

ROMANCE

**Where the Wildflowers Grow**

Vera Jane Cook

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Four Stars (out of Five)

Gossip among women characters evokes a time and place where accusations and confrontations must be cloaked in scrupulously polite conversations.

Recalling the scandalous small-town secrets of the classic northern novel *Peyton Place*, Vera Jane Cook's *Where the Wildflowers Grow* heads south with similar themes in this mildly erotic story of sexual surprises and women's liberation set in 1960s Georgia. Part romance, part murder mystery, Cook's latest looks behind the façade of the perfect American family to reveal secret longings and taboo affairs of the heart. Darien, Georgia, is an apparently peaceful small town, but Cook looks beyond the blooming meadows and sparkling creeks and into the passionate—and unexpectedly violent—inner lives of its residents, resulting in an intense roller-coaster ride filled with emotional intrigue.

Imagine a world where a pair of capri pants worn by a woman qualifies as an outrage and a disgrace. That's the world Rose Cassidy, wife of respected Dr. Ryan Cassidy, inhabits. She seems to have it all: a successful husband, two kids, and a beautiful home. Strangely, though, all of this plus her weekly ladies' group meeting are just not enough to satisfy Rose. Or her husband, or her kids, as it turns out. The lengths to which they will go in order to break out of their roles form the backbone of Cook's southern soap opera.

Like an engaging daytime drama, Cook's story runs on passion and scandal from the very first pages straight through to the whirlwind ending. Teen romance, with its earnest declarations of endless love and the sexual experimentation that often accompanies it, comes through loud and clear in an opening tryst in the wild meadow that serves as a nexus for the book's main events. Much of the action borders on melodrama, but Cook makes it more believable by taking on each character's personal perspective as the coincidences and cover-ups pile up around them. While we're inside Rose's head, for instance, it seems plausible that she might have a crush on the new woman in town. Likewise, Ryan's desperate attempt to hide an

affair that happened sixteen years earlier feels justified when we're in on the real reason he's never told a soul.

Everyone has a dark secret, or several, including the Cassidy kids, Lily and Dalton. The continuing revelations can be alternately thrilling and numbing, as it seems that the whole town is involved in one conspiracy after another. Cook is strongest when she keeps it personal, focusing on the characters' inner thoughts and feelings. Natural dialogue succinctly conveys each character's personality; the gossip among the women is especially evocative of a time and place where accusations and confrontations must be cloaked in scrupulously polite conversations.

Cook sets up several unsolved mysteries throughout her story, and though some may seem unlikely on their own, she does a skillful job of drawing all of the threads together in the end. *Where the Wildflowers Grow* will appeal to readers who want a fast-paced page-turner with new revelations on every page.

*Sheila M. Trask*