



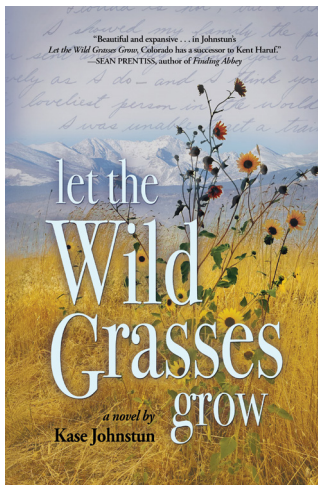
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Reading Group Guide

LET THE WILD GRASSES GROW

A NOVEL

BY KASE JOHNSTUN



INTRODUCTION

Let the Wild Grasses Grow chronicles the lives of Della Chavez and John Cordova, childhood friends separated by a tragic accident, who find each other again during World War II after leading lives of struggle through the Great Depression, the Dust Bowl, and, for John, abuse at the hands of his grandfather. This sweeping American love story celebrates the power of home landscapes, family heritage, and first love.

“Unflinching and beautiful, Johnstun’s *Let the Wild Grasses Grow* is easy to fall into and hard to shake. It is at once lyrical and cinematic, an unexpected combination that perfectly sculpts the paradoxes of growing up and falling deeply in love in a country that both despises and needs you.”

—LEIGH CAMACHO ROURKS, author of *Moon Trees and Other Orphans*

“A multilayered, emotional novel that weaves history and family stories, from the Dust Bowl to World War II, seen through Hispanic eyes. Though it contains vivid depictions of the hardships and despair of the times, the power of hope, love, and community shines through these pages. Della and John are well-drawn characters that, by the end of the book, will feel like friends.”

—TERESA DOVALPAGE, author of *Queen of Bones*

A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

Let the Wild Grasses Grow was inspired by grandma and grandpa Cordova and their origins. This is a reimagination of their lives. My grandfather served in the army and lost his parents in the same way as they are killed in the book – according to family lore. My grandmother was half Native American and was very proud of it, but by the time I came into her life she barely spoke of it. Both of my grandparents never made it past sixth grade and led hard lives. I wanted to see what their lives (with their personalities) could have done if the world gave them some help through education and life experience. I included my grandmother’s love of cooking traditional Mexican food that I grew up on and my grandfather’s love of his small garden that became his life in late adulthood – fresh corn, chiles, and tomatoes filled their home and our plates.



Kase Johnstun lives and writes in Ogden, Utah. Author of *Beyond the Grip of Craniosynostosis* and coeditor of *Utah Reflections: Stories from the Wasatch Front*, he teaches at the Creative Nonfiction Foundation, the Graduate School in Creative Writing for Southern New Hampshire University, Barton Community College, and Weber State University. He holds an MA in Creative Writing and Literature from Kansas State University and an MFA in Creative Writing from Pacific University. You can find him running on the trails of the Rocky Mountains along the face of the Wasatch Front.

Learn more at kasejohnstun.com.

Johnstun is available to discuss *Let the Wild Grasses Grow* with reading groups in person or virtually. For more information, email anne@torreyhouse.com.

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CONVERSATION STARTERS

1. Della's mother insists that the family "let the wild grasses grow" around the crops on their farm, resulting in a successful harvest during the Dust Bowl. What do you think is the larger meaning behind this concept? Can you think of other places it is manifested throughout the novel and the characters' lives?
2. John and Della are very different people yet still love each other after years of being apart and living separate lives. Why do you think they remained bonded despite so much time and distance? Did you notice any parallels in their experiences that made this possible?
3. At the end of the war, John believes that Della has stayed true to her decision not to meet him in Hawaii, yet he forgives her because he realizes the idea of her had given him hope and ultimately saved his life. In this instance, John is able to find meaning amid his heartache. Do you think this type of discovery is always possible?
4. During the war, John and Della each make an irreplaceable friend—John in Noakes and Della in Helen. How did these friendships impact John and Della as individuals? Do you think they had any influence on John and Della's relationship?
5. John realizes one of the reasons he is able to forgive those who have hurt him is because he doesn't "need the anger anymore" (p. 311). In what ways did John and Della's anger fuel them throughout the novel? When do you think anger can be a useful tool and when can it become a destructive weapon?
6. Della and John each had a strong connection to the land of their childhood homes. John loved his chiles, Della loved her apple trees, and they both learned to cook with their crops and the meat of their livestock. How do you think this relationship with the land assisted them later in life?
7. Della agrees to keep her war work secret, telling her interviewers that "it is better to save lives and be quiet than to never save lives at all" (p. 238). She was inspired by the belief of poets who have stated in various ways that "it is better to have loved and lost than to have never loved." Do you think Della and the poets are right? Are there exceptions to these sayings?
8. What were the instances of sexism and racism that John and/or Della faced throughout the novel? How do you think their experiences would be different if they lived today?
9. Did you enjoy John and Della's alternating perspectives? How did this format affect your reading experience?
10. Why do you think John's grandfather was depicted as the main villain in this story? How does he stand in opposition to the concept of "let the wild grasses grow"?
11. On page 236, Della points out the irony of the US's involvement in WWII in light of its treatment of her Native American ancestors. Why do you think Della is able to reconcile this inconsistency and willingly assist the war effort?



The author's grandparents



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