



Blood by Patricia Traxler
by Margot Livesey

from *Post Road 4*

Selected by Amy Scheibe, author of *What Do You Do All Day?*

*Margot Livesey writes gorgeous, evocative fiction that seduces with finely-wrought prose; the same can be said for her reviews. There is a generosity of spirit in her assessment of *Blood* that does not rely on self-reference or bicep-kissing, but instead honors the work that Traxler has done and highlights the beauty to be found in the poet's darkness. – AS.*

Adultery has been a staple of fiction almost since the first stories were told around the cave fire and many excellent novels have drawn their heat and light from the triangulated passions of the menage a trois so when Patricia Traxler sets her wonderful first novel *Blood* in this territory she is taking on some substantial predecessors: *Anna Karenina* and *Madame Bovary* leap to mind along with a host of twentieth century novels.

But this is the twenty-first century and although human emotions may not have changed much, many other aspects of women's lives have. Anna and Emma were married women, economically and socially dependent on their husbands, who were tempted to look outside marriage. Traxler's heroine is a single woman, a painter with a passion for her work as well as for her lover. She is also a lapsed catholic, with a strong sense of right and wrong, who hates to think that she may be guilty of breaking up a marriage, of depriving two children of the daily company of their father.

When Honora Blume receives a one year fellowship to the prestigious Larkin Institute for women (playfully modelled on Radcliffe's former Bunting Institute) both she and her lover, a writer named Michael Sullivan, see it as an opportunity. At last Honora, who supports herself by designing books, will have time to paint and at the same time the couple will be able to see each other more easily. Surely this large change in Honora's life heralds one in Michael's? By the time her fellowship ends, they both promise, they will be setting up house together.

Writing about sex is notoriously hard. In the early chapters of *Blood* Traxler does an amazing job not only of describing physical passion and desire but of conveying the emotions that accompany them, the profound sense of intimacy and belonging that Honora and Michael feel in their love-making. In other words, she shows us sex from the inside, not the outside. These highly charged scenes – there's a particularly steamy one in a jazz club - only deepen the reader's sense of doom. In real life adultery often ends well, or at least not badly, but in fiction we are primed to expect the worst.

And the worst is coming but from a quite unexpected direction. For Traxler does something else, almost equally hard; she writes seriously about the complexities of friendship between women, and between artists. Early in the novel Honora complains that their relationship gives Michael a life and a half and leaves her with half a life. But at the Larkin Institute Honora's life widens in unexpected ways as she becomes friends with an Indian poet and a Chilean journalist. As she tells us at the beginning of *Blood*, this is a story about "the violence of love" but both love and violence come from unexpected sources.

I don't want to say more for fear of giving away the subtle intricacies of Traxler's plot but I can say that *Blood* poses certain moral questions in a way that made me feel genuinely confounded as a reader. Like the characters, I didn't entirely know what to hope for. I can also say that more than almost any other novel I've read *Blood* captures the relationship between an artist and her work, a relationship that is also susceptible to jealousy and revision and love.

Margot Livesey's most recent novel, *Eva Moves the Furniture*, was published by Henry Holt in the autumn of 2001.