

Alpha Bette

Jennifer Manocherian

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Alpha Bette is an intriguing novel whose compelling cast members are invited to a surprising dinner party.

Jennifer Manocherian's captivating novel *Alpha Bette* concerns family, friendship, and unexpected human connections.

Bette, a widowed woman in her nineties, wakes up with the idea to host a formal dinner party in her lavish New York City apartment. The invitees are all confused as to why an old woman in poor health would want to put on such a fancy event. Still, out of respect and curiosity, they go along with her whims. Bette provides just one hint as to the purpose of the party: she has invited a medium to join them for the evening.

As the novel progresses, the significance of the title, *Alpha Bette*, becomes clear. Bette serves as the common connection between the six other characters, who include her relatives, neighbors, and staff, and whose stories become the focus of the novel. The book makes thoughtful choices in how these characters are brought together. However, some relationships are less developed than others. The ones that are given more attention are poignant and showcase how encounters can create opportunities for empathy, personal growth, and appreciation for others. One such highlight is the evolving relationship between Bette's neighbor, Gertrude, a solitary and mean-spirited individual, and Venera, Bette's night aide, whose actions in her capacity as caretaker often annoy Gertrude. Gertrude is at first antagonistic toward her, and even thinks of strangling her or calling ICE, but Venera's compassion softens her.

Character development is the novel's greatest strength, with much of the prose dedicated to detailing the histories, mannerisms, and physical traits that define each person. The novel accomplishes this by devoting each chapter to a single past or present experience told from the perspective of one of the main characters. Often, these experiences provide broader understanding.

Suspense around the impending dinner party is maintained even through this focus on individual characterizations. Much of the book's action occurs in its final chapters, following the generation of deep compassion for the guests. The conclusion is impactful and satisfying, reemphasizing the importance of relationships and resolving many of the book's subplots—though some ancillary stories are unresolved, and certain questions remain unanswered, even when the party is over.

Alpha Bette is an intriguing novel whose compelling cast members are invited to a dinner party that comes to an exciting, unexpected conclusion.

GAIL HOFFER-LOIBL (July 17, 2023)

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