

..... Frances  
& Bernard .....

Carlene  
Bauer

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## About the Book

**He is Bernard Eliot: a poet; passionate, gregarious, a force of nature.**

**She is Frances Reardon: a novelist; wry, uncompromising and quick to skewer.**

In the summer of 1957, Frances and Bernard meet at writer's colony. Afterwards, he sends her a letter, and with it begins an almost holy friendship told through an absorbing correspondence that chronicles – and changes – the course of their lives.

Frances is hesitant where Bernard is insistent, cynical where he is quixotic, but in each other they find the audience they've been searching for. From their witty, early missives to dispatches from the long, dark nights of the soul, Frances and Bernard tussle over faith and family, literature and creativity, madness and devotion – and before long, they are writing the account of their very own love story.

Inspired by the real-life friendship between two giants of American letters, Flannery O'Connor and Robert Lowell, yet with a warm charm and fierce intelligence entirely its own, *Frances & Bernard* is a sparkling tribute to the wonder of kindred spirits and bittersweet romance.

## About the Author

Carlene Bauer is the author of the memoir *Not That Kind of Girl*. She has written for *n+1*, *Slate*, *Salon*, and the *New York Times*, and lives in Brooklyn.

Also by Carlene Bauer

*Not That Kind of Girl: A Memoir*

For  
Anna Mae Bauer

# Frances & Bernard

Carlene Bauer

Chatto & Windus

LONDON

*So, I have written you a love letter, oh, my God, what have I done!*  
— *Fyodor Dostoevsky, The Brothers*  
*Karamazov*

August 15, 1957

Dearest Claire —

How are you?

Here I am in Philadelphia, back from the colony. It was mildly horrific, except for the writing. I finished what I think might be a draft of the novel. If I can just figure out a way to continuously sponge off the rich, the rest of my life should go very well!

I fear, however, that I will have to become a teacher to support this habit. I don't think the rich found me very grateful, and they probably won't ask me back to their glen. Oh well.

And now I will tell you the mildly horrific part. You deserved a honeymoon, but the whole time I was there I kept wishing that you could have come with me so that we could have taken long walks together fellowshipping in daily indictment of our fellow guests. Here were my spiritual exercises: I prayed, and then I had conversations with you in my head about the idiotic but apparently talented. I kept silent at meals, mostly, and this silence, as I hoped, kept people from trying to engage with me. I had nothing to say to them, because they were always telling stories about the other writers they knew or the hilarious things they'd gotten up to while drinking. And me, dry as the town of Ocean Grove. Sample colonists: Two poets, boys, our age. Editors at two different literary magazines. Indistinguishable. Their names do not bear repeating. Sample dinner story: These two had been members of a secret society at Yale, with one the head and the other his deputy. The head would sit on a gold-painted throne they'd stolen from the drama department to interview potential candidates. "Sodomy or disembowelment," he'd ask, "and every man who answered *disembowelment* got in." And then this, from the cocktail party they threw for us the first night: A novelist (a lady novelist, a writer of historical romances). Your mother has

probably read them. I've seen them eaten with peanuts on trains. Was introduced to her as a fellow novelist and that was the last she cared to know of me, as she was off on a monologue detailing her busy reading and lecture schedule; the difficulties of balancing this schedule and her writing; the infinite patience of her advertising-executive husband, who never minds using his vacation time to travel to Scotland and Ireland and France for her research; the infinite patience of her dear, dear editor, who always picks up the phone when she needs to be cajoled out of an impasse, which isn't often. "Thank heavens I'm a visceral writer. It just comes out of me in a flood. I can't stop it. I usually need about three weeks here for six hundred pages, which I then whittle down to a — " I wanted so badly to tell her what this self-centered harangue was making my viscera do. Sometimes there's no more satisfactory oath to utter at these times but an exasperated *Jesus Christ*. I'd feel bad about taking the Lord's name in vain but I like to think he's much more offended by the arrogance that drives me to offer up such a bitterly desperate beseechment. Well, I guess he's offended by my bitterness too, but — a visceral writer. Dear God. Claire, please let me never describe myself or my work with such conviction. The self-regard that fuels so many — I will never get over it. It's like driving drunk, it seems to me. Although these people never kill anybody — they just blindside everyone until they've cleared a path to remunerative mediocrity.

On the few occasions I did speak at these gatherings, I was looked at as if I were a child of three who'd toddled up to their elbows, opened her mouth, and started speaking in perfect French. I enjoyed that. Silence, exile, cunning.

There was one young man who did bear scrutiny. Bernard Eliot. Harvard. Descended from Puritans, he claims. Another poet. But very good. Well, I guess I should say more than *very good*. Great? I know nothing about poetry, except that I either like it or don't. And his I liked very much. I hear John

Donne in the poems — John Donne prowling around in the boiler room of them, shouting, clanging on pipes with wrenches, trying to get this young man to uncram the lines and cut the poems in half. We had a nice lunch one day — he asked me to lunch, he said, because he'd noticed me reading a book by Etienne Gilson. He converted a few years ago. Here I frown: could be a sign of delusions of grandeur, when a Puritan turns to Rome. He said an astounding thing at lunch. He asked me if I had a suitor — his word — and I said no. I was pretty sure this was just to start conversation. Then, after a pause, while I was shaking some ketchup out over my french fries, he said, chin in hand, as if he were speaking to me from within some dream he was having, "I think men have a tendency to wreck beautiful things." I wanted to laugh. I couldn't figure out what kind of response he wanted — was he trying to determine if I was the kind of girl who had experience with that kind of wreckage and who would then be a willing audience for a confession of some of his own, or was he laying a flirtatious trap to see how much of his own wreckage I'd abide? Instead I asked him if he wanted the ketchup. "Actually, yes, thanks," he said, and then, while shaking it out over his own fries, "Have you ever been to Italy?" He asked if he could write me while he was there. I did like him. Though I think he comes from money, and has read more at twenty-five than I will have read by the time of my death, he seemed blessedly free of pretension. Grandiose statements about romance notwithstanding.

Tell me of Paris. Send my love to Bill. When can I visit you in Chicago?

Love,  
Frances

August 20, 1957

Dear Ted —

I'm packing for Italy, and sorry that I won't get a chance to see you before I leave and you come back from Maine. Say hello to your mother and father for me. Will you finally make a conquest of that lobsterman's daughter? I think you're making this effort only to weave a line about it into the final ballad of Ted McCoy, just so your sons and grandsons have something to which they might aspire. Which I applaud. It's as good as catching a mermaid.

It's a damn shame that you didn't get accepted to the colony. I've said it before and there, I said it again. They decided to give all the fiction spots to women this round. Everyone there was a thoroughgoing hack. There was a pert, kimono-wearing Katherine Mansfield type to flirt with, but she wasn't smart enough to consider doing anything serious about. Which was all for the best. She couldn't remember my name until the second week of our stay. She insisted on calling me Anton. "I'm sorry, you remind me of —" but she would never say who this Anton was. I wanted to know! She meant to give off an air of mystery — instead she gave off an air of distracted imbecility.

I met a girl I quite liked — but not in that way. I think you'd like her too. She looks untouched, as if she grew up on a dairy farm, but she's dry, quick, and quick to skewer, so there's no mistaking that she was raised in a city. Philadelphia. Her name is Frances Reardon. Was a little Mother Superiorish. She's just escaped from the workshop at Iowa. She was the only other real writer there. Her novel is about a hard-hearted nun who finds herself receiving stigmata. It sounds juvenile, but it's very funny. (I stole a look at some pages in her bag at lunch when she'd gone to get us some coffee.) Clearly someone educated by bovine-minded Catholics taking her revenge — but for God. A curious mix of feminine and unfeminine — wore a very conventional white dress covered in the smallest of brown

flowers and laid her napkin down on her lap with something approaching fussiness, but then thumped the bottom of a ketchup bottle as if she were pile driving. At one point said that “reading the verse of Miss Emily Dickinson makes me feel like I’m being suffocated by a powder puff full of talc” but avowed that she did like Whitman. “Does that give me the soul of a tramp?” she said, smiling. Very charming, and without meaning to be. A rare thing. Also a very, very good writer. She made me laugh quite a bit. And yet she is religious. Also very rare. I think I might try to make her a friend.

I know you’re not a letter writer, but drop me a postcard or two.

Yours,  
Bernard

September 20, 1957

Dear Frances —

I hope this letter finds you well and still pleausurably hard at work.

I write to you from outside Florence, Italy, where an old professor of mine has a family house that he has very kindly allowed me to come and stay in. I’m finishing my book here.

I very much enjoyed talking with you this summer, and I would like to talk to you some more. But I’m in Italy. And you’re in Philadelphia. So will you talk to me in letters?

Have you ever been to Italy? In Italy, I feel musical and indolent. All speech is arpeggio.

I wanted to ask you this question when we had lunch: Who is the Holy Spirit to you?

Sincerely,  
Bernard

September 30, 1957

Dear Bernard —

I was so very pleased to receive your note. Thank you for writing me. It would be a pleasure to talk to you in letters.

I have not been to Italy, but I have been to London, where I remember seeing young Italian tourists thronging about major landmarks and chattering in a way that made me think of pigeons. I know that must be unfair, but that is my only impression of Italy, refracted as it is through the prism of stodgy old England.

Have you ever been to Philadelphia? Right now, as summer winds down, it is fuzzy with heat and humidity, and the scent of the sun baking the bricks of the houses in this neighborhood. I feel indolent, but not musical. I am waitressing while I try to find a job in New York. One that allows me to pay the rent without taxing my brain. I can be a night owl and wouldn't mind writing until the wee hours after work.

The Holy Spirit! Bernard, you waste no time. I believe he is grace and wisdom.

I hope your work is going well.

Sincerely,  
Frances

October 30, 1957

Dear Frances —

There are pigeons here too. These Italian boys hoot and coo at the young foreign women wandering through the piazzas. Both sides are intractable — the boys with their intense conviction that they can catch something this way, the girls in their perturbation, their furrowed brows. It gives me great pleasure to sit and watch this. I keep hoping that

one of these days a girl will whirl around and take one up on his invitation.

I've never been to Philadelphia.

I don't believe in wasting time when I've met someone I want to know more of.

I don't know what the Holy Spirit is or does. I think this is because I came to Catholicism late and have felt hesitant to penetrate this mystery. Protestants shove the Holy Spirit to the side — too mystical, too much a distraction from the Father and Son. They regard the Holy Spirit with the same suspicion, I think, as they do the saints — it's a form of idolatry to shift the focus to a third party, whether it be the Holy Spirit or Saint Francis. To appeal to the third party is pagan. Is he grace and wisdom? How do you know?

Let's not ever talk of work in these letters. When I see you again I want to talk to you about work, but I am envisioning our correspondence as a spiritual dialogue.

Sincerely,  
Bernard

November 20, 1957

Dear Bernard —

Deal. No discussion of work. I don't like to write about the writing either. I can talk about it, if pressed, but I prefer silence. I don't want to be responsible for any pronouncements on which I might fail to follow through.

I have to tell you — I am wary of projects that are described as spiritual. I fear — this is related to my aversion to artistic empty threats — that the more consciously spiritual a person appears to be, the less truly spiritual that person is. I know what you're after isn't that at all. Perhaps what I am also wary of is the notion that enough dogged

inquiry will induce enlightenment. It may be a mistake to think that it can.

This is also why I fear I can't talk about the Holy Spirit in a way that will make him visible or present to you. I believe that he is counsel, because that is how Christ described him. To me *counsel* means that he is grace and wisdom. But I've never experienced grace and wisdom hovering like a flame over my head, and if I do ever realize that I acted wisely or received foresight clearly because of the Holy Spirit, I will let you know. But I don't ever want to feel touched or gifted spiritually. Or sense God moving about on the face of my waters. What a burden! Everything would then have to live up to being knocked off a horse by lightning, wouldn't it? I think I prefer to live at the level of what the British call *muddle*. Muddle with occasional squinting at something that might be called clarity in the distance, so as not to despair.

Sincerely,  
Frances

December 6, 1957

Dear Frances —

Points taken. My enthusiasm over finding someone with whom to talk these things over got the better of me.

My sin is poetizing. Can you tell?

As much as you protest, I think I have a better understanding now of the H.S.

Why do you despair?

Italy has ceased to be musical. It now feels decrepit and entombing, and I'm glad to be leaving next week. I'm not even taking pleasure in the fact that my Italian is now as musical as my German is serviceable. I don't feel indolent anymore either; I feel crushed by effort. I feel that I'm toting slabs of marble around from second guess to second guess.

I have sinned against us — I have spoken of work. Give me a penance.

When I come back I'll be living in Boston with Ted, a friend of mine — a college roommate whom I call my brother. I'm going to be teaching some classes at Harvard. I'll also be the editor of the *Charles Review*. I am looking forward to being back in Boston. I'm not looking forward to being that close again to my parents, but I think I can keep their genteel philistinism at bay. Send me your next letter at the address on the back of this page.

In fact, send me some of that novel you're working on. I command you.

Yours,  
Bernard

December 15, 1957

Bernard —

Please enjoy this postcard depicting Philadelphia's storied art museum and the mighty Schuylkill. Now you do not ever have to visit.

I hope that you are settling down in Boston. I hope that your marble slabs have become fleshly and alive again.

Oh, I don't despair of anything. At least right now. I was being hyperbolic. If I did despair, I probably wouldn't tell you of it, for your sake and mine! And God's. If I described my despair I would be poetizing and legitimizing it. And I'm not Dostoevsky.

I won't send you some of the novel just yet — it is still percolating. But I am flattered that you want to see it at all.

Penances are God's purview, not mine. Instead, I will wish you a merry Christmas. Love and joy come to you, and to your wassail too.

Sincerely,  
Frances

January 1, 1958

Dear Frances —

Happy new year! It is 1958. Do you care?

I have turned my book in. Now I am in that terrible period between labors, waiting for editorial orders, pacing the apartment like Hamlet waiting for his father's ghost. Although I have begun to write what may be poems for the next one, I can't throw myself into them quite yet. The lines are an insubordinate gang of children who have sized their father up and found him feckless. The only thing to do with this restlessness is talk and drink. Or box. I went to a gym a few times when I was at Harvard, thinking I would take it up, but I quickly abandoned that scheme. "Did you forget your bloomers?" a gentleman once said to me while we were sparring. I knocked him flat and never went back, knowing that I would have wanted to punch me, too, had I been a regular and spied my Ivied, ivory self sauntering through the door. If I didn't have to teach in a few days, and I keep forgetting that I do, I would probably get on a bus or a plane and hope to be invigorated by foreign context. I thought I had tired of Italy, but now — in frigid, colorless Boston, clouds like lesions, having had a dispiriting dinner with my parents, museum pieces already, immobilized by their complacencies — I wish I were there again, where history hung in the air like incense after a Mass, still alive, where around every corner there lurked a spiritual or architectural delight.

Here is a delight: the prospect of getting to know you better. To that end:

Frances, where in this world have you been besides London?

Where in this world would you like to go?  
Have you been reading anything you like? Anything you  
*loathe*?  
What is your confirmation name, and why?  
The gospels or Paul?  
Or is that the wrong question entirely?  
*Paradise Lost* or *The Divine Comedy*? Or neither, and  
instead the whole of Shakespeare?  
Or is that the wrong question entirely?  
James Baldwin? (Say yes.)  
Gossip — in the hierarchy of sins, I'd put it a step or two  
below venial, wouldn't you?  
Whose food did you most want to poison at the colony?  
Have you ever sent a letter you wish you hadn't?  
Or forget all that and — tell me something I might not  
believe about you.

Yours,  
Bernard

January 10, 1958

Dear Bernard —

Although I have yet to turn a book in to a publisher myself, I have a feeling I would experience something very similar. I have been known, at the end of a school year, to spend a good two weeks feeling that if I did not have an exam to take or a paper to write, there was no reason for me to be alive. I get the existential shakes — I'm like one of those small metal wind-up toys that chatter in circles until they peter out, exhausted, and finally keel over. When my existential shakes peter out — gradually I comprehend that no one's going to phone me at home asking for a twenty-page paper by next Thursday — I can go down the shore with a clear conscience.

Whom did *you* want to poison at the colony?

Something you might not believe about me? Hmmm. I'm not sure that we've known each other long enough to have ideas about what in our characters would prove contradictory! Hmmm. You might not believe that children like me, but they do. Or that I have not been able to stop playing *Ella and Louis Again* since I received it for Christmas. I feel ill-equipped to discuss just what it is I love in that record — I am the epitome of square, and I know nothing about music — but there is something about the lower register of her voice that makes me feel as if I am afloat in an ocean the color of midnight.

I think writing to a poet may be rubbing off on me, and not for the good.

Here's something else. I had a girlhood crush on Cary Grant. I was not the kind of girl who had crushes on movie stars — that was my sister, who had a framed picture of Tyrone Power on her dresser. But Grant seemed like someone out of a novel rather than a creature cobbled together on a studio lot. What is it? He is refined but also given to the ridiculous, and the ridiculousness never erases his refinement. Well, I shouldn't lie. I still have a girlhood crush on Cary Grant. He may be the cement in my relationship with my aunt Peggy. She will say aloud from behind the paper, as if she means to invite everyone in the room and not just me, "*An Affair to Remember* is playing up over at the Ritz," and I will say, with feigned nonchalance from behind my book, "What time?" and then we will race out of the house like women who've been told he will be there in the flesh.

Both the gospels *and* Paul; the gospels because they represent God's faith in our imagination, and Paul because more often than not we are too stupid to use it.

And now you have heard more than enough from me. Please do write soon.