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FOXFIRE: CONFESSIONS OF A GIRL GANG

By Joyce Carol Oates

Dutton/William Abrahams. 327 pp.

For three decades, Joyce Carol Oates has created characters whose souls writhe with thwarted elemental passions.

Most frequently, they are adolescents tottering on the cusp between girl and woman. Few, maybe none, grow so actively if rebelliously heroic as Margaret Ann "Legs" Sadovsky, founder and leader of the outlaw girl gang Foxfire, for Legs says the loudest "No!" to the forces trying to shape her life.

The upstate New York town of Hammond in the early 1950s is like our world, only more so. It can't abide unbroken women. By 14, Legs is already a maverick, driven by a strength forged of will and defiance, racing against the current of a society willing to accept only women made from the nearly impossible synthesis of velvet and glass. With four other alienated Hammond teenagers, on the first day of 1953 Legs forms Foxfire from an idea she first announced to 13 year-old Maddy Wirtz. Now, 50 year-old Maddy, paging through her journals, tells Foxfire's story.

Yes, Maddy says, Foxfire was "a true outlaw gang," guilty of felonies ranging from assault to grand theft to arson and kidnapping, but most importantly "FOXFIRE was a true blood-sisterhood" bound by loyalty, trust and love. The greatest lie perpetuated about Foxfire, Maddy feels, was that "we did evil for evil's sake." While the gang began with only five members, it sensed a kinship with all oppressed people, for its strongest bond is the girls' shared refusal to accept the powerlessness they feel forced upon them. Foxfire becomes their way of taking a mallet to a tough world and beating it until it grows more tender to the weak, especially the poor and the female.

Modeled neither on the swaggering boys' gangs nor the sycophantic girls' auxiliaries to the boys' gangs, Foxfire is an Us defined by its Them, the Enemy, those who exploit, demean and bully. Chiefly, men. Its crimes, right up to its last, fatal act of violence on June 3, 1956, are always committed in defense of and revenge for some victim of abuse. When a teacher molests and humiliates a girl, Foxfire paints "I am a dirty old man" on his car. When someone tries to extort money and sex from Maddy, Foxfire beats him. When a man chains his sister in a shed for the sexual use of his friends, Legs burns down the shed. But when the girls try to maintain a home of their own and pay for the heart operations of an infant girl, financial exigencies lead them to deadly mistakes.

On its surface, "Foxfire" covers familiar Oates territory, right down to revisiting fictional Hammond in the fifties, the scene of Oates' 1990 *Because It Is Bitter, and Because It Is My Heart*. As often before, Oates explores the hopes, conflicts and anguish that form the core of female adolescence and can lead toward what gets labeled delinquency, how inner experience shapes outward behavior. Her prose itself, as in her last novel, *Black Water*, returns increasingly to the febrile rush that floods an imaginary world onto the page. Descriptions bear the breathless Oates rhythm, as this glimpse of

Foxfire member Violet: "She was sweet-natured, unnervingly beautiful with skin doughy dead-white, as Wonderbread you think you could poke your finger into, and eyes black as if the pupils had bled out into the irises and her hair jet-black too and straight as an Indian's falling to her waist."

Oates has always demonstrated stylistic genius and insightful rendering of memorable characters. What continue to evolve and deepen, even in her twenty-second novel, are her thematic depth and capacity for delineating some pattern in the events and people she describes.

In *Foxfire*, Oates shows, more chillingly than Wordsworth ever did, what's lost by leaving childhood and what's possible as recompense. The Foxfire sisters are leaving the child's world of androgynous play, when imagination allows limitless freedom, into the time of confining injunctions: smooth your skirt, tie your hair, cross your legs, look to men for what you need. Even those girls lucky enough to find gentle men achieve no autonomy and little power beyond what sex provides. In Legs's experience, men are more likely to provide welts, betrayal, scorn and dehumanization. The typical woman's life as dependent victim is one she refuses to live.

The only man Legs ever warms to is an alcoholic ex-priest who preaches Marxist revolution. Otherwise, men are Foxfire's enemy. To go out on a date is grounds for expulsion. Foxfire's victims are all men. When Legs holds a switchblade to the throat of a blustering leader of a boys gang, onlooking girls see in her not only a champion but even erotic appeal.

But it goes deeper. Foxfire provides its outcast members with something spiritual and mythic. What formal religion provides some—a coherent universe with the promise of inclusion—the gang provides these girls. "Foxfire made sacred those years," says Maddy. The ceremony on the night Foxfire was formed was lit by candles "like in church," each girl wearing a cross, speaking an oath echoing biblical diction, a sacrament as esoteric as a mystery cult's. When, much later, Legs hears a millionaire muttering sham piety as a Puritan distortion to justify his wealth and divine favor, she makes sure he has less chance of escaping her than a camel of passing through a needle's eye.

Holding knives or a sister's hand, Legs fascinates us as we are fascinated by David before Goliath or by Robin Hood, standing up to power, becoming power, acting on behalf of those who believe themselves too weak. She is a realistic, teenaged version of a child's vicarious experience of Captain Marvel or the Incredible Hulk, saying, "I can become something you can't push around." To a world that burns heroic women as witches, Legs says, "If I must be destroyed, only I will dictate the terms."

Foxfire becomes a riveting study of initiation, of male versus female, community versus alienation and power versus victimization. Told with trademark Oates integrity and conviction, it has the quality Hemingway said all good books have: it is truer than if it had really happened.