

Beautiful Dreamers

Minrose Gwin

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In Minrose Gwin's rich coming-of-age novel *Beautiful Dreamers*, a precocious girl navigates the tense atmospheres of 1950s Mississippi.

After her father abandons her family, Mem and her mother, Virginia, return to the small Gulf Coast town where Virginia grew up. There, liberal Virginia rebuffs her bigoted parents to make a home with her best friend, Mac, who is gay. Active in the civil rights movement, Mac undertakes adolescent Mem's education too. Though Mem thrives in her new, unconventional family situation, their cozy life is unsettled by vicious bigotry—and by a handsome confidence man who mesmerizes Virginia and Mac. Although attuned to trouble in the outside world, the adults prove unable to see the threat before them until too late.

A vibrant heroine, Mem is strong and savvy. Born missing two fingers on one hand—she calls it her “paw”—Mem is whip-smart and displays an uncanny ability to understand and talk to plants and animals, among them Mac's cat—a touch of magical realism in an otherwise serious tale. And others, including the cat, are characterized in striking ways as well. Even the confidence man is a complex figure, oozing both charm and danger.

Mem and the adults shuffle between Mississippi and nearby New Orleans, where they escape the stifling atmosphere of their small town. The descriptions of the settings are evocative and sensory, covering the scent of the gulf and the sweetness of beignets. Still, there's a dark undercurrent to Mem's experiences as she learns about racism, homophobia, and the dangers facing girls and women.

Beautiful Dreamers is a haunting historical novel whose memorable heroine further illuminates a troubled period in the South.

PAULA MARTINAC (September / October 2024)

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