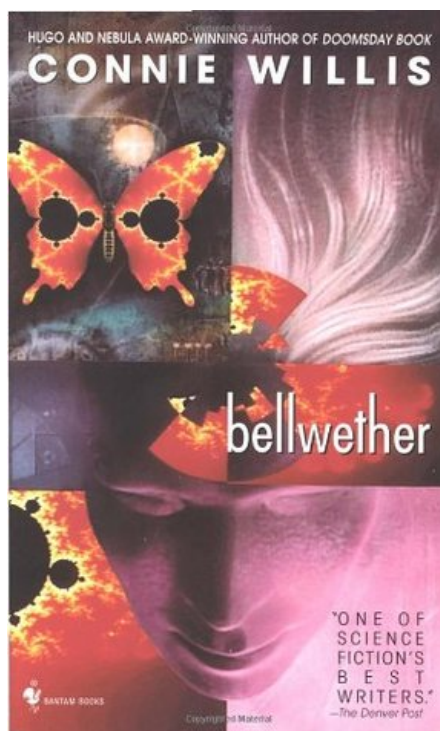




Bellwether

Connie Willis

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Bellwether Connie Willis

Pop culture, chaos theory and matters of the heart collide in this unique novella from the Hugo and Nebula winning author of Doomsday Book.

Sandra Foster studies fads and their meanings for the HiTek corporation. Bennet O'Reilly works with monkey group behavior and chaos theory for the same company. When the two are thrust together due to a misdelivered package and a run of seemingly bad luck, they find a joint project in a flock of sheep. But series of setbacks and disappointments arise before they are able to find answers to their questions.

Bellwether Details

Date : Published June 2nd 1997 by Spectra (first published 1996)

ISBN : 9780553562965

Author : Connie Willis

Format : Paperback 248 pages

Genre : Science Fiction, Fiction, Humor, Romance

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From Reader Review Bellwether for online ebook

ShoSho says

THIS IS NOT SCIENCE FICTION ! This is just horrible fiction! I suffered through 6 hours of gibberish and none-sense ,listened to some ridiculous fads throughout the history ,heard the phrase "hair bobbing" about a million times ,some weird reasoning for scientific breakthroughs and social analysis .
The only good this about this book that helped me to continue was the narrator .

Andree says

So, I actually read this late last night. I picked it up, and did not put it down.

I love everything about this book. I love that it gets science right. I love how it characterizes bureaucracy. I love how it's told. I love the details. I love the relationship and how it develops between Ben and Sandy. I love how Connie Willis does relationships more than most romance novels. it's so delightful. probably because the romance isn't everything, it doesn't feel separate from reality, but rather like it fits within it.

Also, I love the sheep.

I'm going to have to buy this one too.

I want to read it again. It's perfect.

Okay, I've decided to add a bit to this. I should perhaps include one caveat in my review. I'm a former biology grad student who now works for the civil service, the heart of bureaucracy. As such, this book is basically the intersection of a lot of things that appeal to me.

Note: Seriously, don't read these spoilers if you haven't read the book, because they're rather significant.

(view spoiler)

Kim says

Re-read in December 2015.

Bellwether isn't science fiction, though the story is about scientists. At heart it's an off-beat romance between a couple of researchers, and it follows the often hit-and-miss process of scientific discovery. Sandra Foster studies the origin of fads; Bennett O'Reilly studies animal behavior as an aspect of chaos theory. They work at the same tech company but have never met... that is until fate intervenes in the form of an exasperating administrative assistant named Flip.

The book is very clever and full of dry humor. The descriptions of the management nonsense imposed at the fictional HiTek are absolutely spot-on (something I know from personal experience) – promoting the least competent, "improving" efficiency by introducing new forms of bureaucracy, repackaging old ideas as new initiatives with shiny new acronyms. But in the end Willis shows us that it is individualism (not herd mentality) that wins out... in innovation, as well as in fashion.

It's a charming, fast and funny read. This is my second time through and I loved it even more than the first time.

honestly mem says

Can we all agree to stop comparing banning smoking in public lounges to a) racial segregation and b) the Holocaust? Thx.

A tedious, unamusing, and flat rom-com populated with tedious, unamusing, and flat characters. So, this was a good book to pick up to get back into reading Connie Willis. (A lie.)

Heather K (dentist in my spare time) says

2.5 stars

Underwhelming from Connie Willis, one of my long-time favorite authors. This book is less sci-fi (in fact, I didn't even shelve it as such), and more realistic fiction or speculative fiction, or even romantic comedy.

It's really hard to describe this book. It is sort of a rambling narrative about trends (actually pretty interesting), interpersonal relationships, and office environments with some chick-lit thrown in. It is a weird mix, and though I had no problem listening to it (due to an always great narration by Kate Reading), it was oddly dissatisfying.

I like other Connie Willis books much more.

Algernon says

Insecure, ill-dressed chaos theorist desires intelligent, insightful, incandescent trends researcher. Must be SC.

Yes, this is a romance novel, of sorts. With socially awkward scientists and stuff. But it has something that most romance novels only aspire to: it's laugh out loud funny. And smart. And sneaky: under the disguise of the boy meets girl plot, you might find out more than you bargained for about science, and about what makes us human. It is what **The Big Bang Theory** should have been and has no need of a laughter track.

You need to read the book to find out what SC stands in for. And why acronyms are an annoying fad that refuses to go gently into the oblivion of past similar fads. *Management* is probably responsible for its longevity.

- *What's the meeting about?*

- *Manager went to another seminar. Which means a sensitivity exercise, a new acronym, and more paperwork for us.*

Having worked in Quality Management Systems for a few years, I can attest to the accuracy of this observation about pointless meetings and improvement ideas that mean nothing more than another batch of paper forms to fill. But that's only one of the fads discussed in the book.

Sandra Foster is a researcher in a big institute called HiTek and her project is the study of all fads, fashions, trends: how are they started, why are people following them blindly, how can they be controlled, predicted, used (presumably by the big corporations that are sponsoring her studies). Hula-hoops, hair-bobbing, Rubik cubes, miniskirts, crocs, pointy shoes, Kewpie Dolls, chain letters, tattoos and crinolines – what do they have in common? and why is there a nexus of fad initiation in Marydale, Ohio?

Science has its fads and crazes, like anything else: string theory, eugenics, mesmerism.

The answer might have something to do with the research of another scientist in the same HiTek building, Doctor Bennet O'Reilly, whose interests lean towards chaos theory. He is trying to isolate the rogue element in a system of known variables or, to put it more simply, he would like to study the group behaviour of monkeys and extrapolate the findings to humans. He is only missing the monkeys, as the bureaucratic wheels in the institute move at a snail pace, with endless meetings and paperwork and little actual research done. The situation is hardly improved by Flip, the office assistant from Hell, who is allergic to work and misdelivers messages, mails and instructions from management. But at least Flip is incidental in the novel's plot, as one of her 'accidental' deliveries brings Bennet and Sandra together. With both of them being single, smart and workaholics, you don't need a master's degree in science to figure out they will fall for each other:

I had been following the oldest trend of all. Right over the cliff.

They take their time though in getting together, preferring instead to concentrate on work and on the multiple obstacles put in the way of their success by Flip ("An antiangel, wandering through the world spreading gloom and destruction."), Management and a reluctant flock of sheep. You might wonder what trending and chaos theory have in common, and how sheep get included in the equation. And what exactly is a bellwether? I won't tell you here, better pick up the book and find out for yourselves. I wouldn't want to

spoil all the jokes and the screwball connections.

(view spoiler)

Can we discuss instead in general terms about the science part of the novel? How do you feel about research? The serious school of thought would have us believe that : “The process of scientific discovery is the logical extension of observation by experimentation”. Sandra Foster is living proof that : *Nothing could be further from the truth. The process is exactly like any other human endeavor – messy, haphazard, misdirected, and heavily influenced by chance.* . And yet, it works! Pasteur discovers peniciline by accident, X-rays are the by-product of a failed photograhny test, and fads are important not because corporations can use them to sell us more useless products, but because they tell us something important about ourselves:

And therein lay the secret to all fads: the herd instinct. People wanted to look like everybody else. That was why they bought white bucks and pedal pushers and bikinis. But someone had to be the first one to wear platform shoes, to bob their hair, and that took the opposite of herd instinct.

When you’ve spent as much time studying fads as I have, you develop a hearty dislike for them. Especially aversion fads. They seem to bring out the worst in people. And it’s the principle of the thing. Next it might be chocolate cheesecake. Or reading. Come on.

You shouldn’t be looking for the secret to making people follow fads, you should be looking for the secret to making them think for themselves. Because that’s what science is all about. And because the next fad may be the dangerous one, and you’ll find it out with the rest of the flock on your way over the cliff.

In conclusion, for the improvement of your mind and a chance to find your ‘SC’ other, here are a few simple steps that Dr. Sandra recommends:

- Find the bellwether. Think Pink!
- Eliminate acronyms.
- Eliminate meetings.
- Study effect of antismoking fad on ability to think clearly.
- Read Browning. And Dickens. And all the other classics.

I would add:

- read more Connie Willis,
- don’t forget to laugh – it’s good for your health,
- check out The Far Side albums by Gary Larson
- don’t be a sheep.

movie version dreamcast : Katherine Hepburn and Cary Crant.

images included in review : copyright Gary Larson.

Danielle The Book Huntress (Back to the Books) says

A huge thanks to Nenia for recommending this when I asked for a Nerd Romance. This was exactly what I wanted and more. I can't even begin to classify this into a genre. It's so distinctive. First of all, it's hilarious! I felt like Connie Willis nailed what it's like to work in Corporate America. I could have changed the name of HiTek to the places I worked and it would have been exactly the same. The complete waste of time exercises they come up with in the hopes that it will increase productivity (when it actually interferes with it), the jive turkey meetings, and horrible acronyms, and the fact that said environment is so fertile for folks like Flip, Desiderata, and even Dr. Bullock. I loved the wry and deadpan humor. I mainly listened to this while I was doing my Wii Fit exercises, and this is one where you can't be quiet while you read. It made the exercise time fly by!

Sandra is a very accessible heroine. While she does have a snarky way of looking at the world, and the narrator has her sounding a bit superior at times, her inner voice is very realistic. You don't always see people in the most charitable ways internally, even when you make an effort to treat others well. Sandra's field of study is fascinating. She's a sociologist/statistician who investigates fads. I loved the facts about various fads throughout the many years of human history. While I feel that she is really a hater of Barbies and I like Barbies, I can't argue with her on most of what she says. I loved how Sandra processed Flip, who is a complete slave to fads and seems about the most useless person on earth. Flip is that person you know who just seems to make your life a living 'you know what', but then you realize that they do have a purpose in your life, and they help you to grow as a person. With that in mind, her sometimes superior way of looking at Flip and folks like her is put into complete perspective. I also loved how Sandra is a big reader and she processes life events in light of what she's read. This book is definitely for bibliophiles.

Can I tell you I adored Bennet? Oh my, he made my Nerd Love meter go off big time. I wanted to hug him with his horribly fashion-challenged self and his adorable Coke Bottle glasses. Man I wish I could find a Bennet of my own. :)

The sheep storyline had me dying of laughter. Yeah, sheep aren't the brightest animals, and you really understand why they need shepherds. I had no idea about the bellwether and it just draws the story together so well when we learn about it.

I tell you, this is a really clever and just wonderful book. It takes a lot of writing talent to take such dissimilar ideas as sheep, fads, Chaos theory and hair bobbing and actually craft a meaningful story around it. A nice sized read. It helped me enormously with my book reading slump because it was just so clever and vivid and kept me interested. I never thought I'd enjoy a book about something so non-specific as research into fads. I surely did. I definitely recommend this to readers who want something different. And for sure to those looking for Nerd Love and satire about the corporate work environment. It hits high on every point, so five stars!

Stephanie Swint says

The book centers on the science of pop culture and chaos theory. Connie Willis develops an intriguing tale set in the 90's of scientists at a large research firm named Hi-Tek. Sabrina Foster studies fad source analysis. Why do we make the decisions we do? What makes us think something is a good idea, that a person is attractive, what we will wear, what we do in our free time, and what we do for a job? Good questions, no? I'd like to know and so would every company in the world. If you know what the next fad is going to be you can make a pretty profit. If you study fads, however, life becomes all about them. Your favorite restaurant has stopped selling iced tea because nobody is drinking tea anymore. Tea is out and coffee is in. If you go to the

library what books are on reserve? Sabrina checks out her favorites once a year so the library doesn't sell them because even Dickens get sold if no one is reading him. The library must cater to its customer wishes and those generally focus on what's hot right now not 200 years ago. Commitment is in, postmodern pink is in, hairwraps are in, branding is in and so is Barbie. How do you start a trend of positivity, accountability, and a strong work ethic? At Hi-Tek, management is always current on the newest employee engagement trend. They go through 3 to 4 engagement seminars in a season. My favorite had the acronym of GRIM, but another one was SHAM. This made me laugh very hard. 'Bellwether' is a very funny tongue in cheek book.

Sabrina studies fads to see how they are started. Her focus is on what caused women to cut their long curls and bob their hair in the twenties. It's a fad that doesn't have an obvious source like the Pompadour, named after its trendsetter Madame Pompadour. If she can figure this out she can figure out what truly starts trends. Through her studies she, and every other scientist, is plagued with the interdepartmental communications director named Flip. She is not competent. She, however, is very knowledgeable of what tasks do or do not fall under her job description ... mostly the ones that don't fall under her job description so she can refuse to do them. What Flip is good for is causing chaos and destruction wherever she goes. Flip delivers a perishable package to Sabrina instead of the person it belongs to. Due to Flips incompetence, and Sabrina's sense of responsibility, Sabrina delivers the package and meets Chaos Theorist, Bennett O'Reilly, who seems to be completely free of fads. He is a perfect study subject. Flip's errors keep putting Sabrina in Bennett's crosshairs and they become friends. When Flip loses Bennett's funding request Sabrina adapts her research project so he can keep his job. Instead of studying Macaque Monkeys for the trigger or iteration in chaotic systems they will use sheep that Sabrina can borrow from a man she's dating. This interdepartmental study is perfect for studying chaos and what starts trend behavior in higher animals. Management is keen on it and finds all necessary resources to fund it because statistically it has a likelihood to win the elusive and very lucrative Niebnitz Grant. The sheep wreak all kinds of havoc, just like Flip.

This is wonderful book. It's light, it's humorous, and smart. It's sprinkled with literary references. There's even a believable but unobtrusive romance. Connie Willis's writing and characters are fabulous and worth your time. It's a short book, and won't take you much time. By 'Bellwether's' logic it should have been a fad. If you haven't read it, it's okay, you can still join the party. Unlike many fads this one is worth your time. Enjoy!

Jill says

This is a formulaic love story set in what is supposed to be a research institution. The author has clearly done a lot of reading and found a lot of trivia about fads, and drops short infobites about fads in history into the text throughout. Unfortunately the plot moves slowly, the writing is competent in a breezey way and the researchers don't appear to do any real research. As a researcher myself I was disappointed in the shallow portrayal of science. Apart from the rather unlikely ways in which the main characters conduct their research (going to the public library to find general books on sheep? Sorting newspaper clippings but never having any idea of a theoretical approach?) there are just silly factual mistakes, like when the protagonist is said to have a double major in her PhD.

William Gibson's Pattern Recognition is about the same general ideas but is much better written with a more engaging and less cliched plot.

Melki says

bell·weth·er - [bél wèt?h?r]

1. indicator of future developments or trends

2. leader

3. a sheep that leads the rest of the flock, usually wearing a bell around its neck

"Bennett told me you're working on fads analysis. Why did you decide to work with fads?"

"Everybody else was doing it."

Sandra Foster works for the HiTek corporation studying fads. How do fads start? Why do some things catch fire while others fizzle? And how can HiTek get in on the action? Purely by accident, she meets Bennett O'Reilly, a clumsily dressed, completely unfashionable biologist. He's a fascinating specimen to Sandra, as he seems completely immune to the influence of trends. Or, is there *another* reason she finds him so interesting?

The two of them end up working on a project together; a project involving the *"orneriest, stubbornest, dumbest creatures on the planet"* - sheep. After learning that herding sheep is harder than herding cats, the scientists realize they need a leader, a bellwether that will show them the way.

This was a surprisingly fun read that I enjoyed W-A-Y more than I expected.

Willis offers the funniest send-up of the corporate work environment since Initech - *"Yeah. It's just we're putting new coversheets on all the TPS reports before they go out now."*

Working for HiTek means filling out 68-page funding request forms and attending frequent, time-wasting meetings where employees learn about Efficiency Enhancers and perform sensitivity exercises that involve giving your partner a hug that says *"I appreciate your personness."*

Willis's characters never really come to life, but the story was such a swell ride, I didn't really mind that fact. This was an entertaining look at human nature and the mystery of why we humans tend to follow the flock.

Tadiana ☆Night Owl? says

Bellwether is one of Connie Willis' non-SF satirical (even farcical at times) comedies. It took me a couple of reads, about 10 years apart, to really appreciate it.

The bellwether sheep, who leads the flock

After Bellwether Read #1, sometime around 2005: 3 stars. I'm a big Connie Willis, but she can be a little uneven. She seems to have two primary modes: farce/comedy of errors (usually with a little romance mixed in), and incredibly detailed and well-researched SF. Sometimes the two mix together, to delightful results (my favorite is *To Say Nothing of the Dog*).

Bellwether is in the farcical vein. It's not really science fiction since there's not much really speculative about it. Sandra Foster is a scientist who is researching the phenomenon of fads, in particular, how they start and spread. The plot felt like kind of a mad scramble, mixing the stress of research with the competition for a grant, the complications of Sandra's attraction for another researcher, and her frustrating daily run-ins with Flip, the Administrative Assistant from Hell.

It was an interesting read with some fun moments, but ultimately this one didn't really stick with me. But some of my GR friends love this book, so YMMV.

Interim thoughts: Even though *Bellwether* didn't wow me the first time I read it, I've downloaded it and am going to give it a reread. The Wikipedia article on this novel makes a fascinating but pretty spoilerish comment about a particular name that opened my eyes to some interesting symbolism, and makes me want to revisit this book. (view spoiler)

After Bellwether Read #2, October 2015: 4 stars. I'm finished with my totally unplanned reread, and this one definitely deserves another star. I think the first time I read it I just expected more science fictiony stuff because, well, Connie Willis, and this short novel isn't that. But it is very funny; Willis' send-up of the worst parts of corporate culture is to die for, and her exploration of the way people unthinkingly jump on the bandwagon and adopt (often really idiotic) fads is worth reading. Interestingly, the "Pippa Passes" theme is much stronger and more explicit than I remembered from my first read. I kept an eye out for it this time, and it pops up repeatedly, as does a fascinating minor theme related to the "Toads and Diamonds" fairy tale that I had totally forgotten.

This book also makes a point about how society also cycles through phases of being "anti" various things--drinking (Prohibition), certain religions that are persecuted, obesity, smoking--and how those attitudes are also fads, in a very real sense.

Minus a star for being a bit slow in places and because the big reveal at the end didn't seem to me to be as earth-shattering as the book and the main characters were making it out to be. But still, this was very funny but thought-provoking reading, and I recommend it.

Megan Baxter says

As you may know, I have an up-and-down relationship with Connie Willis books. I think some of them are astoundingly good. I think some of them are very weak. So I always start a new one wondering which it's going to be. And then there's *Bellwether*, which is barely even science fiction, and it's fun, but a bit forgettable. This one didn't disappoint me, but it wasn't anything more than fine.

Note: The rest of this review has been withdrawn due to the changes in Goodreads policy and enforcement. You can read why I came to this decision [here](#).

In the meantime, you can read the entire review at [Smorgasbook](#)

Carol. says

I owe bellwether a review.

Bellwether is a book that I inevitably turn to when I want something that is light, clever, literate and sweet.

Sandra Foster has been studying fads, specifically trying to identify what started the bobbed hair craze at some time in the 1920s.

The company administrative assistant, Flip, is pretty much the worst ever, and one day when she mis-delivers a 'perishable' (not 'fragile,' as Pip says) to Sandra, Sandra finds herself taking the package down to the Biology Department, where she meets Bennett O'Rielly, a chaos researcher who seems to be entirely immune to fashion fads.

What happens is a more than a bit of gradually escalating chaos as they each try to work on their respective projects, turn in the annual funding request to the Hi-Tek Corporation, dodge team-building meetings, and avoid Flip's oblivious tendencies towards destruction.

Each chapter begins with a description of a fad, much like certain books begin chapters with aphorisms. I actually learned a little bit about a number of fun things, including hula hoops (1958-59), hair dioramas (1750-60) mah-jongg (1922-24). There are numerous references to scientific discoveries, fascinating if you know your scientific history. There's a mention of Fleming leaving a Petri dish cracked as he headed out to golf, and a researcher hiring a Polish woman named Marie Curie to help him with radiation research. It's one of the things that elevates this beyond your average rom-com. I'll also note there's a definite feel of verisimilitude about this; on this reading I noted Sandra referencing SPSS software, classic software that I've used myself in statistics class.

As in *To Say Nothing of the Dog*, there are a number of running gags, including corporate insensibility ("**Tell them any number of scientific breakthroughs have been made by scientists working together. Crick and Watson, Penzias and Wilson, Gilbert and Sullivan--**"), bigotry against smokers, personal ads, where rivers begin, and the unrelenting cheer of Browning's Pippa. In a nod to having a life outside of work, she weaves in her adventures at the local (trendy) cafe and her regular visits to the library.

While I understand this isn't highbrow literature, it is one of those reads that make one feel delightfully entertained, resulting in a lingering feeling of *happy* once it's over. It's my go to read when I need something light and clever to cleanse my palate in between those nail-biters. How much do I love it? I own a hardcover... and a paperback for lending. In view of my recent review of *The Trespasser*, I absolutely give this five stars.

Althea Ann says

A very different take on marketing and trends than the one presented in William Gibson's "Pattern Recognition!" Still, this book has some similarities: they're both non-sci-fi novels by authors known for their science fiction, and they both deal, thematically, with the human tendency toward 'fads.' However, where Gibson's character Cayce has an almost psychic attunement to these trends, Willis' narrator is a much less glamorous, stressed-out researcher who's trying to understand how and why trends happen by attempting to track down the source of past fads. Plagued by the uniquely-fashionable but totally incompetent assistant, Flip (who is nearly the exact same character as 'Bubbles' in Absolutely Fabulous [at least, I kept seeing her]), her work takes her through the maze of academic research institutions, bureaucratic red tape and illogical management, a mysteriously attractive scientist who seems to be immune to trends – to say nothing of the flock of sheep! ;-)

I didn't think this book was quite as good as either of the other Willis books I've read, but it was still definitely a fun and witty read.

j says

My main problem with Connie Willis books is that they usually have great characters and an interesting plot, but are thick with too much narrative padding, typically in the form of "funny bits" about bureaucratic incompetence and miscommunication due to mishaps with modern technology, and exhaustively-researched recitation of facts tangentially related to the story (famous last words and the Titanic disaster in *Passage*; facts of life during the Blitz in *Blackout*/*All Clear*; etc.). I go back and forth on whether these quirks ruin her novels or just make them more frustrating than they should be.

Bellwether is, on the other hand, a *thin* novel, but bizarrely, instead of a plot it includes *only* the narrative padding that makes up the worst third of any of her other books.

And some how, it is kind of great!

I mean, no, there isn't a plot. And the characters are her typical bumbling, absent-minded professors, researching something while making wry observations about how annoying everyone around them is. It's right in the author's wheelhouse, and she does it well here. The topic of the day this time is fads -- the origin of groupthink, essentially -- as well as chaos theory, which was kind of a big deal at the time thanks to the release of Jurassic Park a few years earlier (come on, admit it: you only know what chaos theory is because Jeff Goldblum explained it to you). Connie Willis Protagonist Sandra Foster (think Kate Hepburn) is working for HiTek Corporation, a ludicrous parody of the worst in '90s corporate trends, trying to figure out what caused the hair-bobbing craze of the '20s... for some reason. She falls in with another scientist, an affable Spencer Tracy type, who is studying chaotic systems.

Toss in some colorful supporting characters (Sarcastic slacker office assistant! Management-type only referred to as Management, like that is his name!), a malfunctioning cell phone, a few comic set-pieces, and a whole herd of sheep, and you've got a more than passable attempt at a literary version of a classic screwball comedy. It's not quite as zany as, say, *Bringing Up Baby*, but it reminded me a lot of *Desk Set*, a semi-obscure Tracy & Hepburn movie that is also about a romance blossoming amid a workplace in upheaval thanks to the follies of corporate "innovation." It's not the world's most memorable flick, but it's a lot of fun, and that sums up this book nicely.

Lauren says

The first time I read this, I gave it four stars.

Time, however, has warped my feelings about this book from "minor but fun" to "the best option if you really want to read Connie Willis" to "this represents a vicious libel on bread pudding and I'm not sure if I can forgive it." So let's take a tour of those evolving impressions.

Minor but fun:

Bellwether is something of a romp. It's slight (literally--this is closer to a novella than a true novel), and that slightness works to its advantage, because it's basically a breezy and screwball nineties Shakespearean comedy, complete with a ruler in disguise, a happy match, and a little light satire. Sandra Foster is researching trends on behalf of a Big Science corporation, and despite diligently taking notes on every fad from Hula Hoops to guillotines, she's not getting any closer to determining where they come from, how they start, or how they spread. Adding to her frustration is the office assistant, Flip, whose approach to work is dangerously haphazard and incompetent and accompanied by many enormous eye-rolls, and management that is overly enamored with buzzwords and acronyms. The best part of her job is her growing friendship/flirtation with the strangely trend-resistant Bennett O'Reilly, a chaos theory researcher who seems to float through life unaffected by herd instincts of any kind. Sandra teams up with Bennett to combine chaos theory and trends and maybe find some solutions to the weirdness of life.

Sandra's musings on trends make for fun micro-histories, Flip's disastrous "assistance" makes for good comedy, and Willis does a nice job building a brightly-colored world and giving you a Sandra's -eye view of it as a place full of ebbing and flowing cultural obsessions with colors, books, angels, foods, and even breeds of cattle. It works as a chipper fairy tale in which the good get rewarded and the incompetent get mocked and a few people are basically magical. (view spoiler) It all combines to make the book some sort of literary Pop Rock: a little insubstantial, but gratifyingly sweet and fizzy.

The best option if you really want to read Connie Willis:

So then I read more Connie Willis, and wow, does she like her misunderstandings and miscommunication. This killed *Doomsday Book* for me: I cannot get emotionally invested in a serious story of mass tragedy and small instances of individual grace and charity when revelations are being artificially dragged out by characters passing out before they can finish delivering their important pieces of information. *Bellwether* has a lot of that kind of thing, but it's a *comedy*, and so the *Benny Hill* scenes of people running around and missing each other and having petty conversations about terminology are much more appropriate. Also, again, it's short. It'll give you a taste of what she does without dragging you through something like *Blackout/All Clear*. If her style of plotting annoys you here, it will definitely annoy you elsewhere.

A vicious libel on bread pudding:

And then I reread *Bellwether* and looked up from the page in horror to announce to the world, "This book is kind of a petty asshole." Now, I'm always happy to read *about* petty assholes, who as characters can be entertaining and even lovable, but it's not a status you want a book to achieve. *Bellwether* really rolls up its sleeves and commits to that approach, though, giving you a novel in which feeling differently from its protagonists on literally any subject apparently makes you deserving of ridicule and contempt.

The tip-off for this is that Sandra initially gives three reasons why Flip is The Worst, and two of them are that she has a nose-ring and a tattoo of a snowy owl, neither of which should hypothetically affect Sandra's life in any way whatsoever, and I say that as a person who has never gotten a tattoo and who accidentally let

my pierced ears close up again because I kept forgetting to wear earrings. Now, Flip is in fact a legendarily terrible assistant, but the more I think about Sandra, the more I'm convinced they deserve each other, because people can't even order bread pudding around Sandra without her darkly speculating about how they've been brainwashed. She prefers chocolate cheesecake but laments that good things never catch on. Because chocolate cheesecake is *so hard to find* and *only carried by obscure restaurants*, I guess? (I'll go on the record with this: I would take bread pudding over chocolate cheesecake any day.)

A little bit of self-righteous conviction that she's exempt from her own field of study could be an interesting characterization detail for Sandra, but the novel rewards her for it at every turn, even when it makes no sense. For example, Sandra keeps going to the library to look into what's trending (angels, generally) and to check out a random collection of classics that the library will supposedly purge if they haven't been checked out in a year. Look, I know whereof I speak here, and there is 1) no way something like *The Wizard of Oz* or *The Color Purple* wouldn't be checked out at least once a year, and 2) that is not how libraries work. Yes, circulation statistics are important (though it's likely they'd have a much longer timeframe than a year), but libraries still have discretion over what gets weeded from their collections, and it would be self-evidently ridiculous to get rid of a bunch of Charles Dickens. I don't actually care if professional details get fudged for fictional purposes, but I *do* care if they get fudged in a ridiculous, cheap attempt to make one character look smarter and more literary than everyone else.

A lot of this humor is actually pretty mean-spirited, based as it is around "our heroes are right and everyone else is wrong and stupid." When you have a man ordering bread pudding as a reveal of his true, trend-following nature that plays like him peeling off a mask to reveal that he's been Satan all along, when every single twenty-something Sandra encounters is viciously lazy, when Bennett's *name* is trotted out as proof that he's above it all as if he had something to do with it (and "Matt" and "Mike" are included as trendy names alongside "Troy," which is truly bizarre)--there's just way too much self-congratulation going on. Good for you, Assumed Reader, the book practically purrs: you like the right fashions and books and foods. You're not like these sheeple. You're unique. (You are Jack's beautiful and unique snowflake?)

By the time Sandra is preachily commenting on *Toads and Diamonds*, the Superior Fairy Book That She Loved as a Child Which is Not Like the Current Trend of Fairy Books, and saying "inner values versus shallow appearances. My kind of moral," I wanted to bash my head against something.

The net effect is to make the book seem like a lengthy, passive-aggressive note left on the breakroom refrigerator: "SOME OF US in this office have been DISRESPECTING the labels on PARTICULAR PEOPLE'S FOOD. This is why we can't have nice things. If you're going to steal something, why not Mary's Mountain Dew? Why target my much more reasonable Fresca?"

Would I really downgrade this book to two stars because of Connie Willis's strange vendetta against bread pudding? Absolutely I would. But out of fairness to my former self, I'll only lower it to three. If you're less bothered by the way comedy can sometimes flatten its antagonists into one-note jokes, or if the above things don't strike you as hypocritical and/or grating, then you may very well find this to be quick, energetic, and amusing. And then I highly recommend sending Connie Willis a picture of you playing Pokemon Go or otherwise engaging in the fad of your choice.

Lyn says

Not science fiction but rather fiction about science, akin to the distinction between a girlfriend and a friend that's a girl. And like the difference between a platonic and an amorous relationship, this book is fun without too many complications.

It's about trend analysis, meaning a sociological study of fads, and chaos theory and how they interrelate. It's also well written, chatty and a light, enjoyable read. I'll read more of her work.

Bradley says

Baaaaaaa!

I'm caught in a horrible quandary. On the one hand, this is a purely wonderful and madcap whirlwind of farcical trendsetting, and I mean that most literally, in that it's ABOUT the madcap whirlwind of farcical trendsetting, and yet for all its humor, its chaos, its insight into human and animal behavior, and even how fads rule the sciences, I have to admit that this isn't *actually* science fiction.

It is a fantastic novella, though. :) It's funny on so many different levels, and there's even a romance that hits us like a fad from out of nowhere and changes everything, just like the never-ending quest to discover the source of the Bob hairstyle or the source of the Nile when people don't understand that gravity goes down.

Baaaaaaa.

I'm still chuckling after reading this. There's something truly awesome about reading really great writing, no matter what the subject matter. I've always thought that Connie Willis is a brilliant writer, and I've come to trust that it doesn't matter in the slightest what the topic is. Her craft is amazing and she can turn anything at all into something that feels wild and chaotic while always holding us firmly in a narrator's hands. I love how I can feel both overwhelmed and zinged and yet always feel like the narrator is always in control of her own destiny, even so.

But is it SF? In the sense that SF is the fiction of idea exploration, absolutely, and what she does with it is clever, creative, and so, so fun. Baaaaaaa!

Who cares. I can't pigeonhole her. Shouldn't ever try. She's just too good and is too competent in her voice, knowledge, humor, and talent. :)

Hallie says

I really have almost nothing to say about *Bellwether* itself, though the "all time favourites" shelf probably says enough, but this reread was an unusual one and I don't have any other social media site on which to share it. Quite a few people here will already know that Dorian, a Dublin friend, was in a serious accident back in February, and is still in hospital, technically in a coma, although she has woken up. The prognosis is not great, but of course brain injuries are always a big unknown. Back in April Dorian's husband said that it would be good if some friends could go visit her on a regular basis, to read or talk to her, along with the daily visits he and her family were doing. The first Friday I went, I brought *To Say Nothing of the Dog*, because it was a book I'd loaned Dorian shortly after we met up for the first time. I didn't know her reading tastes very well at that point, and didn't understand the slightly dazed look when I'd mentioned Wodehouse and Dorothy L. Sayers, but "I want!" made it clear. Of course she loved it, and borrowed it again, eventually tracking down her own copy. It didn't seem the right read in the hospital for some reason (although that might just have been me, as the first time seeing her was really tough) so I switched out for *Bellwether*.

As I said, I don't have much to say about the book itself, except that it seems unlikely there are many more challenging tests of a book than to read it to someone who's smart as hell, a voracious reader, and completely unresponsive. It was hard not to expect her to share a grin at "'Why did you decide to work with fads?' 'Everybody else was doing it'" or roll her eyes at all the eye-rolling done by Flip. Perhaps that's attributing a bit too much power to the reading of a wonderful book, but if I've learned anything from Connie Willis, it's that there's always hope. A few weeks ago her husband was there when I went in and we took her outside in the sun. The headrest on the wheelchair had slipped (which it always seems to do) and she was pushing at it. Patrick asked her if it was bothering her, and I said that I really hoped the first "What the *fuck* do you think?" was addressed to him, and not to some hapless nurse. (And yes, that would be the exact wording.) Sandra predicts great things at the end of *Bellwether*, and I very much hope someday to get a cranky commentary from Dorian on my reading - whether choices or performance doesn't matter at all.

Tony says

Prior to picking this up, I'd read and greatly enjoyed two of Willis' other books: *To Say Nothing of the Dog* and *The Doomsday Book*. However, despite the science fiction packaging, this one is a completely different kettle of fish -- and not in a good way. It's basically a run-of-the-mill romantic comedy blended with an unsuccessful social satire. The heroine is a sociologist working for some kind of research firm (how this firm actually makes money is entirely unclear) who is attempting to isolate what triggers social fads in general, and hair bobbing in particular. She's kind of a Sally Sad Sack, smart and sensible but never sticking up for herself even when she knows she's been wronged. The question is whether she will succumb to the attention of a trend-following rancher, or pursue a decidedly untrendy physicist working on chaos theory. Just as the answer to that is entirely obvious the first time we meet the characters involved, so too is the satire entirely obvious and dead on the page.

About 1/3 of the satire is directed at the firm the heroine works for, but making fun of giant companies is like shooting fish in a barrel, and there's nothing remotely fresh or funny about Willis' efforts here. However, if you think jokes revolving around how the "Simplified Funding Application Form" is actually longer than the original form, then maybe you'll get some giggles out of this. Personally, I found it all pretty tedious. Similarly, there is a lot of oversatirization of trends which mainly comes off as cranky and dated, rather than light fun. Indeed, it reads all too much like an author working out their frustration with modern society. Overall, quite disappointing, considering how much I enjoyed the other books of hers I'd read.
