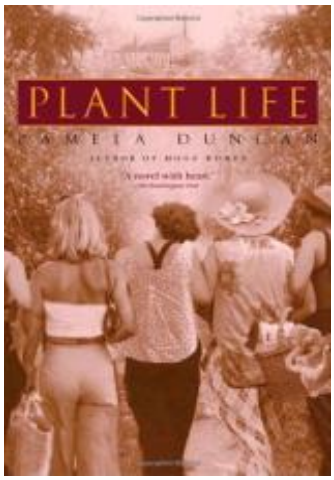
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Plant Life: A Novel

by Pamela Duncan



About the Book

Her luminous first novel, **Moon Women**, won the hearts of both readers and critics, who called it "richly textured...a pleasure to be savored by a writer to watch." (*Kirkus Reviews*) Now Pamela Duncan returns to the rich landscape of the human heart with a lush, resonant novel about mothers and daughters, about family and friendship, about a woman at a turning point in her life and the extraordinary world she discovers in a place called home?

Plant Life

It's Christmastime in Russell, North Carolina. For Laurel Granger, the holiday can't pass quickly enough. With her fifteen-year marriage ending, the visit to her hometown is bound to be even more painful than usual. And the worst part will be looking at the lives of her mother, Pansy, and Pansy's gossipy group of friends, for whom life revolves around the plant, the aging textile mill where for decades they have found companionship, a modest livelihood, and a purpose.

But with her own marriage disintegrating--the full scope of the disaster hasn't become clear to her yet--Laurel has nowhere else to turn except Russell, and to the women of the plant. And soon what Laurel begins to see is not the stifling town she couldn't wait to leave, nor women whose lives seem petty and plain, but a place where powerful secrets have been kept...where hearts and lives have been broken...and where a group of extraordinary women may have a thing or two to teach her about life. Most of all, as Laurel starts to live and even love a little again, she is faced with her mother, and her mother before her, and what their complex relationship has meant for Laurel all these years.

Weaving together the voices of several remarkable women across generations, Pamela Duncan tells a story of faith and forgiveness, acts of love and acts of betrayal. With the same artful brushstrokes that made **Moon Women**, a wonder, Duncan paints a masterful portrait of seemingly ordinary lives, and of what it means to grow a life and a future--in the rich soil of the past.

Discussion Guide

1. What was your reaction to Maw Bert's prologue, particularly her assertion that women must choose between a college education and marriage?

2. The first chapter opens in one of Laurel's favorite locales--the grocery store. What makes this such a telling--and entertaining--setting for her showdown with Scott and his new wife?

3. One of the most striking aspects of the Russell residents is their high rate of lifelong commitments, such as Dan and Pansy's thirty-nine-year marriage, and Idalene's intention to continue working at the plant until age seventy-five. In your opinion, does this trait always indicate contentment? Do you prefer to stay the course or change paths often? Discuss the factors that have contributed to your most significant life decisions.

4. Compare Hap to Joe. What does each man offer Laurel? Why is she hesitant to get serious with either of them?

5. What does Laurel discover about herself as a result of working at the plant and associating with her mother's friends?

6. The theme of poverty subtly recurs throughout **Plant Life**; hard economic times force Dill to sell off much of his prized land, while the need for reliable income causes many of the characters to put their dreams on hold. What does Pamela Duncan convey about the economic history of this region? What do her characters have in abundance?

7. How might Pansy's life have been different had she been born after the 1970s? Do you attribute the quashing of her talent to the time period of her youth, or to Maw Bert's overprotectiveness?

8. Do you believe Maw Bert's justification for destroying the charity doll to which Pansy was so attached? Why was Maw Bert so certain that Pansy would never be able to attain the things she craved as a young girl?

9. What is the significance of the novel's title? How do some of the characters' names (for example, Laurel and Pansy) reflect their personalities? What are some examples?

10. Consider the spectrum of relationships presented in **Plant Life**, ranging from supportive marriages to abusive ones and Idalene's satisfying affair with Mr. Arthur. What insight can be drawn from these widely varied couples?

11. Discuss the concept of home as portrayed in **Plant Life**. What does it take for the central characters to feel securely rooted? What does Idalene's bequest to Laurel represent, besides material comfort?

12. What does Pansy's painting of the cornfield indicate about her notion of love and life?

13. Discuss the ways in which work defines these women's lives. How does it shape their identities and interactions? What is its role in their sense of "community?"

14. In what ways are the female characters in **Plant Life** similar and dissimilar to those in **Moon Women**? How do you think the central characters in both novels might react to each other?

Author Bio

Pamela Duncan was born in Asheville in 1961 and raised in Black Mountain, Swannanoa, and Shelby, North Carolina. She holds a B.A. in journalism from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and an M.A. in English and creative writing from North Carolina Sate University in Raleigh. She lives in Graham, North Carolina.

Critical Praise

"**Plant Life** is an American classic. Like **Our Town** or **Winesburg, Ohio**, it presents a compelling and moving portrait of an entire community. In this case, it is the life of a cotton mill, and three generations of women who work there---whose whole lives have been determined by the mill. Stark, poetic, funny, gritty, and intense, their stories will move you to tears and make you laugh at the same time. Never have the lives of Southern working women been so well documented, their stories so truly told. **Plant Life** is a mature work of a great compassion and insight."--- Lee Smith, bestselling author of **Fair and Tender Ladies** and **The Last Girls**"**Plant Life** is sometimes hilarious, sometimes heartbreaking, but always real. Pamela Duncan doesn't just write a great novel--she pours her heart out onto the page, giving a piece of herself to the reader. Here she is exploring the terroritory she knows best: families and friendships and the friends who feel like family. She tells these people's stories with honor and grace but never a hint of sentimentality. This book is full of the hard-earned wisdom of working people, people who dream and love as hard as they work. **Plant Life** is a beautiful book from a writer who gets to the soul of the matter."--- Silas House, author of **Clay's Quilt** and **A Parchment of Leaves**

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