



The Story of Sassy Sweetwater

Vera Jane Cook

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The Story of Sassy Sweetwater is a sparkling debut novel. It is a bildungsroman chronicling the life and loves of the title character from age thirteen through adulthood. Born to promiscuous Violet McLaughlin in 1949, Sassy Sweetwater lives with her mother and her mother's various boyfriends until she and Violet land at the family homestead in Carter's Crossing, South Carolina, which is ruled by strict matriarch Edna McLaughlin. When Violet runs off with yet another man, Sassy is left at the family farm. She adjusts to small town life, surrounded by kin, some kindly and some dangerous. As she comes of age, Sassy meets Thomas Tierney, who becomes her true love. She endures good times and bad, as family secrets and the push for civil rights come to a head in Carter's Crossing. Sassy survives everything life throws at her with aplomb.

Cook has penned a sweeping coming-of-age saga that is sure to appeal to fans of romance and drama. Sassy, an assertive, observant protagonist, gains the reader's sympathy at the outset; in the manner of Jane Eyre, she survives the hand fortune has dealt her through sheer will, rising up to meet every challenge. Even the love affair between Sassy and Thomas bears some similarity to that of Jane and Rochester's relationship: after a period of initial distaste, affection slowly grows between Sassy and Thomas, who, kept apart by circumstance, marry at long last. One of the biggest obstacles to their romance is that both Sassy and Thomas refuse to admit their feelings for one another. Readers will ache for their unspoken longing to be confessed, and they will swoon with relief when this finally occurs.

However, it is not just the gripping love story that will hold the audience's interest; it is also Cook's nuanced portrayal of Sassy's positive relationships with people whom others are prejudiced against. She warms right away to Edna's African-American employee, Dudley, her disabled brother, Kyle, and her lesbian aunt, Elvira. As she matures, she becomes aware of the biases of others.

Drama lovers will be pleased to note that Sassy faces lies, cover-ups, violence, murder attempts, and the rediscovery of loved ones once thought dead. None of this descends into soap opera, however, because Cook skillfully grounds these events in her protagonist's emotions. Those who know the agony of a family rupture will feel Sassy's pain as she wishes for Violet to return, yet hates her for leaving. Along with the main story, as Cook delves into the lives of Sassy's family (particularly those of Violet and Edna) she paints a haunting portrait of physical abuse filtering through multiple generations. Despite its violence, though, *The Story of Sassy Sweetwater* is an uplifting read.

JILL ALLEN (June 14, 2012)

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