



The Tale of Miss Berta London: "Recollections of Accomplishments"

Jihan Latimer

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Both bright and brittle, The Story of Miss Berta London is an intriguing and entertaining trip through one woman's reinvention.

With an interesting and modern premise, Jihan Latimer's *The Tale of Miss Berta London* is a story of self-discovery and reinvention.

Berta London is a savvy and stylish woman who sets trends and turns heads in her classy New York neighborhood. As a revered, successful, and influential editor at *Eloquent Fashion Magazine*, Berta seems to be living a coveted life. Fashion is fickle, though, and after misjudging the upcoming season's style, Berta finds herself rejected by all the industry buyers she was once the darling of.

This major shift in tone occurs just as the story hits a believable stride. Berta experiences an incredible reversal of fortune, losing everything—her magazine, status, respect, and house—over an apparently simple error in judgment. This shift in the plot is jarring and beyond belief, particularly for the fashion industry, which is full of seasonal hits and misses. The fall from grace serves as a convenient turning point for the plot.

Suddenly a pariah in the fashion and publishing industry, Berta decides to pursue teaching, only to end up becoming a nanny. There seems to be no real purpose for Berta's short stint in school. The nanny gig is also a diversion to the plot, and it is full of questionable circumstances that are hard to relate to. Eventually, Berta forges her own path and comes full circle, returning to the publishing industry to create a wildly successful family magazine.

Berta moves from being a shallow and misguided character toward redemption, with moments of introspection and intentionality emerging along the way. She comes to realize the value in human connections. Still, she remains somewhat aloof, materialistic, and hard to relate to throughout, undermining her redemption tale.

Writing is at first fast-paced and zingy, following the book's stylish, attractive lead through her New York City life. Descriptions of that life enliven the text. Beyond the fashion offices, though, the text is less realistic, particularly in relating family dynamics. The book comes to focus more on word craft than on building a consistent story; dreaminess and window dressings overtake the plot. Tangents and illogical circumstances abound. There's some fun to be had, but not much to hold on to.

Supporting characters like Jessica and Mrs. Williamson, the teenager and mother of the family Berta nannies for, share in Berta's shallowness and are inconsistently drawn, with their inner thoughts rarely matching their outward actions. Characters are developed at a distance.

Backstories and tangents occupy much of the book's space, describing, for instance, a secondary character's summer internship in Geneva in detail, though it does not relate directly to Berta. Dialogue is overly formal and outdated. The story wraps up tidily and expediently, though.

Both bright and brittle, *The Story of Miss Berta London* is an intriguing though implausible tale, an entertaining trip through one woman's reinvention.

FELICIA TOPP (April 30, 2018)

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