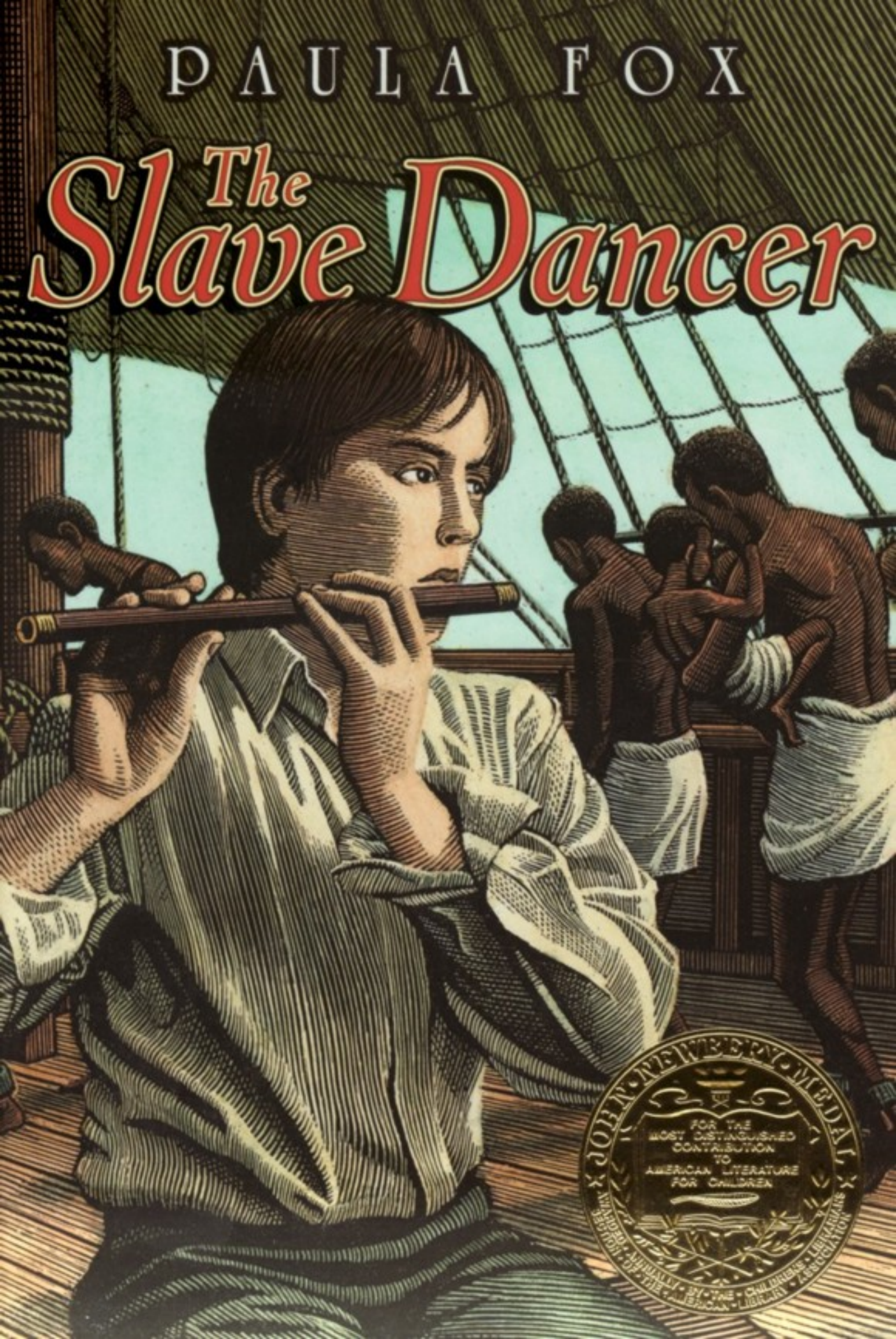
PAULA FOX

The Slave Dancer



THE ERRAND

In a hinged wooden box upon the top of which was carved a winged fish, my mother kept the tools of her trade. Sometimes I touched a sewing needle with my finger and reflected how such a small object, so nearly weightless, could keep our little family from the poorhouse and provide us with enough food to sustain life—although there were times when we were barely sustained.

Our one room was on the first floor of a brick and timber house which must have seen better times. Even on sunny days I could press my hand against the wall and force the moisture which coated it to run to the floor in streams. The damp sometimes set my sister, Betty, to coughing which filled the room with barking noises like those made by quarreling animals. Then my mother would mention how fortunate we were to live in New Orleans where we did not suffer the cruel extremes of temperature that prevailed in the north. And when it rained for days on end, leaving behind when it ceased a green mold which clung to my boots, the walls and even the candlesticks, my mother thanked God

that we were spared the terrible blizzards she remembered from her childhood in Massachusetts. As for the fog, she observed how it softened the clamor from the streets and alleyways and kept the drunken riverboat men away from our section of the *Vieux Carré*.

I disliked the fog. It made me a prisoner. I imagined, sitting there on a bench in the shadows of the little room, that the smoky yellow stuff which billowed against our two windows was a kind of sweat thrown off by the Mississippi River as it coiled and twisted toward the sea.

Except for the wooden sewing box, a sea chest which had belonged to my mother's father, and her work table, we owned scarcely anything. One cupboard held the few scraps of our linen, the cooking pots and implements, candle ends and a bottle of burning liquid which my mother rubbed on Betty's chest when she was feverish. There were two chamber pots on the floor, hidden by day in the shadow of the cupboard but clearly visible by candlelight, the white porcelain one chipped and discolored, the other decorated with a painting of an ugly orange flower which my mother said was a lily.

There was one pretty object in the room, a basket of colored spools of thread which sat on the sill of the window facing Pirate's Alley. By candlelight, the warmth of the colors made me think the thread would throw off a perfume like a garden of flowers.

But these spools were not used for our clothes. They were for the silks and muslins and laces which my mother made into gowns for the rich ladies of New

Orleans to wear to their balls and receptions, their weddings and the baptism of their infants, and sometimes to their funerals.

One early evening toward the end of January, I walked slowly home inventing a story that might distract my mother from asking me why I was late and where I had been. I was relieved to find her so preoccupied there was no need to tell her anything. Even if I had blurted out the truth—that I had spent an hour wandering about the slave market at the corner of St. Louis and Chartres Streets, a place as strictly forbidden to me as Congo Square, where slaves were allowed to hold their festivities, I doubt she would have heard me. The whole room was covered with a great swathe of apricot colored brocade supported by chairs to keep it from touching the floor. Betty crouched in a corner, staring at the cloth as though in a daze, while my mother, her back against the wall, gripped an edge of the brocade in her two hands and shook her head from side to side, muttering to herself in words I could not make out.

I had seen damask and gauze and velvet and silk across my mother's knees or falling in cascades from her table, but never such a lavish piece as this, of such a radiant hue. Designs were embroidered upon it showing lords and ladies bowing, and prancing horses no larger than thimbles, their rear hooves buried in flowers, haloes of birds and butterflies circling their caparisoned heads.

Without looking up, my mother said, "We need more candles," in such a fretful and desperate voice, I knew

The Slave Dancer

ONE DAY, THIRTEEN-YEAR-OLD JESSIE Bollier is earning pennies playing his fife on the docks of New Orleans; the next, he is kidnapped and thrown aboard a slave ship, where his job is to provide music while shackled slaves "dance" to keep their muscles strong and their bodies profitable. As the endless voyage continues, Jessie grows increasingly sickened by the greed, brutality, and inhumanity of the slave trade, but nothing prepares him for the ultimate horror he will witness before his nightmare ends—a horror that will change his life forever.

★ "Spellbinding . . . will horrify as well as fascinate."
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