This needling and unpleasant little book can easily upset readers who are expecting to find nice characters and inspiring behavior. The novel’s settings—a hotel room, a restaurant, a back office—are claustrophobic, and its dramatis personae show themselves to be weak or contemptible when they are not being viperish. Indeed, *The Widow’s Children* fits snugly in the tradition of the Viper Novel, with a centrally placed witty monster who makes mincemeat of everyone around her. In this respect, it resembles Jarrell’s *Pictures from an Institution*, a book that is much more fun to read. In short, there’d be no particular reason for reading *The Widow’s Children* if it weren’t a masterpiece of psychology. It is a great short novel, underappreciated in the way that books about cruelty tend to be. The first time I read it, I couldn’t stand it—or, rather, I couldn’t bear it, which is not quite the same thing. Now I can.

Other readers couldn’t bear it; the manuscript was rejected by thirteen publishers until it was finally accepted by Dutton/Plume.

Along with being a Viper Novel, *The Widow’s Children* is also a cautionary tale. The story concerns three middle-aged siblings who have never been properly parented—absent father, helpless mother—who as a result have never grown up. As if illustrating point-for-point Robert Bly’s argument in *The Sibling Society*, they are petty, sadistic, and mean-spirited—dangerous to be around. Only one of these siblings, Laura, the worst of them, has a child herself, Clara. Since Laura has never managed to get out of her own protracted adolescence (think of a female George W. Bush), she has never properly taken on the role of parent and has envied and hated Clara and therefore discarded her or abused her almost from the moment of birth. Now grown up, Clara has
been invited to her mother’s and stepfather’s hotel room for cocktails prior to their departure for Europe. A meal in a restaurant will follow.

The novel takes her to the hotel, and for the rest of its 224 pages stays for drinks and dinner, two conversations that night, and a funeral the following morning. Its tone is that of barely controlled and therefore eerie hysteria, and its method is one of hyper-detailing. This novel has some of the intensity of *Long Day's Journey into Night*, and for some of the same reasons. Subtexts proliferate; everybody is thinking about something that he or she can’t quite say, and the technique is that of jittery omniscience. All the narrative pressure is on facial expressions, body language, and minutely observed and detailed gestures and dialogue. It’s nerve-wracking emotionally, but exhilarating aesthetically, because Paula Fox absolutely nails every single moment.

If you know people like this (I grew up with them), you read *The Widow’s Children* with the kind of relief that’s tinged with tremendous gratitude. The author witnessed something you yourself witnessed (or suffered), and she reported on it accurately. What the novel does better than any other novel I’ve ever read is to reproduce the condition of what therapists call “hyper-vigilance,” that feeling you have when you’re surrounded by people whom you cannot trust, who are pretending to be kind to you when they actually mean to do you ill, and whom you must therefore watch carefully at every moment, as a prisoner watches his jailers.

*The Widow’s Children* has the longest extended scene I know of in an American short novel, a chapter, “Drinks,” that goes on for almost eighty-three pages. It is amazing. Any apprentice writer who wants to learn how to make a confined space come alive, how to make dialogue ring with meaning, and how to make every gesture count, should read this chapter over and over.

This book is not better known than it is because its characters are, for the most part, unpleasant to be around. And it does not have the epic ambitions of the work of novelists like Dostoyevsky or Faulkner. So what? Within its chosen confines, it carries out its mission perfectly. To use a phrase of Paula Fox, it is true all the way down.