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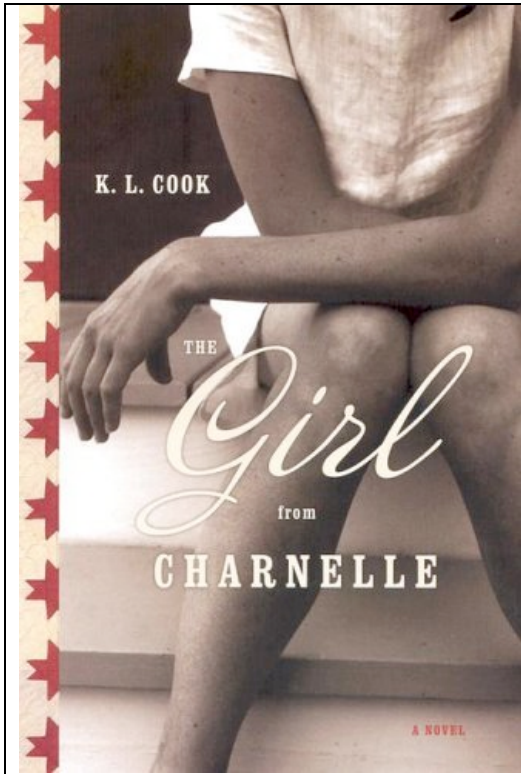
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*Gifted Writer Illuminates Love, Loss, and
Redemption Against a Backdrop of Small-Town
America on the Brink of Upheaval*



"The story of an entire generation growing up too quickly...impossible to put down until the dramatic and realistic conclusion."

- Library Journal, starred

"Compelling...A strong, complex story from a promising new literary voice."

- Kirkus Reviews

"A deeply thoughtful and honest rendering of the unanswered questions of relationships and the nature of love."

- Booklist

THE GIRL FROM CHARNELLE

By K.L. Cook

"THE GIRL FROM CHARNELLE burrows not just under the reader's skin, but into the flesh as well. K.L. Cook has given us a taut, textured tale that's grounded in both character and place."

— Richard Russo, Pulitzer-Prize winning author of *Empire Falls*

Not since Wally Lamb's *She's Come Undone* has a man so effectively reached into the female mind and heart. The man, in this case, is prize-winning author K.L. Cook; the woman is blossoming 16-year-old protagonist Laura Tate; and the rich, stunning, and utterly unforgettable book is **THE GIRL FROM CHARNELLE** (William Morrow, an imprint of HarperCollinsPublishers On-sale: 4/11/2006).

Cook returns to the small Texas town so admired by fans of *Last Call*, his award-winning story collection, to immerse readers in the complex lives of a 1960 family. Two years before, Laura had been the innocently happy middle child in a large family made up of a mother and father, two daughters, three sons, and two dogs. Then her older sister Gloria left the family, eloping with a soldier and moving abroad. Soon their mother followed, taking a single suitcase and disappearing completely. Suddenly, Laura, only sixteen, was the woman of the house, her father and brothers reliant on her for meals and housekeeping, and the Tate family the scandal-shrouded talk of Charnelle.

What the citizens of the small West Texas town think they know about the Tates is only the beginning. Unmoored by her changing life and coming of age without a female influence, Laura falls into an affair with a married man. He is more than a decade older than she is, a co-worker of her father's, and has two young children, for whom Laura frequently baby-sits. It is terrifying but intoxicating, shameful but tinged with the excitement of first love.

As her erotic awakening begins in secret, Laura's intellectual life starts to grow as well. Inspired by an impassioned and eloquent new teacher, she contemplates what it means to be an American, and learns to ask herself difficult questions about freedom and obligation, in politics and in private. As Kennedy and Nixon campaign for the Presidency, the last remaining Tate woman must decide if she, too, is reaching for something larger. Is she hurtling toward her own inevitable departure or growing up and accepting her place in her family and in Charnelle?

As he probes the subtleties of identity, abandonment, connection, isolation, and the value of a secret life, K.L. Cook touches a chord in all of us. His portrait of a young woman, a family, and a small town at the beginning of the sixties is spot-on and impossible to forget. With **THE GIRL FROM CHARNELLE**, Cook earns a place among our most cherished American writers.

About the author:

K.L. Cook was born in Dumas, Texas and grew up in Houston, Dallas, and Amarillo. He won the inaugural Prairie Schooner Book Prize in Fiction for his collection of linked stories, *Last Call*. His stories have appeared in *The Threepenny Review*, *Shenandoah*, *Harvard Review*, and *American Short Fiction* among others.

THE GIRL FROM CHARNELLE

By K.L. Cook

William Morrow Hardcover Original

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Behind the Book: Writing **THE GIRL FROM CHARNELLE** By K. L. Cook

I was born in a small Texas Panhandle town two months after John F. Kennedy was assassinated. Although I lived there for only a year and a half, I spent many holidays and summers in the tiny house where my mother had been raised. Over the years, I learned the details of my mother's traumatic childhood and adolescence in the fifties and early sixties. I imagined what life must have been like for her when her family fractured and she was forced to assume far too much responsibility for her father, sister, and three brothers. Her childhood home became as haunted for me as I think it may have been for her, and when I began writing fiction, I knew that some day that house and that town would be at the heart of a novel.

I began **THE GIRL FROM CHARNELLE** during a time when I was periodically estranged from my mother. I would not see her for years at a time. Often I did not know where she lived or even if she was alive. As she drifted in and out of my life, I began to believe that, eventually, the next time she disappeared would be for good. The novel grew out of my desire to reconnect with her—if not with the woman she had become, then with the girl she might have been. I wanted to re-imagine her life in the Panhandle town where she was raised and where I was born. I wanted to re-create life in that tiny house. I wound up discovering a family who, though at first resembling my mother's, soon took on a life and drama all its own.

My fictional family had been abandoned by their women—an elopement by an older sister followed less than a year later by the mysterious disappearance of the mother. I focused on sixteen-year-old Laura, left to take care of her father and three brothers. I saw that this family was, like America itself in 1960, on the verge of not only a new era, but changes they could not have foreseen or prepared for. I saw Laura at the town New Year's Eve party, startled by the advances of one of her father's co-workers, John Letig, and then, surprising even herself, falling into an affair with him. I realized that this affair, and her discovery of her own secret erotic and intellectual life, would force Laura not only to begin to understand her mother and sister, but to struggle with the ways that we all try to leave our families and communities—honorably and with their blessings, if we're lucky; or secretly, in shame, anger, or desperation, if we aren't so fortunate.

Another event in my life deeply influenced **THE GIRL FROM CHARNELLE**. A few years before I began the novel, around the time that my mother and I were initially estranged, my youngest son was born with serious health problems. During the first few months of his life, my wife and I lived daily with the belief that he might die, and that it would be, in some inexplicable and helpless way, our fault. My son is fine now, but the vivid, painful experience of those months changed me. Since then, I've listened intently to the stories of parents who lose their children—to the way families are devastated, transformed, and sometimes healed by this kind of tragedy. About midway into writing the novel, I realized events were leading toward the death of a child, a death that both Laura and Letig would feel responsible for and that would propel them into very different futures than the ones they thought they wanted. And they would be forced, along with the rest of their community, to try to make sense of their grief, guilt, and anger.

During the three years I spent writing this novel, I did not show it to anyone, nor did I talk much about it, not even to my closest friends and critics. I kept thinking about this line from a Chekhov story: "everything about which he felt sincerely and did not deceive himself, everything that constituted the core of his life, was going on concealed from others." My characters had hidden lives, too. They were mysterious to each other and to me as they clung to their secrets and decided (or were forced) to expose them. When I finished the novel, I felt a great sense of relief and accomplishment, but also deeply sad and vulnerable about releasing these characters. These people I'd spent years with were no longer part of my secret world. But like Laura, I discovered that the value of a secret life lies, in part, in letting that hidden life—and letting the people you love—go.

Writing this novel about a family in crisis made me feel more connected to my own family and, more importantly, reminded me that fiction can profoundly expand both the reader's and the writer's capacity for empathy. I found that the experience of writing **THE GIRL FROM CHARNELLE** rekindled my compassion for those closest to me, no matter whether they stay nearby or continue, like my mother, to drift in and out of my life.