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Clarion Review

Autobiography & Memoir

Cheap Cabernet: A Friendship
Cathie Beck
Studio Trujillo, illustrator
BookSurge
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Four Stars (out of Five)

Some friendships survive beyond the final gruesome fight. Some last beyond the grave. Cathie Beck had that kind of friendship with Denise Katz, an artist she met when she formed a women's group in an attempt to alleviate her loneliness. She relates the roller coaster ride of their relationship in her memoir, *Cheap Cabernet*, with a heavy dose of wit and a wine glass full of poignant reflection.

Beck survived teenage pregnancy, single motherhood, welfare, evictions, and various difficult relationships with her family members. She counts herself successful when she finds herself alone in her own apartment, with a couple of degrees on her résumé and her kids off in pursuit of their own adult lives. But she senses that some elements are still missing from her fairly comfortable life; one of these—friends—she tries to gain by inviting eight women to a meeting of WOW: Women on the Way, a group that rises purely out of her imagination.

One of the group members proves to be the antidote she was seeking. Cathie and Denise fall into a routine of daily phone calls, nightly dinners and cheap wine in front of *Seinfeld*, and weekly shopping excursions to the Big Store. Denise's husband, John, who lives next to her as instead of with her, takes part in some of their fun, though he doesn't travel with them to Havana or even realize he's helping Cathie buy her own home.

Sadly, all good things must come to an end. Quite suddenly, Denise's symptoms from Multiple Sclerosis worsen and she can no longer play quite so hard. But instead of leaning on Cathie for support, Denise drives her away to save her the pain of being a part of a harrowing demise. "She could put up with MS, travel, run a business as her life caved in around her, but, by god, she couldn't worry about me and figure out how she'd escape her hell as well," Beck writes.

Beck's writing is breezy, polished, and fun to read. Her vivacious personality comes alive on the page and draws readers into her world. Occasionally she lapses into narrative that feels like too much slapstick—people in *Cheap Cabernet* tend to yell and hoot instead of speaking and laughing. She also uses an abundance of hooked-together-with-dashes words which can be disconcerting. These lapses, however, are mere distractions in an otherwise endearing tale of the best kind of love.

Sprinkled among her anecdotes of Denise are references to a life lived by the seat of her pants—a mother with a wooden leg and an alcohol problem, a husband who slinks out of her life in the middle of the night, dead-end jobs endured so her children can eat; hopefully Beck will choose to mine these veins for stories for another book.

Pour a glass of decent wine, put some country western songs on the iPod, slip into a steaming bubble bath, and enjoy Beck's spirited account of that one true friend we all hope to find.