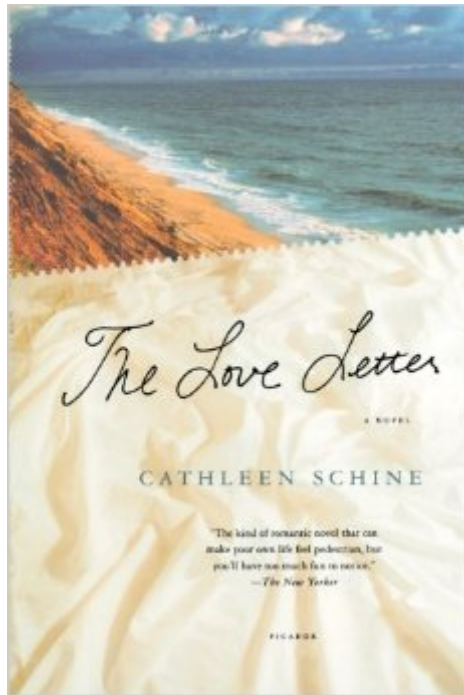


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The Love Letter: A Novel



Synopsis

Independent, irresistible Helen MacFarquhar is the owner of a bookstore in an idyllic seaside town in New England. A happily divorced mother who enjoys a playful relationship with her customers, Helen's life is turned upside down when an anonymous letter arrives, penned by an unknown lover.

Book Information

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Average Customer Review: 2.8 out of 5 starsÂ Â See all reviewsÂ (72 customer reviews)

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Customer Reviews

Well, that about sums it up. However, the book is really worth the read. It's sweet, witty, and sharp. This book demonstrates perfectly what I like about the way Cathleen Schine writes. She loves words, and so, since I perfectly concur on that point, I do enjoy her books, few of them that there are. (Two? Maybe three, but I've only seen, uh, read two.)For example: I never used to use the word banal, or how about insouciant, but the way she sort of twists the words makes them catch. Anyway, I can't remember the last love story that I enjoyed as much. Please don't write it off as that "crappy women's writing", as many are wont to do. Cathleen Schine is a smart writer, and one who obviously reads literature; I caught a lot of the references, but some of them were like whoosh, right over my head. A fun read, fast despite its being a people driven book as opposed to an action driven one. Not too hard, but feels challenging nonetheless. Read the book. It's good.

I loved this book. It's one of those where you could say that nothing much happens: the development is in understanding not in terms of action. It's modern in every way, but it also has a quality that seems somehow more attuned to 19th or 18th century fiction - perhaps because of the

pace, which is relaxed and dreamy and takes its time. So it is a subtle novel; Schine creates a wonderful mysterious atmosphere that carried me through from the first page to the last. The relationships between the characters are very convincing and help the reader to associate with them. As a male, I was suspicious at first of what looked like - and indeed is - a romance. But it's also much more than that: a deep examination of the way the heroine's mind works. In this way we learn about ourselves and others and what makes us all tick. I think that's what good fiction is for. If you like subtlety, I recommend it highly.

Based on the jacket blurb, I was hoping this would be a fun, literate romantic comedy. After the first two chapters, however, I found myself wishing Helen had a richer inner life, since Schine spends almost all her time detailing Helen's thoughts and feelings. Helen is too complacent and sold on her own charm and flirtatiousness to be interesting as a character we're supposed to identify with wholeheartedly. Jane Austen or Barbara Pym would know how to use irony to give us a larger perspective on Helen, but Schine really seems to expect us to fall in love with Helen. The references to books and reading (Helen owns a bookshop) end up feeling dropped in, since Helen never seems convincing as a reader and lover of books. The cutesy quality of the plot and some of the language, along with Helen's self-obsession, end up giving the novel a claustrophobic feeling.

I will not give a synopsis of the book because it has already been provided. However, I will caution, do not read this book if you are a reader who likes a heavy plotline. There is minimal plot in this book. One would therefore expect more character development. But, alas, there is minimal character development as well. Characters start off selfish and superficial, and remain so throughout the book. I wish I could say that the writing was good, but I felt it was bloated and repetitive. Phrase embedded within phrase simply slowed the pace of the already-slow story for me. Somewhere in this book, however, was the promise of a good story.(hence the two stars.) Tighter writing, a heavy editing hand, and perhaps more likable characters would have brought out the essential story question...how can a romance between an older woman bookseller and a younger college guy survive? (WARNING: SPOILER) Unfortunately, however, the ending is not resolved and the author drops the ball.

Schine's writing in 'The Love Letter' is deceptively simple but filled with subtle understanding of human nature and the sensual pleasures of the natural world. Consider the book's opening paragraph: "The honeysuckle was everywhere the day the letter arrived, like heat. Wild roses

bloomed in hedges of tendrils and perfume. There were fat bees, dirigible bees, plump and miniature. It was a sweet, tangled morning..." Such passages recur through the book, and remind one of the small epiphanies of life that occur when we momentarily lose ourselves to joy. I loved reading this novel. While I initially disliked the character of Helen, as I continued reading I began to identify with her. She emerges from being a somewhat irritating flirt and controlling personality into a woman surprised and chagrined at finding happiness and emotional freedom with the love of a young man half her age. The reader comes away with a feeling that she has met a real, imperfect, vulnerable human being in Helen. The character of Johnny is humorously endearing and believable. Ultimately, this unconventional love story itself becomes an epiphany, one which reminds us of the joy awaiting when we embrace the gifts life brings so unexpectedly. A smart, literate, elegant reading experience, 'The Love Letter' makes us reflect-- on the essence of writing our emotions, the nature of love, the simplest pleasures of life, and our own fears, foibles and capacity for growth at any age.

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