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The Unlikely Lavender Queen: A Memoir Of Unexpected Blossoming



Synopsis

“I couldn’t help but question how I’d gotten to this strange spot in my life, so far from what I’d expected for myself. Yes, there had been a heady romance a few years back. Then a slew of subsequent decisions, fueled by love and yearnings I didn’t even know I had. But I never, ever would have suspected that this was where the sum total of them would bring me. That afternoon a new doubt dripped into my mind. When do you know, I wondered, whether the choices you’ve made were the right ones?”

In 1990, Jeannie Ralston was a successful magazine writer and bona fide city girl—the type of woman who couldn’t imagine living on soil not shaded by skyscrapers. By 1994, she had called off an engagement, married Robb, a National Geographic photographer, and was living in Blanco Texas, population 1600. *The Unlikely Lavender Queen* is the intimate story of a woman who gives up a lot for the man she loves—her beloved blue state, bagels and all-night bodegas—only to have to wonder: Was it too much? Ralston offers a lively chronicle of her life as a wife, new mother and an urban settler in rural Texas. As she labors to convert a dilapidated barn into a livable home, deal with scorpions and unbearably hot summers, raise two young children while Robb is frequently away on assignment, she realizes her ultimate struggle is to reconcile her life plans and goals with her husband’s without coming out the proverbial loser. And just when it seems like she might be losing that fight—and herself—a little purple bloom changes her life. For centuries lavender has been a mystical herb, so valuable to ancient Romans that a bushel would cost nearly a month’s wages. But when Robb returns from a trip to Provence with a plan for growing lavender on their land, Ralston is not convinced—in fact the last thing she needed or wanted was to take up farming on top of everything else. Then, much to her surprise, she slowly but surely falls in love with lavender, and in the course of growing and selling blooms, hosting the public at the farm, and creating lavender products, she discovers a new side of herself. A few short years later, Ralston had built Hill Country Lavender, a thriving commercial enterprise that transforms both her little corner of Texas and her life. *The Unlikely Lavender Queen* will resonate with all women who have faced the tough choices that come with “having it all” and secretly (or not so secretly) hoped for great adventure to come along and surprise them. Ralston’s honest, funny, and poignant memoir is a testament to the fact that such adventures await us around every bend in life.

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Customer Reviews

Arriving in Manhattan for a McCall's magazine summer internship when she was 21, Ralston was smitten with big-city life. Soon she had the career of her dreams, a Chelsea apartment, even a film student fiancé. Then, on a feature assignment for Life, she met Robb, a photographer for National Geographic, and her life was up-ended. Before long, Ralston was leaving her boyfriend and New York City, to move with Robb to his home state of Texas. They settled first in Austin, but Robb wanted a less urban lifestyle, so they bought land with a creek and an old stone barn in the Texas Hill Country. Robb's busy schedule of international photo shoots left Ralston in charge of house renovations, hardly her forte. Then Robb had his next idea -- they'd raise lavender on their limestone-rich land, which was similar to the soil of Provence. Ralston agreed, provided they start having children. Together, they began a successful niche-industry, growing and processing lavender into a variety of marketable products. In this satisfying and enjoyable story, the reluctant Ralston eventually falls in love with their fields of lavender. (May) Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

"Book clubs, start your engines! Jeannie Ralston's engaging read takes on all the current issues on a woman's plate -- career, marriage, kids, health, money, sanity and social conscience. It's good and it's good for you." --Marianne Wiggins, author of *The Shadow Catcher* and *Evidence of Things Unseen* "A smart, ambitious -and secretly -hayseed- Tennessee girl comes to Manhattan and earns her props as a magazine writer. Then she falls in love with a Lone Star State-loyal globe-trotting photographer and agrees to chuck her hard-won sophistication to

become a Texan, a ranch wife and mother, and finally, an herb farmer. Jeannie Ralston's deliciously intimate exploration of autonomy vs. partnership, worldliness vs. domesticity, and order vs. chaos is filled with epiphanies scented in lavender. Worried about finding your strength in a marriage to a (benignly) dominating man? Read this, enjoy, and have heart." -Sheila Weller, author of *Girls Like Us: Carole King, Joni Mitchell, Carly Simon-and the Journey of a Generation* and *Dancing at Ciro's: A Family's Love, Loss and Scandal on the Sunset Strip* "From New York City to rural Texas, Jeannie Ralston's *The Unlikely Lavender Queen* entrances. Here is a smart, funny, and edgy voice, well worth following into the lavender fields!"-Catherine Goldhammer, author of *Still Life with Chickens* "Honestly, I was about as enthusiastic about reading a book about a lavender farm as the author once was about starting one, but Jeannie Ralston's sharp writing and old-school storytelling quickly drew me in. Her memoir is unusual and refreshing -instead of harrowing the reader with tales of tragedy and dysfunction, Ralston inspires with behind-the-scenes stories of a remarkable project and a life well lived."-Marion Winik, author of *Above Us Only Sky* and *The Lunch-Box Chronicles* "Jeannie Ralston magically takes us along on her nutty, agonizing, hilarious and uplifting journey to discover happiness and meaning in her own backyard. Learning to want what you already have is the greatest lesson in life and this wonderful story shows you how to let it happen." -Martha Sherrill, author of *Dog Man: An Uncommon Life on a Faraway Mountain* "Jeannie Ralston's memoir is a lovely read, and inspires us to know that you can find beauty-fields of it!- in the most difficult and unexpected places."-Laura Fraser, author of *The Italian Affair* "Brimming with piquant observations on everything from marriage to motherhood, careers to cappuccino, Ralston's exuberant memoir showcases the resiliency of the human spirit."--Booklist

The beginning 2/3rds of this book is not great but the last section about the lavender farm and how that evolved is quite interesting and makes it worth it. The weakness with the first part is the way she writes about her life in NY compared to Texas. I believe what she wanted to describe was the contrast between what she saw as a happy and exciting life in NY and the let down she felt losing that in the move to Texas. The problem is that she focuses not on what made her happy in NY per se but how much more glamorous and envy evoking her life was compared to the rest of the world outside of NY. I guess it is very hard to try to describe what you think is glamorous without sounding kind of bragging, like "wasn't my life just so great, don't I live big and don't you wish you were me" and as the reader I felt like, ah, no, it doesn't sound any more interesting than many people I know. For example, this is a quote from the book after she opens her farm to the public -"It smells good," I'd tell them, trying to make sure my smile showed patience, not the condescension of a New

Yorker who once met regularly with executives at beauty companies.' -- I mean this is what is going through her mind when she meets with people visiting her farm??? It's kind of comical like - you met regularly with beauty executives? wow, didn't you lead a fascinating life meeting such rarefied people. I mean does she think that people in Texas have have not done things, met interesting people and led an interesting life too??The other problem is her depiction of her husband - could he really be so unsupportive, so selfish? Why marry a guy like that and let him make all the choices, leaving such a successful and happy life? I felt like bonking them both in the head - him for being so thoughtless and her for letting him make all the decisions just because he brought in the majority of the money. He brings in more money not because she refuses to work and wants to watch tv and eat bonbons but they had 2 kids and he still gets to work full time while she sacrificed her career to take care of the kids. And btw staying home and raising two kids alone is much tougher than traveling around 8 months a year with only yourself to take care of. But the last 1/3 is interesting. For one thing, Lavender is a beautiful crop and it doesn't seem to take the resources or expertise as other crops would so as a reader I could relate a little more to this as something I could potentially do (although unlikely) vs starting a vineyard or something. It was great to read how the business grew not because she went into with a grand business plan but rather just winged it so it was fun to read and informative too. In the end I was quite glad I finished the book despite the struggles in the beginning and I would recommend it.

Enjoyable, easy flowing read. Will be fun for people who ever lived in the Austin, TX area or who know the Hill Country. Middle age mothers who are spinning many plates will also enjoy this woman's story of blooming in an unlikely place.

This book was dull and boring. I found the woman to be very whiny and her husband gone and unsympathetic. I went to school in that area and so am familiar with it. It is beautiful so I could picture in my mind what the author was describing. I have already given my copy away to charity.

I'm so glad a friend recommended this book. I loved it because I spent a lot of my childhood in the town of Blanco, Texas, that the author writes about. But I think I would have enjoyed the book even if I had never been there. A well written book and good story. I love "real life" stories about things that acutally happened.

This is a story about a real place in a beloved Hill Country area. Our book club thoroughly enjoyed

reading it. We even brought lavender and brochures from the Texas Highway Department to the discussion! It makes you want to visit the area again,

I am not a long winded person so this will be short. I read a lot of books. I came across this book as I was buying books on lavender in general. I said..."What the hell, I will read this. Sounds like a fun book." Well, I am so glad I did. Not only is this book so well written, the humor is fantastic. I had to put the book down every night so that I would not read it all at once. I only wish it was longer.

Many have expressed this sentiment, which I agree with, that *The Unlikely Lavender Queen* is an inspiration for many women, particularly those who have ever relocated to unfamiliar territory, with a spouse (namely a husband who is from that territory!). I certainly appreciated the story, and on too many levels. All the way through I kept anticipating Jeannie's breaking point, when she would give in, especially when she had taken the trip to Tennessee. But the unlikely happened and blossomed from there. Perfect matches might be made in heaven, but on earth I tend to believe, as Jeannie depicted, relationships rivet around commitment, and sacrifice, and tears, and sometimes breaking points too. I absolutely loved the part where Robb interrupted his work and met Jeannie and the boys at the airport on that "vacation" to Tennessee. I wanted to write more but because I don't like spoilers, and because it is "likely" many have touched on the other points I'd like to add, I'll just wrap up by saying this story is especially a good one to curl up to on a rainy night, or during a snowed-in day. A humbling read it is.

Very nice writing.

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