

## Almost Perfect

**E. F. Dodd**

Sugar Beaver Books

(367pp)

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*A long-distance couple builds on their surprising connection in the lighthearted romance novel Almost Perfect.*

In E. F. Dodd's cozy romance novel *Almost Perfect*, a pediatrician connects with a bartender during a girls' weekend in upstate New York.

Vivian agrees to the autumn trip up north in order to help her friend get over an ex. But when she travels from North Carolina to Rochester, she doesn't expect to find herself falling in lust with Dave, a bartender who is, at first glance, not her type. Egged on by her friends, she allows herself to enjoy a liaison with him, only to discover that he's not what she expects—and that their contrasts lead to real chemistry. But Vivian's mother is not so fast to consider Dave as an ideal long-term partner. Further, Vivian finds their long-distance relationship challenging.

Aspects of Dave's and Vivian's psychology are revealed throughout the book, though these qualities are often handled with a light touch. As the novel progresses and a better sense of who Dave and Vivian are begins to develop, the couple's connection generates greater interest. Their relationship builds at a gradual rate; their sense of surprise at this is genuine. Still, only near the end of the book does the couple start to talk honestly about their emotions and begin to work on themselves and on their relationship in earnest. Finally, the tension and emotions that were suggested throughout the story begin to flourish, leading to a satisfying conclusion with touches of artistry.

Less convincing are the couple's exchanges in the midst of sex scenes: they engage in lengthy, eloquent exchanges that are often at odds with how they otherwise speak. This is even more true when it comes to Dave, who is a reticent speaker on other topics. Their physicality in the same scenes is more rousing, though it's also idealized.

Women's friendships play a prominent role in the story, leading to mutual empowerment. Vivian has humorous talks with her friends throughout; their language is grounded and contemporary, incorporating slang and swear words. And scenes featuring Halloween and Thanksgiving celebrations add moments of additional lightness and humor to the otherwise steamy tale. But women's fashion senses are also overemphasized somewhat; such stereotypes, in addition to Dave's emotional inhibitions, undermine the book's more powerful qualities.

*Almost Perfect* is a raunchy romance novel in which people from opposite ends of the country begin an unexpected love story.

SARAH FRIDESWIDE (September 8, 2023)

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