



Cousin Bette

Honoré de Balzac , Francine Prose (Introduction) , Kathleen Raine (Translator)

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Poor, plain spinster Bette is compelled to survive on the condescending patronage of her socially superior relatives in Paris: her beautiful, saintly cousin Adeline, the philandering Baron Hulot and their daughter Hortense. Already deeply resentful of their wealth, when Bette learns that the man she is in love with plans to marry Hortense, she becomes consumed by the desire to exact her revenge and dedicates herself to the destruction of the Hulot family, plotting their ruin with patient, silent malice.

Cousin Bette is a gripping tale of violent jealousy, sexual passion and treachery, and a brilliant portrayal of the grasping, bourgeois society of 1840s Paris. The culmination of the *Comédie humaine*, Balzac's epic chronicle of his times, it is one of his greatest triumphs as a novelist.

Cousin Bette Details

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From Reader Review Cousin Bette for online ebook

Jim says

This is the third time I have read this late masterpiece of Balzac's -- and it got better with each reading. There have been other novels (mostly European) about men who have ruined themselves for illicit love of other women, but Balzac's Baron Hector Hulot goes further than any of them. At the beginning of **Cousin Bette**, he is at his apogee: married to a loving woman, with two loving adult children -- and an incredible itch for what willing young women have to offer. I will not say what happens to him in the end, but his fall is precipitous and involves the ruin of his brother, his uncle (who commits suicide), and numerous others who are tangentially affected by his ways.

Rather than summarize the story, which the author handles masterfully, I thought I would discuss what makes for a great Balzac novel:

1. The best Balzac stories show temptations or character weaknesses to which the hero or heroine yields, and for which he or she suffers grievously. This ranges from the lecherousness of Hulot to the improvidence of César Birotteau the perfumer to the excessive indulgence of Old Goriot to his daughters to the blind ambition of Balthazar Claes in **The Quest for the Absolute** to find the alchemist's stone. Perhaps the classical plot in this respect is **The Wild Ass's Skin**.
2. Behind the best Balzac plots are demoniacal moneylenders who are never, ever bested in their transactions with mere mortals. In **Cousin Bette**, there is Vauvinet, but the best moneylender in his work is the eponymous hero of **Gobseck**.
3. Balzac's Paris is full of young dandies on the make who act as a kind of Greek chorus to the story. Perhaps the best depiction of them is in **Lost Illusions**.
4. Envy plays an outsize role in the world of Balzac. Whenever someone looks to be doing well, often one finds a sort of cabal forming to do him or her in. And this cabal is every bit as relentless as the moneylenders, with whom they are frequently in cahoots. Again, **Lost Illusions** is a prime example. This is related to the extreme vengeance that plays such a large part in **Cousin Bette** and **Cousin Pons**.
5. Not only evil, but good, sometimes acts under the cover of a seemingly all-powerful secret society. The classical case are the three stories collected under the title **The Thirteen**. For good, there is Mme de la Chanterie, who appears in the current novel and also, at greater length, in **The Wrong Side of Paris**. In **Cousin Bette**, we see the archvillain Vautrin, now become chief of police, working with dubious villains like Mme Nourrisson, to help Victorine Hulot wreak revenge on Mme de Marneffe.
6. There is something Mephistophelian in Balzac's best villains, especially Vautrin in the three or four novels in which he figures as a major character. I would have to include Mme de Marneffe, whose avarice is matched only by the unbridled lust of her lovers.
7. Although Balzac keeps returning to the balm of the Catholic Church, he likes to let his victims twist in the wind before they get any of the Church's benefits.
8. There are frequently large sums of money involved in highly complex financial transactions that defy anyone whose knowledge of French economics of the July monarchy is less than professorial. In this edition,

in fact, there is an appendix entitled "Money Plot of **Cousin Bette**." Having read it, I'm still in the dark.

9. Balzac virtually invented the idea of the same characters appearing in two or more or even a dozen stories. Doctor Bianchon is, I believe, in over thirty of them. The more Balzac you read -- including the minor works and the shorter stories -- the more you will appreciate novels like this one, in which dozens of characters reappear elsewhere.

In short, looking back at the many Balzac novels I have read -- and I have read most of them -- I find myself looking at what its author called "The Human Comedy" -- men and women who fall far short of the ideal and are grievously punished for it.

The five novels I will list here are among the greatest works from the mind of man and well-deserving of close study by anyone who is interested in how human beings fall short of their hopes and aspirations: (a) **Père Goriot**; (b) **Lost Illusions**; (c) **A Harlot High and Low**; (d) **Cousin Bette**; and (e) **Cousin Pons**. I could easily have expanded the number to ten, or fifteen, or even more.

Chrissie says

I am no literary critic. I will merely try and express what I experienced while reading this book.

I am glad I read it, but I admire the author's opus more than I enjoyed it. Honestly, it was often a struggle.

It has a **very slow start**. The book's narrator, after a third of the way through, states that only now will the story begin. All that before had just been an introduction to the characters! That "introduction" doesn't read as a normal introduction; you are thrown into events that you scarcely comprehend. Often I was confused, and so also upset, but always I did eventually come to understand what was happening. **There are lots of characters**. Actually, the number is not the main problem. **The confusion is caused by the immense amount of details thrown at you**. When I begin a book, I have no idea where the book is leading so I try and remember e-v-e-r-y-t-h-i-n-g. I was swamped. From all these details the author does periodically summarize and clarify so you do understand. These details do serve a purpose; they very accurately depict life in Paris in the early 1840s.

The book was first published in serial format in *Le Constitutionnel*. Balzac wrote it to compete against another popular *feuilleton* author, Eugène Sue, of a socialist bent. Balzac supported the House of Bourbon and venerated Napoléon Bonaparte as a champion of absolutist power. Balzac's aim was to realistically describe life after Napoléon's fall. Given that it was published as a *feuilleton*, he was writing for people of his day. References are made to individuals and events that were the talk of the town. **So they understood what he was referring to much better than we do! Much is left unexplained**. In addition, the popularity and success of the writing depended upon keeping readers engaged. Melodrama, excitement, titillating scenes and moralistic elements pepper the writing. This very much affects the writing style. **I think he magnificently depicts the different social classes vying against each other in Paris, but as with other books written in serial format something quick and exciting must happen in each episode**. Do you see why I admire the writing, but don't really love it?

Then there are the characters. **Some critics say his figures are complex. I didn't see them that way**. The reader easily spots different character types:

Bette - think of one seeking revenge. She is the cousin of Adeline.

Valérie Marneffe - the beautiful, seductive, greedy mistress of four. And she is married!

Baron Hector Hulot - consumed by sex. Let's just call him the dirty old man.

Baroness Adeline Hulot - Hector's saintly wife.

Célestin Crevel - the wealthy, retired tradesman and rival of Hulot. Here and elsewhere Balzac shows the importance of wealth.

Wenceslas Steinbock - the artist. Here Balzac has a chance to spell out what it takes to succeed in art – hard work! You can reflect on Balzac's own efforts. He wrote this novel in two months! His health suffered.

There are several more figures in the families:

Hortense Hulot - daughter of the Hulots married to Wenceslas

Victorin Hulot - the Hulots' son married to Celestine.

Celestine - Crevel's daughter married to Victorin

Maréchal Hulot - Hector Hulot's honorable brother

Johann Fischer – an uncle of the Hulot family, someone handy to send to Algiers to embezzle funds

And mistresses and lovers:

Josépha Mirah - singer, Jewish, abandoned child

Baron Henri Montès de Montéjanos - another Baron, another lover, but Brazilian this time

Agathe - kitchenmaid, mistress and.....

I am listing the characters for two reasons. To help those planning on reading the book and to illustrate the caricature each represents. I prefer more complicated, complex characters. I don't see them that way. There is a strong moral message conveyed.

Yet, Balzac did have a great idea in writing his *Comédie humaine*, a multi-volume collection of interlinked novels sharing many of the same characters. He completed over 90 novels and had begun over 40 more. You hit upon characters that have turned up in other novels. You remember other things they have done and said. This added depth for me. In *Père Goriot* I met the criminal in-hiding, Vautrin. Here he is in the police force, and we meet more of his family! Doctor Bianchon was one of the diners at the lodging house *Mason Vauque*. We meet him here too. I liked this very much. You don't have to read the books in a particular order, but the more you read and the more you know, the fuller the story becomes. As in real life, as with real people, the more you learn about each, the more interesting they become. You become curious for more.

The audiobook I listened to was narrated by Johanna Ward / Kate Reading. She knows how to pronounce French correctly. That is important. For me she spoke too quickly. She dramatizes, but she does this well. Me, I would give the narration four stars.

So the book IS worth reading, but it is difficult. You have to pay close attention. It is by no means an easy read. For me it was a bit too didactic, a bit too melodramatic, its characters a bit too simplified. The next I will read from the *Comédie humaine* will be *Eugénie Grandet*. My curiosity has been piqued and I do want more, but I need a breather first.

Jonfaith says

Despite some narrative leaps and a reversal of fortune for several of the characters, I truly loved this novel. It

was a perfect, snowy weekend for such. The pacing, except for the end, was sublime and supported with equal measures of vitriol and detail.

There is much to say about a family in decline, if not peril. I rank Cousin Bette with Buddenbrooks and The Sound and the Fury.

Anascape Taylor says

Spoilers Inside Sigh. It is a shame to give only 3 stars to a book so eloquently written, but what will linger in my mind about Cousin Bette 30 years from now will most likely be the rotten taste it has left in my mouth, not the honey-dipped words.

The first star was lost because I had to suffer through long sections of Balzac's rambling, misguided moralizing. His sermons seem to cover all topics, from the high-handed judgment of a variety of races to the merits of "good breeding." I like an author to fascinate me such that I feel like I would not be worthy to hold a conversation with them, if we were to meet. Unfortunately, I got the feeling that Balzac would be a remarkably loud and boring dinner guest who liked to listen to himself better than anyone else.

The second star was lost because I was left completely unsatisfied. Now don't tell me that if I want a happy ending I should go find a children's book. Here's the deal: the character who is "punished by the vengeance of God," as it was painted, Madame Marneffe of course, is not really the one I cared to see brought to justice. Yes, she was terrible and cruel. But who is to blame: the woman who mercilessly steals a family's honor and fortune, or the stupid and selfish man who hands it over to her willingly? No, I didn't really care about the Madame's fate. And Bette couldn't have been punished any more judiciously than she was in the end. But the Baron? What justice did he receive? None, of course. And while Adeline's character was honorable, on some level I see her impassioned hunt for him through the slums of Paris to be one of complete selfishness. He didn't want to come home, as he said and demonstrated to the very end. He even wished her dead, even more so when he came home, so she couldn't very well have saved him from God's wrath. I realize that she was supposed to have not seen this, but it certainly doesn't leave one impressed with Balzac's idea of perfect virtue. It seems that his definition of virtue boils down to martyrdom. And what a convenient bar to set for a woman of 19th century Paris. Furthermore, in the end Balzac glorifies Crevel, putting his vanity up on a pedestal as some mark of greatness. Well then, take me to the nearest Porsche dealer and find me a real genius! Really, the only two characters I respected in the whole thing were Hortense and Victorin. Hortense, for the most part, nips her husband's insults in the bud. She has the wherewithal to throw him to his transparent Madame and not suffer a lifetime of pointless martyrdom that makes no one the better. And Victorin pulls his family together in their time of "disgrace," proving to be the only thing standing between Lisbeth and her vengeance. So I feel that mine and Balzac's definitions of vice and virtue differ markedly, and not in ways that can be accounted for simply by the passage of 150 years.

Ahmad Sharabiani says

La cousine Bette = Cousin Bette, Honoré de Balzac

Story of an unmarried middle-aged woman who plots the destruction of her extended family.

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Caroline says

In the dedication to Cousin Bette, Balzac describes his glowing admiration of Don Michele Angelo Cajetani, Prince of Teano, for the impromptu exegesis of Dante's *Divine Comedy* that he gave one evening in Balzac's company. Thus, presumably, the umbrella title of *La Comedie Humaine* for his many of his novels. Balzac writes:

The two sketches I dedicate to you [The Poor Relations: *Cousin Pons* and *Cousin Bette* are the two eternal aspects of one and the same fact. *Homo duplex*, said the great Buffon: why not add *Res duplex*? Everything has two sides, even virtue. Hence Moliere always shows us both sides of every human problem; and Diderot, imitating him, once wrote, “This is not a mere tale”...

At the beginning of the novel, this claim that even virtue has two sides, catches your attention, since you're quite sure there will be a lot of vice in the pages ahead. But indeed, by the time we reach page 361, where the courtesan Josepha tells saintly, endlessly-forgiving Madame Hulot:

”You make me sorry, Madame, that I cannot tread in your footsteps, in spite of the thorns that tear your feet and hands. --But it cannot be helped! I am one with art, as you are one with virtue.”

we realize that virtue taken to an extreme can facilitate vice to the extent that both sinner and saint are equally guilty. When you are married to a man as weak as Hulot, you have an obligation to rein him in.

I have mixed feelings about the novel. Balzac's ability to paint characters is wonderful, and I really enjoyed his authorial interludes. (One has to set political correctness aside, of course, but the epigrammatic nuggets are worth the dated smears of other nationalities.) But it is all just unbelievable. Yes, men can be silly over a woman, but for so many men to be so ruinously infatuated for so long in the face of Madame Marneffe's greedy machinations is not credible. Nor is her ability to juggle their assignations for so many years unknown to each other (at least as lovers) believable.

One final observation. I was quite intrigued with how specific the references to money were. I have been reading Austen, Trollope, and Balzac, and am thus immersed in nineteenth century financial preoccupations, particularly associated with marriage and inheritance. But Balzac is the accountant among these authors. Every page of *Cousin Bette* is suffused with the spiraling financial disaster of the Hulots, and the ever-increasing fortunes of Crevel and Malneffe. Every loan, every gift, every appointment to a paying position, is detailed and set down in the ledgers. A thousand francs. Ten thousand francs. Two hundred thousand francs. Six thousand francs. On and on. Presumably Balzac is considering the changing class structure and distribution of wealth in mid-century France, from the nobility to the middle class. Does he think the middle class and the tradesman are somehow cheating and conniving their way at the expense of an inherently superior nobility? A nobility that is degenerating, as Hulot does before our eyes? Since there are several still-noble servants of the state in high positions, it seems he views Hulot as the kind of weak link in the chain that puts everything at risk. All quite fascinating.

Sara says

Lisbeth Fischer is consumed with hatred for her cousin, Adeline Hulot. Cousin Adeline has married a Baron and come up in the world, and Bette is the poor spinster relation, who has to work for part of her living and depends on the charity of the family for the remainder. Cousin Adeline's husband, the Baron Hulot, is a despicable womanizer who ruins himself for "love", uh make that lust. Nothing to envy in Adeline's life at all...I'd have rather had the independence of Lisbeth, but then Lisbeth never bothers to enjoy her independence except in the ways that it gives her opportunity to take revenge and help to destroy her family.

Balzac does some great character development, especially with his female characters. Valerie Marneffe is the epitome of the beautiful woman who manipulates men for money, her husband the consummate cur, Bette the picture of a soul driven by jealousy and pettiness, and Steinbock is all the artist who squanders his talent and good fortunes might ever be. His good characters are weaker, in my mind. Adeline becomes almost a caricature, and does all the fainting, enduring and praying to excess, Victorin is almost too willing to sacrifice for his father's sake, and Clementine too forgiving of hers.

I did enjoy parts of this novel immensely, at other times I wished to speed up the narrative and push Balzac toward some conclusion. I was troubled by the ages of the girls that Hulot pursues, fourteen and sixteen year olds who are often already overly acquainted with the world. But, I kept reminding myself that this is Paris of the early 1800s and seventy year old men bedding fourteen year old girls might not have shocked a soul, particularly if the old men were Barons.

I debated long about whether my 3.5 star rating should be rounded up or down, finally settling for down. While there was much I did like about the novel, it falls short of being a truly captivating read. I am glad to

have read it, however, since it is only the second Balzac I have tackled.

Petra X says

This is a soap opera masquerading as a classic. It has all the right ingredients.

- * A husband, a baron, who has spent all the family money on other women.
- * A wife who justifies acting like a doormat by saying it is religious feminine submission.
- * An in-law who threatens to put the kybosh on any potential "good match" marriage for their dowry-less but pretty (and rather boring) daughter Hortense if religious doormat doesn't sleep with him.
- * Cousin Bette, the protagonist of the story, who is the plain, poor relation given shelter by the Baron, but must earn her own living and who is a jealous, vengeful and cunning woman.
- * A talented sculptor who leads on and exploits Cousin Bette for what she can do for him, but falls in love with Hortense (and marries her after he has become rich through using her connections).
- * A beautiful mistress/whore, Valerie. Lots of French classics have a woman who exploits her looks but is eventually brought low. Camille in *La Dame aux Camélias*, Nana, *Madame Bovary* to name a few I've read.
- * The poor but handsome lover of the mistress who is used for sex and spurned because he hasn't got enough money. He's going to have his revenge too.
- * More than a hint of lesbianism between the vengeful Bette and the greedy Valerie.

Everyone gets their just desserts in the end, except, mystifyingly, the Baron who on his saintly wife's demise marries a servant girl and is happy as a hare in clover satisfied with his comfortable life and lots of sex.

Balzac did write this as a series and it is both light fiction and great literature. It explores the themes of wealth, beauty, cruelty, passion and religion in an elegant fashion. This is what makes it such a good read, a good plot, great characters and plenty of depth to flesh out the story into a real experience. But 4 stars rather than 5 because it does take a bit of wading through.

Elizabeth (Alaska) says

They are scoundrels! The whole lot of them! Well, ok, there are one or two virtuous people among them, but they are boring. Which is what makes the rest of them scoundrels. I loved this book. I think I was supposed to be scandalized, but I live now, not then.

It is a time of opulence and excess. Money and Sex. Depending on gender, they use one to get the other. To what lengths they will go in pursuit of money and sex! And then there is Cousin Bette who has neither.

Because she has neither, she is filled with hate and a burning desire for revenge. Such a web of intrigue and lies in pursuit of the goal.

Balzac has some 90 or so novels and stories in his *La Comedie Humaine*. I will continue to make inroads in the series, though I don't see how I have time for them all. So many good books, so little time.

John says

I had decided to listen to the book itself after recently seeing the 1971 video starring Margaret Tyzack and (a young) Helen Mirren; the novel moves at a slower pace, although the basic elements are the same. A good subtitle would be: "in which (almost) everyone gets what they deserve."

I dislike reviews that rehash plots, but in this case I'm going to have to do that myself to comment on what to expect for folks considering tackling this classic. Poor plain Bette snaps when her niece Hortense, daughter of the beautiful cousin Adeline (Baroness Hulot), whom she's always bitterly resented, "steals" her young ... ward away for a husband. The spinster and her neighbor Valerie then plan a slow, thorough destruction of the Hulot family. Things go according to plan for much of the story, until fate intervenes with one aspect of Bette's scheme, signaling that she has over-reached.

Far from an exact parallel, but this novel reminded of a sort of French forerunner to Anthony Trollope's *The Way We Live Now*, with such emphasis on casually squandering (or at least splashing about) huge sums. A whopping difference here, however, being that openly "loose" women are accepted, versus complete disgrace for Englishwomen even *suspected* of such behavior. Married men who engaged in outright adultery, such as Baron Hulot (who today would be called a "sex addict") were seen as fine fellows, and their wives expected to Suck It Up. A revolting society to me, but it was what it was I guess.

Balzac's language does get a bit flowery, along with Adeline's in-your-face piety, but narrator Johanna Ward handled it all so well, that I never lost interest. If one is new to reading classics, **Do Not Start Here!** However, those looking to branch out beyond Dickens and Trollope should find the story of interest.

Magrat Ajostiernos says

Me ha costado lo mío terminar esta novela (yo que creía superado mi trauma con los franceses xDD) pero en fin, una vez terminada y reposada puedo decir que 'La prima Bette' es una novela larga, densa, demasiado minuciosa en los detalles y aún así, no ha dejado de resultarme interesante y curiosa en ningún momento, y desde luego me alegro de haber llegado hasta el final. Sus últimas 150 páginas me han encantado y la descripción de esos personajes tan odiosos me ha llegado al alma. Y además, qué queréis que os diga, yo soy #TeamBette a tope xDDD

Adam Calhoun says

Like seemingly every French novel of the period, Cousin Bette's first hundred pages are boring tidbits of

backstory that could have been condensed to only a few pages. Fortunately, the remainder of the book makes up for that fact. Cousin Bette is the story of a bitter family member who decides to bring down the relatives that she sees as having done her wrong. Since she takes slights easily, this is quite a few of them.

But it's really an exploration of changing social mores, as nouveau riche gained power in mid-century France, when the upper class aristocrats were invaded by successful merchants. The conflicts that arise between different ideas of proper social behavior vis a vis the aristocrats and nouveau riche are fascinating and deserve careful scrutiny. The theme of the importance of hard work and the artistic temperament seen through the actions of Fortinbras are still relevant. And the behavior of an irresponsible man-child, the Baron Hulot, analogizes powerfully with the plight of a class of debt-ridden pleasure addicts that are so often scrutinized today.

As characters are developed only to be dropped and picked up again briefly later - a technique that is possibly useful in developing a *setting* rather than a tight plot - the morals of the day are clearly evident. Baron Hulot, who in a story today would surely be one of the villains, gets off exceedingly lightly in this morality tale; his punishment seems to be a series of affairs with hot teenage girls who give him money. Perhaps you can see why he never learns his lesson until Deus Ex Machina forces him to. Things that are considered bad in the book: being a woman, not having socially-defined "taste", and not letting your husband do whatever he wants. Things that are okay: having affairs (if you're a man), having sex in exchange for a nice house and jewelry (being a mistress; prostitution, not okay), and selling your children in marriage for money.

This is quite a good book; I read it just after *Daisy Miller* and the two combined gave me a one-two punch of a type of society that is utterly alien and, hopefully, dead and outdated.

Helga says

This book is about extreme vice versus extreme virtue. There is no middle! The characters are either very bad or very good. How can a serial adulterer who was the cause of at least 3 people's death due to his actions called a victim? How can all the fault be with the woman who "seduced" the man??

This book is mainly about Cousin Bette's jealousy of her relatives and her hatred and decision to ruin them; but the problem is that the relatives ruin themselves by their own idiotic or selfish actions. Throughout the story the only role of Cousin Bette was spying and putting oil on fire!!!

And in the end what happens? Vice wins!

And why should we call a wife who doesn't mind her husband having several mistresses (including 15 year old girls), even to the extent of ruining her and her daughter's life, "virtuous", only the writer knows!

J.L. Sutton says

Compelling (and unsavory) characters drew me into Honore de Balzac's *Cousin Bette* (1846). The main plot centers on Cousin Bette's revenge on her family; however, all the stories which make up the novel are imbued by obsessions which drive the narrative to its dark end. Much of how I described Balzac's earlier novel, *Pere Goriot*, holds true for *Cousin Bette*; Balzac's impressively/exhaustively detailed style is at work here. The layers of detail allow readers to immerse themselves in early 19th century French society in

general and more specifically in the depiction of the drawn out spiteful vengeance Bette exacts on her family. Once immersed, it can be overwhelming to stand in Balzac's world, but it's probably as close as any of us will get to hanging out with scheming relatives (in 19th century France).

Manny says

Plain, spinsterish Lisbeth has become insanely jealous of her beautiful cousin Adeline, and decides that she will finally get even with her. She knows that Adeline's husband is unable to resist feminine charm, so she forms an alliance with the gorgeous and completely amoral Madame Marneffe. I love the following quote; a slightly adapted form even found its way into the dreadful movie version.

« Madame Marneffe était la hache, et Lisbeth était la main qui la manie, et la main démolissait à coup pressés cette famille qui, de jour en jour, lui devenait de plus en plus odieuse »

Madame Marneffe was the axe, and Lisbeth was the hand that wielded it, and, with rapid strokes, the hand demolished the family which, every day, she came to hate more and more.

Carol Rodríguez says

Después de haber llegado a poco más de la mitad, he decidido abandonar este libro (lo marco como leído porque GoodReads no tiene la opción de "abandonado").

Empezó bien, hasta fluido y entretenido, pero poco a poco se convirtió en un folletín repetitivo en el que todos los personajes me parecían horribles, viles y machistas (en este último punto incluyo también a las mujeres y a la voz del narrador). Ante la falta de empatía y la trama aburrida, poco creíble, extensa de más y que no me dice nada, lo abandono.

Era mi primera experiencia con Balzac y no ha salido bien. A día de hoy no me apetece volver a probar con este autor.

Un saludo,
Carol Rodríguez

Sandra says

Lussuria, invidia, avidità, sete di potere, corruzione, odio e VENDETTA: le passioni che imbrigliano l'umanità.

Il tutto amalgamato sullo sfondo di una Parigi post napoleonica, descritto minuziosamente ed in modo vivido, tanto da non essere solo Parigi ma il mondo intero.

Insomma, il peggio del meglio (o il meglio del peggio, come ci pare).

Perry says

SWEET LAND OF LIBERTINES

If you fancy yourself a moralist, you may wanna skip this one. As the undoubted precursor to/playbook for modern-day soap operas, *Cousin Bette* involves:

marital cruelty, sexual blackmail, spite-filled revenge, prostitution, unconscionable adultery, women with irresistible sexual allure to men, men and women having a number of different sexual partners (in a day), theft, poisons, passion-filled murder, and just about every other sin and demoralizing character defect one can imagine.

It seemed realistic and true to the human condition... an exploration of a society uninhibited. Balzac wrote *Cousin Bette* in 1847 in France at the height of the "libertine" philosophy holding that one need not be restrained by the morals of society, including monogamy and marriage, but should instead seek out and enjoy all of life's pleasures (particularly a variety of sexual partners) with no regard to harm done to others (Note: my uneducated synopsis of Libertinism, which also fits my idea of biblical Sodom and Gomorrah).

Here, money and sex are bartering and blackmail chips; virtues like honor and loyalty take second seat to instant gratification and debauchery. Guilt and regret are non-existent.

The name is somewhat misleading. Cousin Bette is the old maid jilted by her infatuation for Wenceslas in favor of her angelic cousin Hortense Hurlot. As a result, she schemes to ruin the Hurlot family through a temptress named Madame Marneffe, who is as easy as an old shoe. Daddy Hurlot and the Mayor are also sleeping with the Mdme. I cannot start describing the rest of the story without going down a path littered with raunch and degradation.

I wanted to read at least one Balzac novel so I picked this one and read it a few summers back [review updated from then]. I give it 4 stars because there is something to be said for keeping all this straight and being the primary trailblazer of realism in fiction. Plus this is just a part of a larger, loosely-tied sequence of novels and short stories, *La Comedie humaine*, in which Balzac presented his panoramic view of life in France after Napoleon's downfall in 1815. So many great authors followed his lead in the 20th century in Europe and America and set the world afire down so many different paths toward truth and humanity that are each so unique.

Capsguy says

Stupid men falling for vicious and manipulative women. You don't see that every day!

Reckoner says

Ο Μπαλζακ γλάφυρα και κυνικά ξεμπροστιάζει την γαλλική κοινωνία δίνοντας στο έργο του διαχρονική ποιότητα. Με κάθε πιθανή μορφή και τρόπο, η Αρετή και η Κακία αντιμαχονται η μια την άλλη μέχρι θανάτου αποτελώντας τις δυο κυρίαρχες δυνάμεις που κάνουν αυτόν τον κόσμο να γυρίζει. Χαρακτήρες πωρωμένοι, φιληδονοί, αγαθοί, εκδικητικοί, μίζεροι, μικροπρεπείς, γοητευτικοί, περηφάνοι, ανιεροί, ποταποί και ταπεινοί κατακλύζουν τις σελίδες αυτού του οικογενειακού δράματος που παίρνει διαστάσεις τραγωδίας όταν η εξαδέλφη Μπεττυ παίρνει την απόφαση να εκδικηθεί για όλα εκείνα που της στέρησαν. Σαν φίδι δίνει θανασιμες δαγκωματαies και απειλει να γκρεμισει τα θεμελια της οικογενειας Υλο που ζει με αυταπατες μιας χαμενης αιγλης και τρεφει στον κορφο της την προσωποποιηση του αχαλινωτου παθους (ο ασωτος πατηρ). Ο Μπαλζακ πλάθει με τέτοιο ολοκληρωτικό(κοινωνικά, διοικητικά,οικονομικά) και απολαυστικό τρόπο το πορτραίτο της γαλλικής κοινωνίας του 19ου αιώνα που σε συναρπάζει και σε ταρασσει με την αλήθεια του και τον ρεαλισμό του. Πολιτικές μηχανορραφίες και μια γιαγια πληρωμενη δολοφονος αποτελουν το κερασακι στην τουρτα. Μυθιστοριογραφια στα καλυτερα της, γεματη ολοζωντανους διαλογους.

Απ'σπασμα απο την δημοσ'ευση στη Λ'σχη του Βιβλ'ου
