



## The Tree and the Vine

**Dola de Jong**

**Kristen Gehrman, Translator**

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Bea and Erica, who are outwardly just roommates, have a relationship that's so intense that it bewilders Bea. First published in 1954, Dola de Jong's novel *The Tree and The Vine* hums with obsessive energy as it follows the confusion of unfamiliar emotions.

Erica is a creature of high highs and low lows. She is unabashedly aware of her own sexuality and is both revolutionary and infuriating, a combination that leads pragmatic Bea into near obsession with her. Bea is slow to catch on to the nature of her obsession—much slower than the audience is, and miles behind eccentric Erica.

Told through Bea's perspective, the story relies on oblique prompts that encourage its audience to read between the lines. From its first moment, it focuses in on the women's unremarkable relationship, in which innocuous moments illicit tumultuous emotional responses from both women. Its sparse and anxious prose, while a product of its time, imbues the book with the flavor of Bea's dizzying emotional state. The result is a chamber drama with the atmosphere of a murder mystery.

By today's standards, *The Tree and The Vine* is overwrought. Coming into awareness of one's own sexuality through a same-sex crush on a roommate is close to a cliché, yet within the novel, tension rings in every paragraph. The novel is a piece of queer history, and its subtext-laden emotional roller coaster takes on revelatory magic.

Tragic yet triumphant, the tense novel *The Tree and the Vine* is best read in one long, shaking breath. It is a gift to queer women's history, and a delight akin to the letters of Virginia Woolf and Vita Sackville-West, or the laughing photos of Frida Kahlo and Chavela Vargas.

JESSIE HORNESS (May / June 2020)

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