

Jetta Carleton's first novel widely acclaimed

THE MOONFLOWER VINE by Jetta Carleton. Simon and Schuster. 318 pp.

Students who win literary honors in college seldom distinguish themselves in this field after graduation. Dr. Robert L. Ramsay, who was in charge of literary contests at this University for many years, accounted for this by saying that their distinction here was merely a creative flare-up of youth. All the more then are we gratified when one who showed great promise during her undergraduate years has fulfilled that promise, and Jetta Carleton has done that in writing her first novel, "The Moonflower Vine." No one who knew her when she was here is surprised that her book was acclaimed by the critics even before publication date. Many of them have compared it in spirit and distinction to "To Kill a Mocking Bird." Two weeks after publication it appeared on many lists of most popular titles. Already librarians with advanced copies have been reviewing it for women's clubs, and McCall's Magazine has bought the serial rights.

"The Moonflower Vine" is the story of a family, father and mother and four daughters; their love and loyalty for each other, as well as the daughters' need to escape from their parents. The setting is on a farm and in a nearby small town in southwest Missouri.

Matthew, the father, is a school principal. Upright, narrow, strong, except for the intermittent crushes he is all but overcome with for one or another of his pretty little pupils; Callie, the mother, a vivid, small woman, who would never learn to read; Leonie, perhaps the most rebellious of the daughters, but whose loyalty to her parents keeps her longest beside them; Jessica, the first to go, surest of what she wants, and finding it; Mathy, the maverick, who lived more fully than any of them in her few years before she was tragically cut down; and Mary Jo, the narrator, of whom we know least of all.

It is the vivid way she makes us see her characters that makes this book unforgettable. Of her sister Leonie she tells us, "I looked at my other sister sitting in the sunlight, brown and glossy as a warm brown egg. She was the one with the enviable pigment, a dark-skinned blond whom the sunlight loved. As her skin tanned, her hair turned paler and paler. It streamed over her shoulders now, fine and silvery as young corn silks. No woman, I thought, who looks like that deserved the nature of Carry Nation."

Even her minor characters are fully realized, such as the neighbor, Miss Hagar: "Oftentimes we beheld her single in a field, a solitary reaper in a sunbonnet, faded gingham, and a man's old shoes. A rough, shy, stolid little creature who fended for herself and asked no favors."

Just as vividly she brings the farmhouse kitchen to life for us: "I remember the kitchen on a winter morning—coal buckets underfoot, a bucket for slops near the door, water boiling on the big black range . . . The kitchen was not a gracious room. It was

bath room, dining room, laundry, and dairy, each in turn or all at once."

But it is with the out-of-doors that she touches our senses, brings us weather and season: "She felt the air and heard the meadow lark, and smelled the blossoming orchard." Or, "There was a scurry of wings in the cedar and the nasal chirp-chirp of the robin. The day came alive with such grace. Unhurried and sweet and certain. Nothing remained of the night but the still feeling, and that was not properly of the night at all but of the morning."

The novel takes its name from the moonflowers that the family loved to watch in the late summer afternoon. "Soon now a stem would tremble . . . a faint shudder ran through the vine. . . . A light spasm shook the long pod. Slowly at first, then faster and faster, the green bud unfurled, the thick white edge of the bloom appearing and the spiral ascending, widening till at last the white horn of the moonflower, visible for the first time in the world, twisted open, pristine and perfect, holding deep in its throat a tiny jewel of sweat."

In this day which is flooded with ugly beatnik books, this novel stands out basically sound and clean, yet by no means sentimental or squeamish. One critic has said of it, "This is nostalgia, but nostalgia with a spine."

We who knew Jetta in her University days remember her as a poet, and we are happy to note that she has written a novel that only a poet could have written.

MARY PAXTON KEELEY

More about Jetta

Jetta Carleton, A.B. (WD) '36, A.M. '39, in private life is Mrs. Jene Lyon, wife of a publications consultant for the State Department. Those who knew Miss Carleton when she worked for radio station WHB in Kansas City and edited *Swing* magazine remember her as an exceptionally bright and inventive girl. Those who knew her as a student at M.U., describe her as "dynamic and different, and a genius." A friend recalls that when Jetta won first-prize in the Mahan essay contest, "she took the \$25 prize money (a tremendous sum in those Depression days) and squandered it on a white polo coat which kept her in debt for cleaning bills from then on." Novels as good as *The Moonflower Vine* don't get written very often by anybody—certainly not by first novelists. Miss Carleton, a native of Holden, Mo., left Kansas City after World War II, lived for a while in New Mexico, then went to New York where she has been writing advertising copy for television in recent years. Her husband, a native Kansas Citian, is author of a science book for children, "Our Sun and the Worlds Around It." Their home is in Hoboken, N.J., but they are living in Arlington for the duration of Mr. Lyon's present work with the Alliance for Progress.