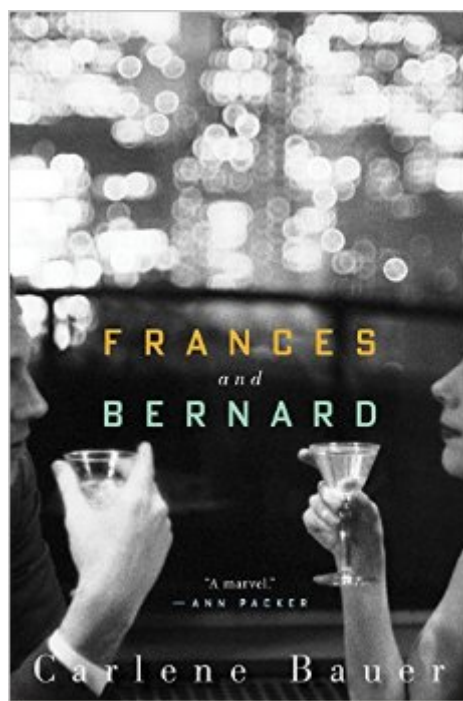


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Frances And Bernard



Synopsis

In the summer of 1957, Frances and Bernard meet at an artists' colony. She finds him faintly ridiculous, but talented. He sees her as aloof, but intriguing. Afterward, he writes her a letter. Soon they are immersed in the kind of fast, deep friendship that can take over and change the course of our lives. From points afar, they find their way to New York and, for a few whirling years, each other. The city is a wonderland for young people with dreams: cramped West Village kitchens, rowdy cocktail parties stocked with the sharp-witted and glamorous, taxis that can take you anywhere at all, long talks along the Hudson River as the lights of the Empire State Building blink on above. Inspired by the lives of Flannery O'Connor and Robert Lowell, Frances and Bernard imagines, through new characters with charms entirely their own, what else might have happened. It explores the limits of faith, passion, sanity, what it means to be a true friend, and the nature of acceptable sacrifice. In the grandness of the fall, can we love another person so completely that we lose ourselves? How much should we give up for those we love? How do we honor the gifts our loved ones bring and still keep true to our dreams? In witness to all the wonder of kindred spirits and bittersweet romance, Frances and Bernard is a tribute to the power of friendship and the people who help us discover who we are.

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Customer Reviews

"It's terrible," Bernard said to Frances soon after they met. "You answered a letter and befriended a monster." Bernard is not a monster; he only believes himself to be. In Carlene Bauer's epistolary novel, he and Frances begin a long-term correspondence after meeting at a writer's colony in the

late 1950's. The book consists primarily of their letters, and occasional letters to and from Claire (Frances' friend), and Ted (Bernard's ex-roommate), who serve primarily as confidantes. Bernard is a poet; Frances is a fiction writer. Initially, he lives in Boston, she in New York. But as their correspondence deepens and their feelings for each other heat up, he moves to New York, and they begin to redefine their friendship. In the process, they explore that amorphous boundary between friendship and love, coming face to face with who they really are and the choices they need to make in order to be true to themselves. Frances is controlled, self-contained, aloof, and cautious. In college she had been referred to as "Fanny Price" - after Jane Austen's prim MANSFIELD PARK heroine. Frances is traditional in her Catholic religiosity, but untraditional in her dedication to writing during a decade in which female aspiration centered entirely on marriage. Bernard said of her in a letter, "She grew up among women who love harder than they think, and she has strengthened her innate intractability in order to keep tunneling toward a place where she could write undisturbed by the demands of conventional femininity. So she may always think harder than she loves." Bernard, in contrast, is emotionally effusive, brimming with puppy-doglike affection, and manic-depressive - a rare 1950's rebellious radical. Writing to Frances, he refers to himself as "Polyphemus groping for you from his dark cave." He acknowledges, "I plunge myself into something, seeing and hearing only my will, and I have to crash into something to stop." Occasionally exploring religious issues, he recognizes, "I built myself a god who was not God, who was only myself made boundless.... My fervor was self-adornment." Many passages, especially Bernard's, are literary gems. But author Carlene Bauer is not only skilled in her use of language - she also creates characters who come alive on the page. Since Frances and Bernard are both writers, the intelligence and articulateness with which they express themselves and explore their lives is entirely believable. Their friends, Ted and Claire, also contribute to our understanding of them because of the outlet they provide for self-expression and the perspective they give on Frances and Bernard's developing "friendship." Less interesting are other characters briefly mentioned in the letters, and the irrelevant details of daily life that author Bauer really did not need to include -- but these don't take up much space. I did find the ending a bit anti-climactic, but perhaps it had to be, in order to be realistic. Some noteworthy background information: The source of the author's inspiration for Frances and Bernard was the actual friendship between poet Robert Lowell and the fiction writer Flannery O'Connor. O'Connor and Lowell met at Yaddo writer's colony in 1949, and afterwards began a long-term correspondence. They never did develop a love relationship per se, but as friends they were for a time infatuated with each other. Lowell called O'Connor a "saint", encouraged her to explore darker facets of religion, introduced her to key literary figures, and publicly championed her writing. In an

interview for PUBLISHER'S WEEKLY, Bauer indicated that she was fascinated with their friendship, and decided to fictionalize it, letting it evolve into a romantic relationship. In the process, she created an entirely imaginary version of Flannery O' Connor - the actual writer was a conservative Southerner who developed lupus soon after meeting Lowell at Yaddo, and died at age 39. Bauer did not intend for FRANCES AND BERNARD to be a biography of Lowell and O'Connor - but their correspondence was a primary ingredient in her own literary concoction. FRANCES AND BERNARD is a tribute to the lost art of letter writing. It is an insightful, clever and sometimes humorous exploration of the stages of friendship between two intelligent, talented people -one whose controls are a bit too tight, the other, too loose. Although written as letters, the book is very readable and emotionally engaging. It propels us to explore various stages of intimacy - how it develops, blossoms, and dissolves as two people define and redefine themselves and each other. In the process, the characters grapple with issues that many of us readers are likely to find familiar. For example, consider the question that Frances writes in a letter to Claire, "How should we love those whom we have loved for their particulars when those particulars are no longer present?" Claire writes her, "You rely on your books for things the rest of us search for in people.... I think it's a gift, maybe even your one true spiritual discipline." FRANCES AND BERNARD is a book that brings people to life, a slim but richly textured novel which deeply explores personal relationships. It is itself a gift, a gem, which I treasure, and highly recommend.

I was deeply skeptical when I picked up this slim novel. An epistolary novel? A literary homage? Both of these are, in my experience, all too likely to end with me grimacing in distaste and flinging the book against the wall, annoyed by a novelist trying more to convince me of how clever he/she is than to entice me into believing in the reality of the characters who inhabit the pages. So this turned out to be a warning against drawing pat conclusions about a book based on its form or ostensible subject. That said, this will definitely not be a book that suits all readers. It is made up of letters, and if you can't deal with that, well, this isn't something you should spend your time on. It's also a book revolving around two characters, both of whom are writers, and they spend a lot of time talking about Big Ideas and discussing other things that writers tend to debate, like annoying editors and the difficulty in getting the ideas in one's brain onto the page in the right way. If that sounds pretentious to you, again, this won't be the right book for you. The first half of the book includes many segments of letters in which the duo (Frances, born Catholic, and Bernard, a convert) discuss theology and the nature of the divine. To me, that fit with the characters and the narrative; others may not respond the same way. So, why did I end up loving this book? In large part because the

author at once manages to seize all the advantages of an epistolary novel (not needing to set the stage for a dialogue between her main characters and clutter up their exchange of ideas with distracting side elements) while avoiding some of the biggest perils (figuring that being able to do away with descriptive prose to serve as context means you don't have to pay attention to providing readers with the same kind of information in other ways; imposing his/her own voice on those of the letter writers, to the point where they sound as if they all are nothing more than mouthpieces.) Instead, I felt that both Frances and Bernard were vivid, real people. The book completed, I was crushed to come back down to earth and realize that while they may be loosely based on Robert Lowell and Flannery O'Connor, the operative phrase is loosely. Both Bernard and Frances may owe their inspiration to these two mid-century literary giants, but they stand on their own as characters, inhabiting a time of their own in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Most of all, I found this to be a convincing and moving portrayal of a literary friendship that, because it crosses genders, ends up entangled with the idea of love. When Bernard and Frances meet, both are drawn to each other because of what they see in the other's personality and work and their letters initially enable both to get to know the other in a deeper way than might have been possible in a classic tale of romance. As Bernard muses later on, "We'd read each other like books we were endlessly fascinated by." Their friendship has been tempered by intellectual and personal struggles long before it evolves into a romantic passion, and I found each stage compelling. Bauer reminds us that for people who live in their minds, sharing ideas can be a more seductive prospective than anything else. She also crafts two very distinctive voices: the ebullient Bernard, who throws himself into new relationships with gusto and for whom being around people is the breath of life, and the reserved Frances, wary of all that emotional tumult and all too aware, as she confesses to Bernard, that "writing is the only thing I feel at peace while doing." I can see a number of readers responding to this novel with irritation, arguing that its protagonists spend waaay too much time thinking and talking. To me, that's somewhat the point, and one reason that this works as an epistolary novel. If the two characters were simply talking to each other, I think I'd have tired rapidly of them and the novel. But instead, Bauer gives us glimpses into those interactions by showing us how both react to them and process them. In a way that we are rapidly forgetting is possible, letters offer us -- as Bauer shows they offer Frances and Bernard -- a way to pause, to reflect, and to strive to reach beneath the surface and connect with another human being. And it's the formation of that kind of emotional connection -- whether it takes the form of a literary alliance/understanding, a friendship, romantic love, platonic love -- that is at the heart of this novel, which reminds us that these aren't always distinct categories. Although this is a short book, I found myself slowing down and spacing out my reading;

increasingly, however, I found myself yearning to read the next letter in the series, not just to know "what" came next, but to read the thoughts of each character. A few other reviewers have noted the presence of letters to and from peripheral characters, notably Frances's close friend Claire and Bernard's friend Bill, as well as their mutual editor John, but to me -- given that the bulk of those letters are still written by Frances or Bernard -- those were necessary for context, especially in the last few dozen pages of book, and because of her ability to craft such distinctive voices for her characters, never struck me as jarring. If anything, those more mundane letters with others served to emphasize the uniqueness of those between Frances and Bernard themselves. I don't know whether to call this book a literary tour de force. I do know that it captivated me and intrigued me, and it's one that I expect that I'll dip into over and over again throughout the years as a reminder of the power of letters and literary friendship.

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