



Desert of the Heart

Jane Rule

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When Jane Rule's first novel, *Desert of the Heart*, was published in 1964, it was an auspicious beginning for a writer who would build a reputation on her unflinching views about sexuality, relationships and the painful constrictions of societal convention. Even more astonishing is the way in which the novel has retained its cool quiet beauty and power of expression decades later.

Evelyn Hall is a literature professor who travels to the divorce capital of mid-century America, Reno, Nevada, in the summer of 1958 to put an end to her disastrous sixteen-year marriage. She is divorcing her husband for his own good and on the advice of his psychiatrist because, this being the 1950s, the doctor believes that Evelyn's career success is causing her husband's feelings of inferiority and depression. At the boarding house where she stays to fulfill the six-week residency required for a quickie divorce, Evelyn meets Ann Childs.

Ann is most alluring in her representation of freedom to Evelyn, from her artistic prowess to her unconventional liaisons amid the smoky nocturnal backdrop of casino life. And once these women have found the promise of a significant relationship, Rule's open-ended question is whether or not they can survive the toxic atmosphere, not simply of an unruly gambling town, but of the past sorrows and hardships each of the characters is attempting to put behind them.

The title derives from W.H. Auden's elegy for Yeats—"In the desert of the heart / Let the healing fountain start."

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