

*The Moonflower Vine*



# *The Moonflower Vine*

A Novel

JETTA CARLETON

*Foreword by Jane Smiley*

HARPER  PERENNIAL

NEW YORK • LONDON • TORONTO • SYDNEY • NEW DELHI • AUCKLAND

HARPER  PERENNIAL

The resemblances between the characters in the book and my own family are their environment and occupation, their love of God and each other. This much is the truth. The rest is fiction.

A hardcover edition of this book was published in 1962 by Simon and Schuster, Inc.

P.S.<sup>™</sup> is a trademark of HarperCollins Publishers.

THE MOONFLOWER VINE. Copyright © 1962, 1990 by Jetta Carleton. Foreword copyright © 2009 by Jane Smiley. All rights reserved. Printed in the United States of America. No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner whatsoever without written permission except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews. For information address HarperCollins Publishers, 10 East 53rd Street, New York, NY 10022.

HarperCollins books may be purchased for educational, business, or sales promotional use. For information please write: Special Markets Department, HarperCollins Publishers, 10 East 53rd Street, New York, NY 10022.

FIRST HARPER PERENNIAL EDITION PUBLISHED 2009.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data is available upon request.

ISBN 978-0-06-167323-8 (Harper Perennial edition)

09 10 11 12 13 /RRD 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

*This book is for my father and my sisters  
and in memory of my mother*



## FOREWORD

*Jane Smiley*

Most novelists, no matter how popular, fall into obscurity. Charles Dickens was unread for a few decades after his death; Anthony Trollope, almost unbelievably prolific, had to be resurrected in the 1940s. Who is obscure these days? Ever heard of Rhoda Broughton? Ever read Sumner Locke Elliott or Camilla R. Bittle? And yet, through the vagaries of reader affection and publisher loyalty, a few novels keep turning up. One of these is Jetta Carleton's *The Moonflower Vine*, published here in a new edition for the first time in twenty-four years.

When *The Moonflower Vine*, set in the early part of the twentieth century in rural Missouri, was published, author Jetta Carleton had a strong sense that it was different from the general run of novels then on the market. She remarked in the biographical note to the *Reader's Digest Condensed Books* version, "It's really so unfashionable to like anything anymore, and I like a good many things. The Angry Young Men are in vogue now, but I'm a Glad Old Girl." Perhaps Carleton, nearly fifty, was thinking of Norman Mailer, James Baldwin, and Gore Vidal, writers some ten or twelve years younger than she was, who had made their reputations defying the system. But Carleton, who worked on *The*

*Moonflower Vine* for some six years, was far from unsophisticated. After graduating from the University of Missouri and working in radio in Kansas City, she had gone east to work in advertising. In 1962, she lived in Hoboken, New Jersey, was married to an advertising man, and worked in Manhattan. She wrote Ivory Soap commercials for television—in other words, she was at the top of a quintessentially modern profession. Her family back in Missouri viewed her as madly sophisticated—her grandniece, Susan Beasley, remembers, “She was outgoing and witty, and the star of our family, the exotic one. We always knew which TV commercials were hers because they sounded just like her; she was very original in the way she expressed herself. She was delightful, she loved to laugh, and she loved a good time.”

No doubt Carleton herself knew that *The Moonflower Vine* was far from a nostalgic piece of sentimental Americana. It was complex and daring when it was first published, and it remains so in the twenty-first century—a delicate and loving exploration of some of the most sensitive topics of family life, presented in a straightforward style that is remarkable for its beauty and moral precision. *The Moonflower Vine* is one of those books that readers wish had a sequel. Even Robert Gottlieb, one of the most experienced editors in publishing, felt this. In 1984, he wrote, “Of the hundreds upon hundreds of novels I’ve edited, this is literally the only one I’ve reread several times since its publication. And every time I’ve read it, I’ve been moved by it again—by the people, by their lives, by the truth and clarity and generosity of the writing and feeling.”

*The Moonflower Vine* opens with an overture. We are introduced to the Soames family, down on their small farm in rural Missouri. Matthew and Callie, about seventy, are hosting three of their daughters—Jessica, about fifty; Leonie, in her late forties; and Mary Jo, a good deal younger—for their annual summer visit. The weather is hot. The farm is without most conveniences, as it has always been, and there is the sense that the daughters enjoy their yearly visits because they know they will leave soon and go back to their own lives, but part of the novel’s force is in the fact that we see nothing of those lives. On the last day of the visit, various inconvenient neighborly obligations threaten, and then kill, the Soameses’ family-oriented plans to have a picnic at the old bee tree and gather honey. Reluctantly, they do what they all know must be done, until at last they escape the neighbors and relatives and go home to enjoy the annual evening blossoming of the moonflower vine (a night-blooming relative of the morning

glory). Carleton's storytelling is leisurely, as befits the heat and the circumstances. She tempts the reader to wonder about the Soames family, but also lulls the reader into thinking that Matthew and Callie are a simple, old-fashioned married couple and that their daughters' lives, too, have been your basic American lives, just the sort you might find in a G-rated movie about the rural Midwest.

As the structure of the following sections carries the story forward, though, through the point of view (though not the voice) of each of the family members, things turn out not to have been what they appeared to be: the close-knit family life of the Soameses is as idiosyncratic, and as much of a triumph over adversity, as that of any other family, viewed steadily and viewed honestly. What emerges is a remarkably true narrative, but one that is never partisan or small-minded—the anatomy of a family carried out with simultaneous honesty and love.

The promise of the novel, as an art form, is always that a story will be told with full complexity and, as Edith Wharton once observed, with each element so “thoroughly thought through” that the reader cannot imagine that anything about it is missing or unknown to the author. Such completeness must be an illusion, but it is the essential illusion of all successful novels—even parts of the story that the narrative does not address seem to have been understood and considered by the author. It is in this that *The Moonflower Vine*, only 336 pages long, seems to excel.

The real subject of *The Moonflower Vine* is romantic love. The narrator explores the romantic choices that each character makes, placing these squarely in the context of each character's history and sense of himself or herself. And even though Matthew, Leonie, Jessica, Mathy, and Callie mean well and feel strong bonds with the other members of their family, their choices invariably strain those bonds. It is Matthew who sets the tone with his almost tragic sense of his own shortcomings—even when he wins Callie, whom he considers the most attractive and desirable girl he knows, he cannot reconcile himself completely to family life or to the small world that he lives in. Aware of his own failings, he grows stricter and more forbidding, and the girls find themselves drawn to young men who offer the possibility of escape. Carleton is remarkable in that she is equally adept at portraying each of her character's temperaments: Mathy, the wild one, is convincingly and delightfully anarchic; Leonie, the good girl, is painfully aware that goodness does not make her lovable; Callie is a little intimidated by her husband, but nevertheless understands him perfectly.

The portrayal of Matthew is a feat of empathy. He fears temptation and always tries to rise above it—his position in the town and his religious beliefs require absolute rectitude. Both the desire that drive him and the guilt that consume him are honestly and convincingly portrayed.

All of these passions are set in a beautifully realized natural landscape of plants, flowers, animals, the weather, the contours of the land. The Soames farm is nothing special and has never thrived, but it has given the daughters an education in the beauty of the natural world that often serves to comfort and inspire them. At one point, the girls pick lettuce where Matthew had planted it early in the season, at a spot where he'd burned brushwood, and "the soil enriched by this pure compost, yielded an enormous crop." Nature also gives their mother a sense of fulfillment: "Callie found the summer complete. Sometimes it seemed to her that she could ask for nothing more than this—the long busy days and the warm sweet nights, when the smell of honeysuckle filled the air and her husband sang on the porch with their daughters." Some novelists, with their close and loving observations of the day-to-day activities of their characters, end up drawing detailed portraits of ways of life that later disappear. Their novels become artifacts of vanished places and lost worlds. Carleton clearly understood that *The Moonflower Vine* was something of a time capsule: the members of the Soames family, in spite of themselves and their temptations, continue to exist in a miniature Eden, where the earth is capable of astonishing displays that the characters sometimes are lucky enough or sensitive enough to observe.

Novelists who write a single, excellent novel are a rare breed. The most famous American novelists to have done so are Harper Lee and Ralph Ellison, both of whom, like Carleton, drew principally on their own experiences for their stories. Both Lee and Ellison explored the private ramifications of a political topic, racism, and they did so to great and successful effect, awakening their many readers to not only the pervasive injustice of prejudice, but also to its psychological cost. Lee and Ellison seem to have balked at their huge success, however. Lee is reported to have said that the reception of *To Kill a Mockingbird* was "in some ways . . . just about as frightening as the quick, merciful death I'd expected." Ellison even went so far as to report that a house fire had destroyed hundreds of pages of his second novel, when, as it turned out, those pages did not exist.

*The Moonflower Vine*, in contrast to *Invisible Man* and *To Kill a Mockingbird*, explores the ramifications of passion, and seems to fit neatly into the category of novels that are private, not political. Carleton's own remarks for *Reader's Digest* promote this view, and it is tempting to read the novel as a lovely little story of the private life of a single family. But the novel keeps turning up again because Carleton does hone in on perennial themes of American life: religion, sexuality, women's ambitions, small-town life, and the pastoral landscape. Indeed, these very themes, still private in 1963, were soon, thanks to the women's movement, to become political. The controversy that Carleton manages to dampen down by using a tight focus, a sympathetic style, and a very particular setting would, ten years later, be impossible to contain.

Beasley recalls that the older members of her family were shocked, and to a degree dismayed, by what Jetta had written (the younger members "thought it was wonderful," however). In 1962, a sea change was in the works in the way women's lives were to be considered. Around the time Carleton published her novel, Gloria Steinem had a controversial article in *Esquire* about women's life choices. And Betty Friedan published *The Feminine Mystique* in 1963, as *The Moonflower Vine* was finding an audience among readers of the *Condensed Books*. But Steinem was twenty years younger than Carleton, and Friedan was eight years younger. Carleton managed to write her novel in a nonpolitical way; her subject matter has become political in spite of her efforts.

*To Kill a Mockingbird*, *Invisible Man*, and *The Moonflower Vine* all share one characteristic: they succeed because they are deeply intimate portraits, strongly felt, based on autobiographical material. Readers love them because of their authenticity; because, in some sense, propriety *might* have prevented them from being written, but did not. They are startling, in part, because they are not confessional—the novelist withdraws herself or himself from the material in order to examine it with more objectivity. Each novel seems "true" with a power that a memoir or a nonfiction account might not possess. A first novelist, even a sophisticated one like Carleton, might not anticipate the sense of self-exposure such novelistic intimacy engenders. Other novelists (Dickens comes to mind) don't get to the autobiographical material until later in their careers, when they are used to the public eye, and used to the profession of writing.

That Carleton seems to have worked on a subsequent novel for many years (according to Susan Beasley) adds greater poignancy.

None of Jetta Carleton's living relatives have seen the novel or know where the pages are. It is possible that the manuscript was with her papers, and these were lost in the tornado (a piece of characteristic Missouri irony) that destroyed the town where they were stored in 2003. But *The Moonflower Vine* is ours to enjoy, and we are lucky to have it.

*Jane Smiley gratefully acknowledges the assistance of Susan Beasley and Carlin Landoll, Jetta Carleton's grandnieces, in writing this foreword.*