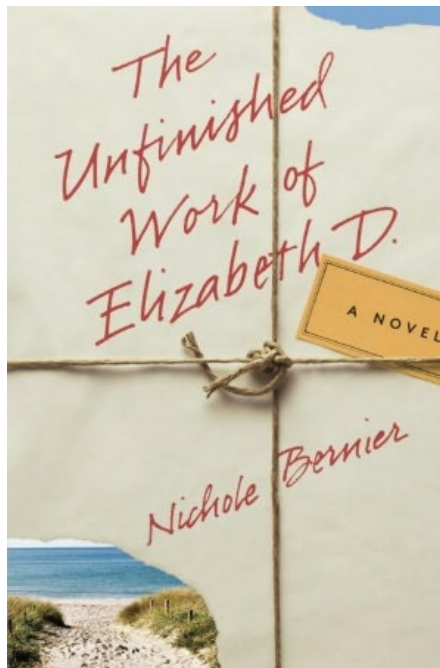




The Unfinished Work of Elizabeth D.

Nichole Bernier

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The Unfinished Work of Elizabeth D. Nichole Bernier

Before there were blogs, there were journals. And in them we'd write as we really were, not as we wanted to appear. But there comes a day when journals outlive us. And with them, our secrets.

Summer vacation on Great Rock Island was supposed to be a restorative time for Kate, who'd lost her close friend Elizabeth in a sudden accident. But when she inherits a trunk of Elizabeth's journals, they reveal a woman far different than the cheerful wife and mother Kate thought she knew.

The complicated portrait of Elizabeth—her troubled upbringing, and her route to marriage and motherhood—makes Kate question not just their friendship, but her own deepest beliefs about loyalty and honesty at a period of uncertainty in her own marriage.

The more Kate reads, the more she learns the complicated truth of who Elizabeth really was, and rethinks her own choices as a wife, mother, and professional, and the legacy she herself would want to leave behind. When an unfamiliar man's name appears in the pages, Kate realizes the extent of what she didn't know about her friend, including where she was really going on the day she died.

Set in the anxious summer after the September 11th attacks, this story of two women—their friendship, their marriages, private ambitions and fears—considers the aspects of ourselves we show and those we conceal, and the repercussions of our choices.

"I loved this bittersweet novel, which manages to be both a compelling mystery and a wise meditation on friendship, marriage and motherhood in an age of great anxiety. Bernier will have you thinking about her characters long after you've turned the final page."—J. Courtney Sullivan, *New York Times* bestselling author of *Maine*

The Unfinished Work of Elizabeth D. Details

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From Reader Review The Unfinished Work of Elizabeth D. for online ebook

Kathy says

One of the many things I loved about this book: it reminds us how much we don't know about about the people in our lives, even those at the center -- close friends, spouses, children, parents. Kate and Elizabeth have been friends through their children for years when Elizabeth dies in a plane accident. This presents the first of many mysteries in the book -- why was Elizabeth on that flight? No one -- including her husband -- seems to know.

In another twist (and this causes strain between Kate and Elizabeth's widower), the journals Elizabeth kept religiously are bequeathed to Kate. As she reads, over the course of a summer filled with her own concerns, Kate finds the friend she thought she knew replaced by an enigmatic and mysterious woman. An insightful, warm and intelligent look at friendship, marriage and the secrets each of us keep. This book and its characters have stayed with me.

Lisa says

The Unfinished Work of Elizabeth D. was Nichole Bernier's debut novel. As is often the case with debuts, I want to go back and read the author's other books. I hope the thing that's often true isn't for Bernier--that the debut was so much better than the second book.

I guess that's beside the point...

Here are some of my thoughts:

1. I take my friends at what I believe to be their face value. It never occurs to me they might have journal-like secrets. Perhaps that's because my life is an open book.
 2. I wonder how I would feel if I read any of their journals and found out they had thoughts and desires and feelings that were either unexpressed to me or totally opposite of what I thought I knew about them.
 3. The more I think about it (and I'm still thinking about the book...) the more I wonder about why Elizabeth made most of the choices she did. Her withholding didn't turn out well, but she kept doing it.
 4. I liked both of the husbands. They had much different ways of dealing with things, and the way they showed their families love wasn't the same. But they both did love their families.
 5. I thought the prose was beautiful at times--some of the sentences/passages zinged straight to my heart. I love when that happens.
-

Randy says

Nichole Bernier reminds one (in finely-wrought, clear, solid, turn-the-page prose) that in motherhood, in friendship, in marriage, there are no easy answers. None of us have one side--we are instead faceted prisms,

showing a side here, a side there--and when we are lucky, we find people who we can show almost every version of ourselves. Bernier catches the rarity of those moments--and explores a grief rarely looked at; the grief of losing a friend. Wonderful book that I highly recommend.

Angela Risner says

Sometimes I just want a light beach read, something I can escape into without having to think too much about it. Other times, I want something that I think about when I'm not reading it. This is one of those books.

The story is about best friends Kate and Elizabeth. Elizabeth died in a plane crash last year and left her journals, which date back to childhood, to Kate. She said that Kate would know what to do with them after she read them. Unsurprisingly, Elizabeth's husband is not thrilled with this decision.

Kate and her family spend the summer at the beach, where she takes the journals to read. What she discovers in the journals is that her friend was a very different person who was shaped by a troubled childhood. The evolution of Elizabeth's personality, including her impressions of Kate, of her marriage, and of parenthood, are a startling contrast to the person Kate knew.

This book showcases so many truths about marriage, about friendships, and from what I can tell, about parenthood. How well can you really know another person? We all have things that we hide from other people, sometimes even from ourselves.

How often do we expect people to pick up on what we're NOT saying and then become disappointed in them when it doesn't happen? Is that a defect on our part or on theirs? Who suffers when we don't tell people our expectations and then judge them for not meeting them?

I'm not a feminist, but I do see that raising children still seems to fall to the female of the species. I have watched while my friends have become pregnant, with the husband stating that it will be 50/50 the whole way. And then reality sets in and the wife has the kids 70% of the time, while the husbands are playing golf on the weekends. The wives are never asked if they can be with the kids, it's just assumed that they will be. The husbands often have to be asked if they can stay home with the kids. And yes, this affects the marriage. It's one of the reasons I chose not to have children.

I blogged for a long time, so a lot of my thoughts and feelings were out there for the world to see. I rarely hid anything. However, I don't blog anymore and I do keep some parts of my life to myself. I don't share every bit of minutiae with my husband, because I know he wouldn't be interested or it would drive me crazy having to over-explain something. That is not a slam on him - it's simply that I'm female and he's male and we think in different ways. This is why women will always need female friends. And studies back that up.

I really loved this book and all of the ways it made me think. Highly recommend. Looking forward to more from this author.

Kats says

This debut novel had been hailed as "THE book club book of the year", so I was quick off the mark to order it in the week of its publication.

Well, I am glad I read it before suggesting it to my book club because in my opinion there isn't much in the book at all that seems worth discussing to me, or at least you don't need to read a book to stimulate a discussion on the career vs children dilemma for mothers, the work a marital relationship requires and that people are not always 100% honest with you, even if you consider them good enough friends. Hardly newsworthy or thought-provoking stuff, and when 200 pages into the book there was still no sight of a plot in the present tense, and I was still not bothered about any of the characters in it, I just knew it wasn't for me. The last 50 pages finally picked up a bit of pace, but the boat had sailed for me by then, and the resolution of what had gone on in the past and its impact in the present didn't move me much by then.

Jo Ann says

Although I read this book before attending Booktopia in Manchester, Vermont this past weekend, I hadn't gotten around to this Goodreads rating. I loved the author, Nichole Bernier, who was present at the weekend, and I appreciate learning about her writing and her journey.

While I enjoyed the journals, and the stories left by Elizabeth to Kate, 2 things stood out for me as life lessons, and very worthy of discussion: One, the intensity involved in grieving the loss of a friend, and two, the fact that sometimes we don't really know what another is going through in life, and we should never judge.

The first is something I've not thought a lot about...there are many, many, books and articles written about grief upon losing one's parents, spouses, children...but not a lot written about the loss of a friend, and how that loss can impact the lives of those left, as it intensely impacted Kate's life. This topic is very real, as my husband and I are losing a wonderful friend of 50 years, and the journey is being very painful. It also is a fine example of what one takes from a book, dependent upon where one is in life. The second lesson is self-evident, and one I feel we all as humans learn and re-learn...we just do not know what someone else is experiencing, and we need to be more kind, more understanding, more forgiving...

Cherylann says

I think I've hit the book jackpot - two books in a row that were five stars. Based on Books on the Nightstand's recommendation, I downloaded The Unfinished Work of Elizabeth D to my nook for vacation reading. I absolutely couldn't put this book down. I found myself reading it on my iPhone while at a Vince Gill concert at the Ryman Auditorium (during intermission not the concert), on line for roller coasters at Dollywood, at the breakfast, lunch, and dinner tables, in the car, and pretty much any time someone was pulling at me for my attention. As the book begins readers meet Kate, a 30 something mother of two small children. She and her husband are on their way to vacation on an island off the coast of New England and make a quick stop off in their old neighborhood to pick up a truck of journals, belonging to Kate's friend and neighbor Elizabeth. In her will Elizabeth left the journals to Kate, confusing Kate by the bequest. Readers are first introduced to Elizabeth through Kate's eyes, and then they quickly meet Elizabeth. The complexity of character development and the writer's craft make this novel a true gem. Bernier's writing is simplistically beautiful. I found myself stopping to reread sentences and read sentences aloud to whomever happened to be near me at that point in time. I've read a number of books that contained journal entries or were composed simply of journal entries. Bernier adds another layer to this format by intermingling Kate's voice with Elizabeth's. As the novel goes on Kate as well as the reader learns that there's always more to people than meet the eye. Hauntingly beautiful, I will be recommending this book to my friends and fellow readers this summer.

Melissa Crytzer Fry says

I admit it: I am a journal junkie. Any time notes or diaries appear in novels, I'm hooked. They offer a depth of characterization – a window into the private parts of the soul – that just makes for good reading. So, yes, I enjoyed the epistolary aspects of this novel (journals are essentially letters to self, right?).

Best friend Kate is entrusted with Elizabeth's journals as part of the conditions of Elizabeth's will. The story made me wonder: what would I do if my best friend died, entrusting her innermost thoughts to me – would I read them? Store them? Would I share them with my friend's grieving family? What if they held incriminating evidence that revealed a very different reality than a life publicly lived? Throughout the novel, pastry chef and mom Kate struggles with these very questions and learns a great deal about herself in the process.

A thought-provoking tale, the novel accurately portrays the dangerous rut that marriages can face when complacency becomes commonplace – as well as the value of personal space, and the secrets we keep from those we love. The novel begs the question: can we ever really know someone?

The key message, though, I think lies in one of Bernier's final passages: "You could not take a single day or night for granted. Within every hour, every plane ride, or every routine doctor's appointment was the spark of possibility, the thing that would become your undoing. And how you left things just before the final moment – that was how they would remain."

This is a thoughtful book about friendship, marriage, parenting and love – as well as the hidden parts within each of us.

Bernier's writing is lovely, and I look forward to her future work.

Robin Black says

I had a chance to read an advance copy of this wonderful book and I highly recommend it! It's the story of two women, of the friendship they shared and of the lives they never could share. It's the story of the ways in which we do know and cannot know the people to whom we are closest. Nichole Bernier is an insightful, sensitive, truthful writer - and she also knows how to keep you on the edge of your seat. This book is good company, it is wise, it is at moments funny - in the way the odd daily happenings of life can be funny - and for those of you who haven't gotten to read it yet, it is something to look forward to.

Melanie Coombes says

This is a amazing novel of two women, Kate and Elizabeth. We are introduced to the character of Elizabeth only after her death in a tragic accident. Kate, who was a good friend of Elizabeth, inherits an old truck of journals that have all been written by Elizabeth before her death. These journals contain her deepest secrets, hopes, wishes and regrets.

Tragically, Elizabeth has left behind a husband and three small children. Kate, who tries to be both confident and competent in her role of mother and wife, also feels the strain of keeping her family safe when she does

not know where that is any longer.

What makes this book such a compelling read is that the characters all seem to be people we can relate to in our own lives. Plus, we are also getting a chance to read Elizabeth's journals of her private thoughts right along with Kate.

This is essentially a book of the difference between the way people are viewed, and the way they really would have wanted to be seen, and remembered after their death.

Kate discovers, she may not have really known her friends at all.

The book is so well written and had me running to pick it up and read every chance I got. I received this book as part of the Goodreads FirstReads program.

Therese Walsh says

This was a beautifully written debut novel by Nichole Bernier. It's not a fast read; it's a thinking-woman's read. It asks you to reflect on your own life and choices, how others might view you, the compromises you've made and continue to make through your days. There are dozens of things I might point to, but here are the two things I loved best about this novel. The details are extremely well attended to; you will feel you are with Kate as she struggles through her crisis of self. And the entire story is authentically depicted; you won't at any moment require a suspension of disbelief. For that alone, it deserves accolades as one of the most unique novels I've read in a long time. *Highly recommended.*

Lormac says

What did I think? I thought, "Eh."

Two fairly privileged suburban mothers/wives become friends. One dies and leaves her personal journals to the other. This results in lots and lots of conflicts. The decedent's husband is annoyed about this (conflict #1). The husband of the reader is annoyed that the reader is ignoring him as she reads the journals during their ANNUAL SEVEN WEEK BLOCK ISLAND VACATION (conflict #2)(sorry for the caps, but this is the clue that this family is pretty privileged). The reader is a world class pastry chef but she doesn't want to leave her kids to get a job and this makes her feel unfulfilled(conflict #3). The setting is post-9/11 and the chef/reader spends a lot of time fretting about how she could possibly keep her children safe from terrorists - squirreling away water in her tire well, researching gas masks, panicking about diseases one can catch from rabbits (seriously) to the point where her husband is getting annoyed with her so she just does this fretting in private and then resents that she cannot share her feelings about this with him (conflict #4). The reader's husband travels and she worries about him when he is not there (conflict #5). He also smokes in secret and denies it to her (conflict #6). Her gay friend who owns a bakery on Block Island is losing his house because his ex-partner left him and stole all his money (conflict #7). The journal discloses that the deceased woman felt she had to give up her career as a graphic designer to raise her kids (conflict #8)(Oh, by the way, I REALLY loved the passage about how when they interviewed nannies for a TWO AFTERNOON A WEEK position, none of the applicants seemed to be perfect enough. Sigh. After that the complaints about how she was so unfulfilled rang a little hollow.) (Oh, and her husband actually CAME TO all of the interviews she

scheduled to find this nanny - - remind me what she was complaining about again?)

Not all of these conflicts get resolved, and I really didn't even care.

Angela says

I loved this book. The best description of it was written by another author, whom I will quote now:

"This is one of those rare novels that's so real you forget it's written; I literally carried it around with me, and I missed the characters when I was done." - Jenna Blum.

To me, this book is about how, as children, we see our mothers as nothing but mothers. When in reality, mothers are regular people with histories, secrets, and personalities. True adulthood begins when you can recognize this in your own mother. It continues when you become a mother yourself and struggle not to forget all of the other parts of you that make you who you are.

This book has earned a spot on my "favorites" shelf.

Favorite quote:

"Back in her cable show days she'd believed most things could be made to happen or not happen by sheer force of will. But she saw that now as vanity. Most things in life, the best and the worst of things, were not controllable. Those who understood that simply marched ahead; that was the thinking of a survivor, someone who resurfaced. The irony was not lost on her that she was beginning to learn this from someone who had not." Page 298.

Nancy says

Every so often a book is written that strikes a cord and resonates deeply and on many levels. This is definitely one of them.

The two reviews I struggle with the most are of the books that move me and the books I really hated. The latter is difficult because I struggle to write something that negates an author's work. The former is difficult because I lack the words to articulate the emotions evoked. It is the culmination of adjectives, writing style, story, and subject matter that, disaggregated, is less than whole.

The protagonist can be Elizabeth or Kate. The truth is that the reader can identify so closely with both women that if she reflects enough on the ideas, the protagonist could be herself. As Kate reads the journals of her recently passed friend, she identifies with much of Elizabeth's emotions, insecurities, and unpredictability of the world around her. At the same time, the journals reflect a different woman than Kate knew. Elizabeth showed a persona she wanted to be known but the real Elizabeth was much more complicated, insecure, wounded, and uncertain. Kate finds that the better she knows Elizabeth through her journals, the more she is compelled to face her own insecurities and secrets.

One of the things I loved about the book is the way Nichole develops the story. Rather than relying on a shocking and unbelievable story line, she methodically uses the environment to reflect just a piece of emotion without overkill. The contents of the journals are surprising to Kate but the true value is in the way

Kate reviews those around her and rethinks the secrets she keeps.

If I were to use this book for a book club (and it could be used in a book club without offense. One swear word. There's your spoiler. You won't get any more), I might want the members to reflect on the following questions:

1. When was the moment you realized your spouse kept secrets from you? Were they game changing secrets?
2. What secrets do you keep from your husband? What do you fear by keeping them? Write two scenarios of sharing your secrets; worst case and best case.
3. What do you see as your public persona? Why did you choose this one?
4. What is your private persona?
5. Reflecting over the above questions, is it because of lack of trust in others or lack of trust in yourself that you are not honest with the real you?
6. Is motherhood and couplehood all you thought it would be?
7. Do you feel your life is well balanced right now? When have you felt like you were hanging off the proverbial cliff, debating whether or not to let go?
8. Do you believe in fate, coincidence, choice, or a little of all?

I could continue in so many different directions but I'm going to make a choice to leave you hanging a little bit. The story is a subtle exploration of friendship, marriage, motherhood, career, and the unpredictabilities of life. It's one to savor rather than consume.

Britany says

2 best friends, Kate and Elizabeth meet at a neighborhood playgroup where they are living the lives of housewives raising their children together. Elizabeth meets a tragic fate and leaves a trunk full of her personal journals to Kate. Kate takes the journals on her vacation with her and starts savoring the writing of her best friend. I really loved the journal entries more than anything else. There were so many hidden layers to Elizabeth that nobody, not even her best friend, knew about. It's almost like rediscovering someone. In this case, it was all too late, the author teases the reader with multiple carrots up until the ending, which I, for one, did not see coming! (view spoiler)

I was intrigued throughout most of the book. Kate got on my nerves a little bit with her paranoia, but I couldn't wait to find out what happened at the end! The ending fell a little flat and seemed rushed and abrupt.

This was a Firstreads Giveaway!

Angela says

I enjoyed this thoroughly, despite having nothing in common with the characters. This isn't so much about Elizabeth's journals as it is about being adaptable, rolling with the changes, and realizing that whatever you get in life is what you have to work with. It's senseless to live in a state of constant anxiety about the evils of the world and how they may or may not be visited upon you.

Ann says

This may be *the* book club book of 2012. Well-written, with so many layers. Can't wait to talk about this book with my closest girlfriends.

J Clement Wall says

This book, about a woman who receives the journals of her dead friend in the aftermath of 9/11, delves into so many big, human questions about the nature of our connections to each other and our ability to ever fully know one another - even the people we love the most. Are the parts of ourselves we don't share any more or less true because we keep them to ourselves? How important is it for us to feel safe, and is that antithetical to feeling truly seen and understood?

This book knocked me on my ass. It's beautiful and haunting and deeply thought provoking. It's about death and fear and grieving, but it's even more about the fierceness (and fragility) of life and love.

Linda says

I anxiously awaited the release of The Unfinished Work of Elizabeth D. by Nichole Bernier. I was excited to read it, but unfortunately, the book did not live up to my expectations. Frankly, I am confused by the extremely high ratings of this novel.

The idea of the story is incredibly enticing; a good friend dies in an accident and leaves journals dating back to when she was in her teens until the present. It is such an engaging premise, but the "shocking" revelations were weak, at best, and the overall story was bland. Further, I did not feel any real connection for any of the characters.

The book was hard to follow at times and too slow-moving. Additionally, the author sets the novel during or around the time of the NYC 9/11 attacks; it was unnecessary, and quite frankly a burden, to add this additional element to the story. The main character, Kate, was emotionally shaken and fragile from the loss of her friend, this was enough. A loss such as this one would shake a person's stability and possibly change who he/she is. Kate's additional anxiety over the state of the world, instead of offering further insight, was a distraction from the initial story.

With the exception of some truly thought-provoking quotes at the very end of the book, for me, the story did not lead anywhere. I wish I felt differently. I wanted to.

Ellen says

What happens to your journals, the place you share your secret life, if you die suddenly? After Elizabeth's unexpected death, Kate inherits a trunk of her close friend's journals and brings them on vacation to read. This is the summer after 9/11, a time of intense re-examination of both national and personal safety. As Kate discovers Elizabeth's secrets, she questions both their friendship and her own choices and yearnings. This book is tender and compelling. And it made me wonder what I should do with the dozen dusty journals in the bottom of my closet.
