

# *The Book of Love*



*a novel*

*Barbara Sibbald*





## chapter one

# Betting

THROUGHOUT MAY, Suzanne and Erica spend a few evenings every week at the racetrack, studying and debating the *Live Racing Schedule*, placing bets, and screaming at the horses. They linger with the sun later and later every evening. Both are reluctant to go home, each for her own reason.

Suzanne is dodging Michael, who is spending most of his time at his golf course dodging her.

“We’ve become the Bickersons,” Suzanne says, but she can’t tell Erica what lies at the heart of it. She’s tried, but then she feels a fluttering tightness in her chest and her throat closes down. I can’t do it, she thinks. At least not yet.

Erica lingers too, relieved to have a break from the singles scene but reluctant to spend yet another weekday night alone in her apartment.

Late in the month, Christina—the balancing third to their friendship triptych—is able to join them. “I feel like I’m escaping domestic detention,” she tells Suzanne.

Between races, they sip over-priced gin and tonics—an optimistic harbinger of the warmer weather—and chat randomly about coq au vin and Murphy beds, belligerent colleagues, and the vagaries of love.

They aren’t horsey women, but then harness racing isn’t really about the horses; it’s about betting on the basis of scant information, something all three women know about.

Erica thought it might be a laugh.

“It’s been such a *tedious* winter.” She rolls her eyes for effect. “The bars and blatant expectations, the give and take—and take. I haven’t had a promising date for months. All I want is someone who can string two sentences together and goes to the clubs for the music, not in the hope of getting some. It’s so facile. Don’t

they realize women need a reason to have sex not just a place?”

Christina laughs widely, revealing a mouthful of fillings courtesy of her childhood craze for toffee. Suzanne grins but wonders: is that what it's really like out there, being single?

“Well, at least you have some excitement: clubbing, getting tarted up, checking out the action,” says Christina. “This is my first foray outside work and Don and the kids since I don't know when—February? Whenever it was that we saw that indie band at the Galaxy. I've missed you two.”

“It hasn't been the same since you moved to the 'burbs, Tina,” laments Erica. “Our trio is sadly diminished.”

Suzanne nods.

The three women have met once or twice a week since second-year university when they found one another cackling in the back row at a film club screening of *Annie Hall*. Afterwards, over a Blue at the noisy campus pub, they agreed that their favourite part was when Alvie and Annie were each complaining about the frequency of sex: we hardly ever have sex, complained Alvie. Only three times a week. He wants sex all the time, said Annie. We do it three times a week.

“Vive la différence,” laughed Erica.

They began hanging out together, mostly at galleries and clubs. And after graduating, they all stayed in Ottawa by choice and chance: jobs taken, love relationships begun, marriage for two of them, a family for Christina.

“Here's to spring,” says Christina, raising her glass, “the start of the race season, and our friendship.”

They raise their highballs, and as they clink glasses, they make deliberate eye contact—Erica told them years ago that if they didn't look each other in the eye, they'd have seven year's bad sex, so it's become part of their ritual.

“Ten minutes to post,” says Suzanne, nodding towards the standings board. “Bets up, gals, for race six.” She runs her finger down the list of horses. “I think I'll go with Postivelydangerous. Oh, but look at this one: Neversawhimcoming. Who makes up these names anyway? I want that job!”

“I'm taking American Hunk,” says Christina. She laughs:

“Or That’s Ideal.”

“Hey, what name would you pick for Don?” Suzanne asks Christina.

“Hmmm, good question,” says Christina, tracing the list with her finger.

Erica notes that Christina’s cuticles are ragged. She’s working too hard, she thinks. Erica keeps her nails clipped and buffed.

Christina pauses at Wild Ride. Not in this life, she thinks.

“How about EasyLivin’ Smiley,” she says.

“That’s so sweet,” says Suzanne. “Michael’s definitely Workaholic. The pathetic reality of the junior partner. He’s never home before seven, dragging his ass and a pile of dossiers.”

These days this isn’t strictly speaking true; he makes an effort to get home by six “so I can spend some time with you,” he says. She wishes he’d made the effort a year ago when it might have mattered.

“For myself, I’d like Winning Decision,” says Erica. “Just for a change of pace.”

They all laugh and settle back into their chairs.

The bet-taker, a youngish woman wearing a faux-Western get-up replete with a slightly bent, red cardboard cowboy hat strolls up. They each make a two-dollar bet, all to place.

“We’re not exactly big gamblers, are we?” asks Christina.

“It’s a tough call,” says Suzanne. “You bet on a sure thing, and the returns are low. You go out on a limb and you can lose it all.”

“Or you can win big,” says Christina, smiling.

But likely not, thinks Erica.

Her losses in love have mounted over the years—men won, lost, rejected—but at thirty-two, she’s still willing to take a calculated risk.

“So what’s up with you, Tina?” asks Suzanne. “What are you working on?”

“Painting? No time for that these days. Ever since the move to the hinterland. The commute’s a killer: fifty minutes each way minimum. It sucks me dry. At the end of the day, I can barely manage to throw dinner together and get the kids settled. And then the weekends are jammed with errands and house stuff and

family—I mean I want some fun time with Norris and Vita, too. I bore myself with all the nagging I do: pick up your toys, hang up your clothes, take a bath, yada, yada. It’s mind-numbing. Anyway, painting’s taken a tumble on the agenda.”

“Have you set your studio up?” asks Erica.

Christina shakes her head. “All my gear’s still in the basement, but I’m going to set up something,” she adds quickly, as if to convince herself as much as the others. “I could always work in the kitchen with an easel. I did that for years at our Spruce Street apartment, remember? I don’t need a studio per se.”

“I hear you,” says Suzanne. “What you need is time. Working five days a week really interferes with life.” She’s dying to mention the grant she has applied for to make her documentary, money that will buy her the time and equipment to make it happen; but she decides it might be bad luck—and besides, she doesn’t want to endure their sympathy when it fails. If it fails, she corrects herself. I have to stay positive.

Christina nods: “Time. If only. But enough about that. It’s the same-old, same-old. I have to decide to make the time, and then it will happen.” She rattles the melted remains of her ice cubes. “Order me another?” she asks. “I’m off to the loo.”

“Ditto,” says Suzanne.

“Loo?” laughs Erica. “You’re such girly girls.”

She turns in her chair to see if the waitress is around. Of course not. The place has emptied out a bit; all the after-work gamblers have finally gone home. One of the businessmen sitting two tables away tries to catch her eye, and as Erica expertly glances away, her eyes land on a red book sitting on the chair at the table behind her. Its cover faces her: *Love* something or another. The table is clear, the book seemingly abandoned. She’s found that reading a book is good for deterring wannabes, so she walks over, picks it up, and returns to her seat.

*The Book of Love: Guidance in Affairs of the Heart* by Jean Foster. Could be a man or a woman, she thinks. The cover is amateurishly designed: no visual, and the typeface is old-school. She flips it over. No author photo. She reads the blurb on the back cover:

# THE BOOK OF LOVE

## Guidance in Affairs of the Heart

by Dr. Jean Foster

The definitive guide to love's journey from pre-date pitfalls through courtship, and on to the nurturing bond. With remarkable insight, Foster combines commonsense and the latest research to steer readers through myriad emotional minefields:

♡ ***E-dating dangers:*** If you think this is the last refuge of the despondent, think again. It is *the* modern meeting place, and the rules of engagement have definitely changed.

♡ ***Marital meltdown:*** How to move from fusion (that melding-together phase of being "in love") to the more mature, long-term delimitation (separate yet together).

♡ ***Sexual fulfillment:*** Welcome yourself as a sexual "partner" and accept that sometimes you have to work at putting the play into playing around.

During twenty-six years as a relationship counsellor, psychologist Dr. Jean Foster has helped thousands of couples to develop nurturing, sustaining bonds. Her renowned "Intimacy Renewal" weekends attract couples from all over Western Canada and the United States.

Erica flips to the catalogue-in-print page: the copyright date is listed as five years from now. How odd, she thinks. There's no publisher either, but then she sees it's printed by a digital press. Self-published, she thinks, or maybe a sample copy for shopping around to publishers.

Suzanne and Christina return.

"Hey, look what I found on that table," Erica says, flashing the book. "It's a digital advance copy not published yet."

Suzanne takes it. "I wonder, wonder, who-oo-oo, who wrote the book of love," she sings, turning the book over in her hands. She glances at the back cover. "Low-end psychobabble," she says and hands it over to Christina.

"I hate these self-help books," Suzanne continues. "The meat of it—I mean the actual nuggets of advice—would fit onto a single page. Double-spaced. My parents were really into that transactional analysis stuff, I'm okay, you're not, or whatever. They were always quoting from it when I was growing up: 'You're communicating like a child,' they'd say, and I felt like screaming at them, 'I am a child, you morons.'"

Erica and Christina laugh.

"Did you guys see who was sitting there?" asks Erica, pointing to the empty table behind her.

"A couple of women," says Christina. "Older, kinda dowdy, but in a nice way. Smart women, I'm thinking."

"Hey, look at this, there's a chapter on finding the perfect mate," says Erica. "I could use some help in that department. I'm going to keep it. I'm sure Foster has other copies—obviously an electronic copy at least—and besides, it's almost like it was meant to be." She raises her glass. "Here's to happenstance."

"There's nothing sadder than an empty cocktail glass," says Suzanne. "Where is that waitress?"

"I think you should turn it in to the lost and found," says Christina. "It's obviously not meant to be public yet."

"There she is," says Suzanne, waving her arm.

"I just want to read it. I'll return it in a week or two," says Erica.



The waitress arrives. Christina glances at the cover. “Foster’s going to be looking for it. It’s not like it was abandoned.”

Easy for Christina to take the high road, Erica thinks. She has no idea what it’s like out there. It used to be fun and flirty, but lately everyone seems on edge. It’s the baby thing, she’s decided: all those hundreds of ticking wombs. Except hers. She’s never wanted kids. “We’re overpopulated as it is,” she argues, although there’s more to it than that.

Lately, though, she’s started wondering why she can’t find a partner—Am I too particular? Too difficult?—and she envies Christina and Suzanne. Both found partners early and seemingly easily. Erica was a bridesmaid at both weddings. Christina and Don’s was at Pink Lake in the Gatineau Hills. Her friend was stunning: blonde curls tumbling down over a halter-top dress that softened every curve. It was made from an exquisite fabric of white sateen covered with swooshes of giant green ferns. One of Christina’s mom’s designs. There was a lake-side, picnic potluck where everyone brought their favourite dish in lieu of a present. Erica had wondered about the match—a techno-nerd and an artist—but here they are, eleven years later and solid. Joyful even.

At least from the outside, thinks Erica.

Suzanne, on the other hand, seemed to find her soulmate in Michael. Three months after their first date, they were living together, and inside a year had a traditional wedding with one hundred and forty guests and a reception at The Chateau. That was nine years ago. Now, Erica suspects, their marriage is on the cusp of a meltdown or at least a good rattle. Not that Suzanne’s said anything, Erica muses to herself, but she’s sure spending a lot of time with me.

Suzanne finishes ordering the round.

“I’m sure the author has other copies, Tina,” says Erica. “At least digital.”

Christina shakes her head. “If I’d found it, I’d return it for sure. What do you think Suzanne?”

She shrugs: “A few weeks isn’t going to hurt.”

Erica changes the subject, anxious to avoid an ethics lecture

from Christina. “You know,” she says, “I’ve been thinking about how finding a good man is like betting on a horse. You study the incomplete facts, calculate the odds, and, fingers crossed for luck”—she crosses fingers next to each ear—“you place your bet. Then you sit in the stadium shouting encouragement as they trot around. And you hope you’ll get lucky *this* time.”

Christina smiles. “You can do more than cross your fingers,” she says. “At least in theory.”

“That’s where the shouting encouragement bit comes in,” says Erica. “But what do I know? After all, women might be able to fake orgasms, but men can fake a whole relationship.”

They laugh.