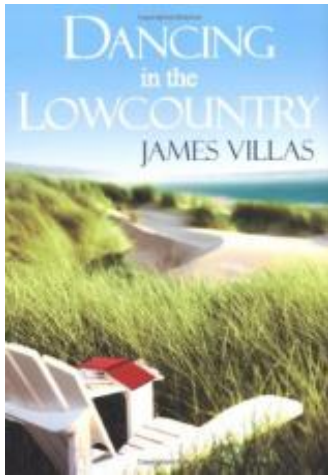


Dancing in the Lowcountry

by James Villas



About the Book

From award-winning author James Villas comes a warm, witty and poignant story of passion, friendship, and family set against the lush, mellow backdrop of the South Carolina Lowcountry.

Ella Dubose is a Southern lady of a certain age --- an age at which memories of youth can rush in at every turn and overwhelm the present. But while Ella's two younger children are concerned for her health and want to limit her independence, Ella --- elegant, unconventional, and unrepentantly willful --- has very different ideas. And she's not about to be controlled by anyone, not when there are tasks she needs to complete and loose ends that must be tied.

The first step is to leave her family and take a road trip back to the places where key chapters of her life unfolded. Myrtle Beach has been overrun by theme restaurants and ocean-front condos, but the Priscilla is still the charming, shingled inn Ella remembers from visits long ago. At the Priscilla, Ella and her companion, Goldie, sip cocktails on the porch and dine on she-crab soup and fried oysters while awaiting the arrival of Ella's oldest son, Tyler, now a successful writer in New York. And there, too, Ella meets a dashing, attentive gentleman who will help her finally face her ghosts and determine which of the secrets she has carried for so long must be shared, and which are better left untold.

With its unforgettable and instantly loveable heroine and evocative portrayal of Southern life --- past and present --- **Dancing in the Lowcountry** is a beguiling, beautifully rendered novel about the places and people that stay with us, the courage it takes to live in the present, and the endless ways life can surprise us, over and over again.

Discussion Guide

1. A very special Southern society plays an important role in the evolution of Ella Dubose's life. How is Ella both a heroine and victim of that society --- as a young lady and elderly woman --- in all its different ethical and moral manifestations?
2. Much as she's portrayed as an old-fashioned Southern lady caught up in the clutches of her past, in what ways might Ella be construed as a modern woman?
3. Ella's younger son, Earl Jr., and her daughter, Olivia, do not come across as very sympathetic characters. Do they have any redeeming qualities, and if so, what are they?
4. Nobody can doubt that Ella's and Goldie's relationship is highly unusual and complex. Exactly what role does Goldie play in Ella's life and the psychological development of the narrative? Does Ella truly believe herself to be superior to Goldie, and is Goldie truly subservient to her domineering mistress?
5. Is Ella immoral --- both as a young, carefree girl and a mature married lady? In what ways?
6. Was Ella truly in love with Jonathan, or has she always been in love mainly with an idea --- or a fantasy? Likewise, did she ever really love her husband, Big Earl?
7. Before --- and even after --- his traumatic awakening about his sexual identity, were Jonathan's emotions over Ella ever genuine? Is it realistic to believe that he was ever really attracted to her sexually?
8. What strength does Ella possibly gain for her lifelong obsession with Jonathan's memory and the past?
9. What are the true reasons for Ella's special bond with her gay son, Tyler?
10. What ways does Tyler stand apart from the other characters in this novel, even while serving as a motivation for much of the action?
11. What is most important to Ella: romance and passion, marriage, or motherhood? Could this eccentric lady have survived without any one of these factors?
12. In what ways is Ella's relationship with Edmund at once totally different and quite similar to those with Jonathan and Big Earl? Has there been any development in her emotional makeup over the decades?
13. Edmund purports to understand Ella, and the reader suspects that, in a short period of time, he may indeed have plumbed the depths in her confused soul that have never been explored. If so, how does he accomplish this?
14. Determined as Ella is to finally reveal hidden truths to Tyler about the past and his identity, she ultimately decides that his precarious welfare is more important than her need to resolve an overwhelming ethical dilemma. Is she right or wrong in her decision?
15. Can Ella be deemed a loving, responsible wife and mother?
16. Nothing ever seems to be as important to Ella as her pocketbook. What might the pocketbook be said to symbolize in

this novel?

Author Bio

James Villas was the food and wine editor of *Town & Country* magazine for twenty-seven years. His work has also appeared in *Esquire*, *Food & Wine*, *Gourmet*, *Bon Appetit*, *Saveur*, *New York Times* and the *Atlantic Monthly*, among other publications. Two of his cookbooks have been nominated for a James Beard Award. He's also won a James Beard Award for journalism and received *Bon Appetit*'s Food Writer of the Year Award in 2003. James Villas is the author of more than a dozen cookbooks and books on food, including *MY MOTHER'S SOUTHERN KITCHEN* and *THE GLORY OF SOUTHERN COOKING*. He lives in East Hampton, NY and is currently working on his next novel for Kensington due in 2009.

Critical Praise

"James Villas's **Dancing in the Lowcountry** resonates with the elegance and master storytelling skills that have made his award-winning food writing timeless. Simply told and yet complexly layered, Miss Ella's journey from spoiled girlhood to endearing eccentricity vividly reminds us that there is always more to the celebrated 'steel magnolias' of the South than meets the eye. Not all Southerners are good storytellers, but Villas sure makes the maxim seem true."

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