

## Where Dandelions Bloom

**Tara Johnson**

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Tara Johnson's Christian romance *Where Dandelions Bloom* places a strong heroine at the center of the Civil War.

In 1861, sixteen-year-old Cassie is desperate to avoid the loveless marriage arranged by her drunken father, so she poses as a boy and joins the Union army. At the same time, Gabe, a young photographer, lands an assignment creating a visual record of the Civil War. Gabe is embedded with Cassie's unit, and the two become friends, though Cassie hides her true identity.

The story is dominated by Cassie, a strong and convincing heroine who's determined to fulfill her duties as well as a man would. Gabe is bland for a romantic lead, prone to tepid introspection. Cassie's first flicker of attraction to Gabe feels more like danger than romance, a yearning that could expose her, and indeed Gabe feels tricked when he discovers Cassie's femininity.

The first half of the book is powered by suspense over whether or not Cassie will be found out, and battle scenes amplify its settings. Cassie and Gabe are brought together by the book's midpoint, after which the book struggles to keep their relationship unresolved. The book is clearly headed for a happy ending, so suspense is sometimes hard to come by, though at one point Cassie rescues wounded and unconscious Gabe, and her stint as a spy behind rebel lines is dramatic.

In the slower moments of the book, scenes are glowing and surprising, as when rebel prisoners who sing "Dixie" in defiance are drowned out by the mournful beauty of black troops singing "Oh, Freedom," and the book's imaginative epilogue is fulfilling. Subtle messages about the power and necessity of forgiveness weave in.

*Where Dandelions Bloom* is a refreshing historical romance with surprising takes on gender roles.

SUSAN WAGGONER (July/August 2019)

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