



The Vicar's Wife

Katharine Swartz

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The conflict of balancing motherhood with a career, as well as the effort required of marriage, are issues that will surely resonate with modern readers.

A seamless blend of historical and contemporary fiction, *The Vicar's Wife* weaves together the parallel journeys of two very different women. Author Katharine Swartz honestly and empathetically illustrates the struggle to find a sense of place and self while adjusting to a new life in a small village on the English coast.

While in the midst of renovating the rambling vicarage into which her family has just moved, homesick and isolated Jane finds a slip of paper hidden in an old pantry. This, a shopping list, sparks her interest in the woman who created it, whom she soon learns is Alice James, the vicar's wife who lived in the house in the 1930s and '40s. Though their journeys take place decades apart, the challenges, expectations, and fears they face as they desperately try to fit into their new homes are often mirrored in each other's lives.

That isn't to say their circumstances aren't profoundly different. Jane, a born-and-bred New Yorker, was torn away from her rewarding, if consuming, nonprofit work. She feels bewildered by, and even resentful toward, her new domestic role. Alice, as inexperienced as Jane is worldly, feels the strain of the expectations of being a vicar's wife. While Jane's self-identity is tested and reformed, Alice is still in the formative stages of defining herself.

The struggles the characters face are authentic and relatable. The conflict of balancing motherhood and a career, societal expectations to behave in certain ways, and the effort required of marriage will surely resonate with modern readers. How each woman paves her own way and their ultimate resolutions will comfort and perhaps offer hope that readers can similarly define themselves. The never-ending, sometimes confusing teenage bitterness of Jane's daughter; the smothering, slightly judgmental tone of Alice's housekeeper; and the ultimate love and devotion between husband and wife similarly ring true.

The story moves along at a comfortable pace, in part due to the book's simple and direct style. This isn't to say that what Swartz creates isn't poignant, honest, and entertaining. While it sometimes lacks subtlety, the writing clearly describes and articulates characters' thoughts and emotions, making the book an effortless yet engaging read.

ALICIA SONDHI (Winter 2014)

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