

Wild Girls

Erica Abeel

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With literary finesse, the novel leaps through its wild moments with ease.

Erica Abeel's bright and brainy *Wild Girls* follows three friends from their 1950s days at "prestigious but offbeat" Foxleigh College, through the decades following graduation. With chapters shifting from quirky Brett to ambitious Audrey to indolently beautiful Julia, *Wild Girls* hits a sweet spot between page-turner romantic fiction and literary finesse.

After their close-knit collegiate years, Brett, Audrey, and Julia take different paths in life, with different notions of happily ever after. They are determined to avoid predictable post-graduation engagements to rising young Ivy Leaguers, and futures of babies, cultivated domesticity, and upward social mobility.

Brett heads to Paris, living in fleabag hotels and befriending some of the Beat Generation writers, including Allen Ginsberg. Manhattan career girl Audrey sets her sights on publishing best-selling novels. Julia lets her photography career lapse to travel and enjoy life with her entrepreneurial husband, Bodie, a "creator of worlds" and hardly the boring Brooks Brothers type; he wears red sneakers to their wedding, while Julia's bohemian bridal gown involves vintage water-stained satin and lace.

Wild Girls is rich with interesting characters, including the Yoko Ono-influenced Rinko Park, but Abeel's portrayal of Allen Ginsberg is particularly vivid. Still conflicted about being gay, the Ginsberg of the novel is charismatic, brilliant, and maddeningly ambiguous about his feelings toward Brett. Later included in Ginsberg's biography as merely "girl unidentified" in a photo, Brett moves on from the experience with her ego intact, unlike many other women who got caught up in the Beat vortex.

Through highs and lows, illness and occasional disillusionment, Brett, Audrey, and Julia quarrel and reunite, somehow always returning to their imperfect but enduring friendship. Abeel's women can be flawed, tending to focus more on themselves rather than any social ideals, but they are all memorably intriguing.

Wild Girls moves with essential verve—like Brett, who, as a lithe young dance student, left in an impromptu series of tour jetés "as though air [were]" her home element."

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