my father had descended to his lifelong mire of apathy and addiction and fear. I understood because I was my father's son, because I was my father."

There's no guarantee, at the point where *Patricide* leaves us, that Pat Rice won't end up in this same mire – he's certainly spent long enough in it already – but there's catharsis in his ability to see it for what it is, and thus to see beyond it. In this sense, the book's title is at least partly misleading: instead of killing his father, Foy's protagonist finally manages to identify with him, and through this identification to glimpse the man his father might have become, had he done a little more with what he'd been given. This is the same man that Rice still has a chance of becoming, in the time he has left, if he goes one way and not the other.