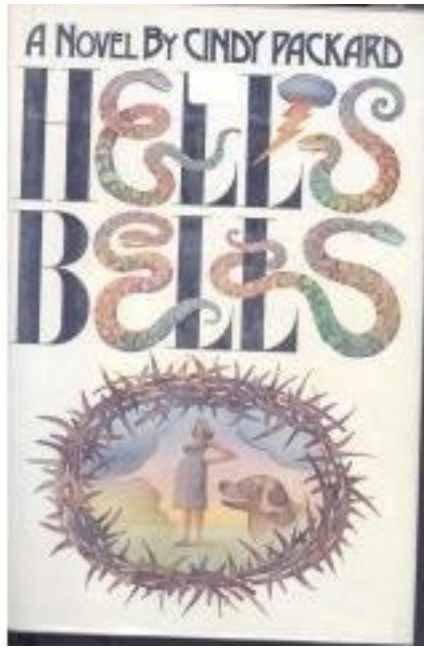


Hells Bells



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Hope Springer Cook, b. 1948--with grand farce in the first half, milder and darker (and less successful) comedy later on. Growing up in posh Pimm's River, Ct., Hope is the youngest in a You Can't ... 更多? Take It With You household: dotty inventor-Dad is a would-be Renaissance man; mother writes mysteries under pseudonyms, with the help of actual weapons and staged readings of her work-in-progress; one brother's a hypochondriac, another's into snakes, all the siblings come up with weird spouses. And everyone, including nasty-tongued Granny Talbot, is pretty rough on Hope--who has a recurring weight problem. ("The lynch mob grouped around the bathroom scales in a tight semi-circle.") Small wonder, then, that Hope wins acclaim in English 102 at Schuyler--read Skidmore--with her essay, "I am a Social Leper." Still, there are a few suitors, and some bright variations on standard sex-fumble-comedy: blind dates

abound ("I knew we were in trouble. . . They were wearing lederhosen and bright red socks"); there's near-consummation with crossword-puzzle fanatic Christopher. ("My manhood, root, member, noble tool must have overpowered you. Don't be frightened, alarmed, nervous, apprehensive.") The most persistent swain is un-gallant Barrett Cook--who deflowers a non-orgasmic Hope, gets her pregnant (a Philadelphia abortion-scene manages to find some fresh comic horror), but shuns her whenever she gains weight to become "the Duchess of Lard." And when Hope thins down permanently, nuptials ensue--despite the objections of Mrs. Cook (a WASPy sports nut) and the offensive remarks of Hope's brother Arthur. ("By the way, kid, can you feed her in the mastodonic manner she's accustomed to?") Then, in the early 1970s, Barrett goes to Vietnam--while Hope works for a small, prestigious N.Y. publisher-in-decline. And when Barrett returns, he insists that Hope get pregnant, that she follow him from city to city as his sporting-goods career develops: there's marriage-vs.-career tension, some mid-pregnancy adultery, mother-of-twins misery, and increasing focus on Hope's terrible three-day headaches. (Her "hell's bells"--which are finally cured, after failed therapies galore, by correction of her jaw alignment.) These marital-woe chapters are neither particularly funny nor credibly harrowing, with a surprisingly weak windup. But the early material is often hilarious--and Packard (daughter of Vance) shows a firm talent for Kaufmanesque, put-down dialogue all the way through.

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