Separating twins

A marriage signals the end of their close relationship

REVIEWED BY SHAWN A. MILLER

CASSANDRA AT THE WEDDING by Dorothy Baker; afterword by Deborah Eisenberg. New York Review of Books, 2004. 222 pp. $12.95.

Dorothy Baker's novel **Cassandra at the Wedding** is populated by only a handful of characters—a family, a fiancé and a therapist (an analyst, actually). Much of the action is confined to a ranch in California's Central Valley. And a hefty portion of one of the book's three sections details a claustrophobic hangover.

Despite this decidedly circumscribed and insular world, *Cassandra at the Wedding* is an expansive novel, if an intensely inward looking one. It's a book about how a wedding cleaves—in both senses of the word—identical twin sisters and changes not merely the circumstances of their lives, but their ways of being.

Cassandra at the Wedding was originally published in 1962 and is only now seeing the light of day again in this reprinting. Baker, an almost entirely unknown author who died in 1968, spent much of her life in the Bay Area and the Central Valley and also wrote *Trio*, *Our Gifted Son* and *Young Man with a Horn*, which was made into a movie staring Kirk Douglas in 1950.

The first and last of the book's three sections are narrated by Cassandra Edwards, a graduate student at Berkeley writing a thesis on young women writers from France. She's just finished the semester and flees the Bay Area and her unfinished "brute thesis" to attend her sister Judith's wedding, though she's clearly against the marriage. She refuses even to learn the groom's name. It is also clear that Cassandra is depressive and drawn in a dark way to the Golden Gate Bridge, though her analyst assures her that she is "not, at heart, a jumper."

Despite Cassandra's breezy, self-conscious, ironic manner, she's wound too tight and cracking—or, indeed, withering—under the oppressive Central Valley sun as she wends her way home with the top down.

Upon Cassandra's arrival, we meet her reclusive father, a brandy-soaked ex-philosophy professor who reads Thomas Hobbes over his morning muffins and has a penchant for skepticism and staying indoors. His dead wife, Jane—a casualty of cigarettes and cancer who imploded in her own right—haunts Cassandra.

Cassandra's essential problem is her precarious identity, which is so tied up with that of Judith that it's barely her own. She wants to explain to her grandmother—and the world—the particular difficulty of being a twin, of "what it's like to be bound to a way of life like ours—a situation we inwardly glory in, but one that we have to protect at every turn from the menacing mass of clichés that are thrust on us from the outside. To be like us isn't easy, it requires constant attention to detail. I've thought it out; we've thought it out together. I've tried to explain to my doctor that it's a question of working ceaselessly at being as different as possible because there must be a gap before it can be bridged. And the bridge is the real project."

The impending marriage threatens this life-long project and as her voice makes clear in the middle section of the book, Judith wants to forsake her sister and her family and forge an identity as a wife. But doing so threatens to destroy both Cassandra and Judith.

Baker succeeds wonderfully at animating Cassandra, at showing the force of her personality and her allure, at showing the destructive power of her sadness and the ambivalence it creates in Judith. And she does it without bogging down the novel down by morose introspection of heavy unhappiness. When Cassandra finds herself near death and considers her desire—to marry a bolt of black velvet—the punch and the snap of the prose helps the reader understand the draw.

Though *Cassandra at the Wedding* is a book from another time, it feels wholly contemporary. Cassandra's prescribed medications have been replaced by more sophisticated pharmaceuticals, but her difficulties and crises are timeless. Her struggle against "things that get in your way, the indignities you have to suffer before you're free to do one simple, personal, necessary thing, like work"—this struggle resonates at an all-too-familiar pitch. ✸