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The Dream Lover: A Novel

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NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER • NAMED ONE OF THE TEN BEST BOOKS OF THE YEAR BY USA TODAY • Elizabeth Berg has written a lush historical novel based on the sensuous Parisian life of the nineteenth-century writer George Sand—which is perfect for readers of Nancy Horan and Elizabeth Gilbert.

At the beginning of this powerful novel, we meet Aurore Dupin as she is leaving her estranged husband, a loveless marriage, and her family's estate in the French countryside to start a new life in Paris. There, she gives herself a new name—George Sand—and pursues her dream of becoming a writer, embracing an unconventional and even scandalous lifestyle.

Paris in the nineteenth century comes vividly alive, illuminated by the story of the loves, passions, and fierce struggles of a woman who defied the confines of society. Sand's many lovers and friends include Frédéric Chopin, Gustave Flaubert, Franz Liszt, Eugène Delacroix, Victor Hugo, Marie Dorval, and Alfred de Musset. As Sand welcomes fame and friendship, she fights to overcome heartbreak and prejudice, failure and loss. Though considered the most gifted genius of her time, she works to reconcile the pain of her childhood, of disturbing relationships with her mother and daughter, and of her intimacies with women and men. Will the life she longs for always be just out of reach—a dream?

Brilliantly written in luminous prose, and with remarkable insights into the heart and mind of a literary force, *The Dream Lover* tells the unforgettable story of a courageous, irresistible woman.

Praise for *The Dream Lover*

“Exquisitely captivating . . . Sand’s story is so timely and modern in an era when gender and sexual roles are upended daily.”—*USA Today*

“Fantastic . . . a provocative and dazzling portrait . . . Berg tells a terrific story, while simultaneously exploring sexuality, art, and the difficult personal choices women artists in particular made—then and now—in order to succeed. . . . The book, imagistic and perfectly paced, full of dialogue that clips along, is a reader’s dream.”—*The Boston Globe*

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woman whose story is enriched by the delicate brush strokes of Berg's colorful imagination."—*Chicago Tribune*

"There is authority and confidence in the storytelling that makes the pages fly."—*The New York Times*


"Berg weaves an enchanting novel about the real life of George Sand."—*Us Weekly*

"Lavishly described . . . Berg uses her own skill as a writer to graphically present the reader with a clear picture of a brilliant, yet flawed woman."—*Fredericksburg Free Lance-Star*

"[A] beautiful, imaginative re-creation . . . Berg's years-long immersion in the writings of and about Sand has resulted in a remarkable channeling of Sand's voice."—*Library Journal* (starred review)

"Berg offers vivid, sensual detail and a sensitive portrayal of the yearning and vulnerability behind Sand's bold persona."—*Publishers Weekly*

"A thoroughly pleasant escape . . . [Sand is] intoxicating, beautiful, gifted, desirous, unconventional and heartbroken."—*Kirkus Reviews*

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Editorial Review

Review

“In her masterful new novel, Elizabeth Berg inhabits the adventurous heart of George Sand, making sense of a puzzling legend who dared to live and write against the grain.”—**Nancy Horan**

“Exquisitely captivating . . . Sand’s story is so timely and modern in an era when gender and sexual roles are upended daily.”—**USA Today**

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“*The Dream Lover*—what a bold, insightful, and enticing novel. And how vigorously Elizabeth Berg brings us the iconoclastic life of George Sand. Berg writes with such intimacy and compassion that I think she must have some shared ancestral DNA with Sand. I savored every page.”—**Frances Mayes**

“What a rich, heartbreaking, triumphant novel Elizabeth Berg has written! I recommend reading it with a highlighter in hand to mark the insights about love and life and being a woman that are on every page so you can reread and savor them.”—**Ann Hood**

“*The Dream Lover* is a historical novel at once expansively researched yet intimately imagined. George Sand may be the ultimate Berg heroine. ‘A life not lived in truth,’ Berg writes, ‘is a life forfeited.’ In this latest work, Elizabeth Berg has poured her own great gifts and her own great heart into the story of a woman determined to refuse any such forfeiture, no matter the cost.”—**Leah Hager Cohen**

“The Dream Lover is the dream match of writer to subject, Elizabeth Berg animating George Sand so vividly that you feel the Frenchwoman speaking directly to you. Infamous for her eccentricities and her passions, Sand is shown to be a touching figure, a woman needing to love and be loved.”—Robin Black

About the Author

Elizabeth Berg is the author of many bestselling novels, including *Tapestry of Fortunes*, *The Last Time I Saw You*, *Home Safe*, *The Year of Pleasures*, and *Dream When You're Feeling Blue*, as well as two collections of short stories and two works of nonfiction. *Open House* was an Oprah's Book Club selection, *Durable Goods* and *Joy School* were selected as ALA Best Books of the Year, *Talk Before Sleep* was short-listed for an Abby Award, and *The Pull of the Moon* was adapted into a play. Berg has been honored by both the Boston Public Library and the Chicago Public Library. She is a popular speaker at venues around the country, and her work has been translated into twenty-seven languages. She is the founder of Writing Matters, a reading series designed to serve author, audience, and community. She divides her time between Chicago and San Francisco.

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My father's name was Maurice Dupin. His great-grandfather was Augustus II, king of Poland; and his grandfather was Maurice de Koenigsmark, later called the Maréchal de Saxe when he was the most exalted field marshal in Napoleon's army. This maréchal was renowned not only for his cunning and bravery upon the battlefield but for a particular kind of bonhomie he demonstrated in war. For instance, he commonly arranged for women and theater for himself and his men to enjoy after a good day of battle—never, he believed, would they appreciate such things more. All of France knew his name.

And so it was in my father's blood, his great love of the military, and he joined the army in 1798, when he was twenty years old, never mind his mother twisting her handkerchief. Two years later, he was transferred to Milan, Italy, as an aide-de-camp, and it was there that he met my mother.

She was Antoinette-Sophie-Victoire Delaborde, called Sophie, a courtesan currently living with a general who'd been smitten by her great beauty, her passion, and her gaiety. As was my father. He stole her away from the general, apparently with little ill will, for he was later promoted.

In many letters written to his mother at this time, my father spoke of his love for his fine mistress, and my grandmother worried and fretted, frightened to death that her son might marry someone so far beneath him. She knew that my mother was four years older than Maurice and of a lower class, born to a poor man who sold songbirds on the quays of the Seine, and that in addition to working as a camp follower, she had a young daughter. It was not the match my grandmother had in mind for her beloved son.

There was in this no small measure of hypocrisy. My grandmother may have had illustrious aristocrats in her family, but she came from a long line of illegitimate births, including her father's. And she herself was illegitimate—her mother, ironically, was a courtesan who had captured the Maréchal de Saxe's attention.

My father went on to distinguish himself in battle, as his grandfather had, but then he was captured by the enemy and held for two months as a prisoner of war. In May 1801, after his release, he returned home to my grandmother at Nohant. His normally buoyant personality had changed; he had about him an air of melancholy. One would expect such a change after a man is subjected to the ills of imprisonment—vile

treatment, near starvation, and only straw upon the ground for a bed. Add to this the mental distress of my father coming to understand that he was perhaps not destined always to be lucky, as he had often told his mother—he was as vulnerable as anyone else. But what beleaguered my father most in those days was the thought that he would have to choose between two women, both of whom he loved.

My grandmother had been my father's only parent since, when he was nine years old, his father died, leaving the little family enough of a fortune that my grandmother had a comfortable yearly income. In 1793, when the eleven months of the Reign of Terror began and the ruling Jacobins were ordering mass executions by guillotine in order to compel obedience to the state, she had fled her apartment in Paris and bought a peaceful country estate 150 miles south of the city. It was in the Berry region, a gently hilly, largely agricultural area of central France, and the estate lay just outside the little village of Nohant-Vic, population 272. Nohant was situated between the larger towns of Châteauroux and La Châtre.

The house itself, done in the style of Louis XVI, was commodious without being ostentatious. It had once been the site of a fourteenth-century feudal castle, and the bell tower still stood, its dusty, tile-lined belfry serving as a gathering place for doves. On the estate's acreage were the smaller houses of peasants, tenant farmers who worked the land. With its fields, expansive gardens, acres of forests, and the Indre River running through it, it was a beautiful place in which to grow up.

In the absence of his own father, my father displayed toward his mother the protective attitude that is understandable in such situations. Their correspondence to each other revealed a mutual affection and appreciation as well as a deep level of trust; and oftentimes the language my father used in expressing his longing to see his mother bordered more than a little on the romantic.

But Sophie! Literally from the time my father first saw her, he was obsessed with her. He had had plenty of opportunities to delight in the charms of highborn, beautiful, and cultured women. Sophie offered something different, something more. He—and many others, I might add—found her irresistible. The more time he spent with her, the more his love intensified.

After he'd been released from prison, my father had gone to see Sophie in Paris. At that time, she was again living with a general, but she begged my father to take her with him when he went back to Nohant. Because he was at that point a penniless soldier (he did not then or ever like to rely upon his mother for his support), she even offered to lend him money to fund the trip. My father's response was that my mother should think carefully and without his influence about whether she truly wanted to be with him, leaving behind a man who kept her in a manner most comfortable. My father's charm would not buy bread.

It took almost no time for my mother to make her decision: she elected to throw in her lot with my father, the man she truly loved. And so the two of them set out for Nohant.

My father had a plan: rather than introducing the two women right away, he would set Sophie up three miles away in La Châtre, at an inn called the Tête Noire. When the time was right, he would make the introduction.

After he spent a few days at Nohant, my father began disappearing for long stretches of time, telling his mother he was visiting relatives. But she suspected he was seeing a woman and finally confronted her son.

My father admitted that it was Sophie he was seeing, that he was keeping her at the inn. He said, "She has sacrificed everything in order to be with me. I am full of gratitude toward her, full of joy that she has chosen to be by my side."

My grandmother's feelings were hardly the same. Bosom heaving, lace cockade trembling at the top of her head, she told her son that she refused to meet Sophie. She berated him for the scandal such a woman's presence would cause and requested that he immediately send Sophie back to Paris, without him.

"For so many long days and nights I turned away food, I could not sleep, for worry about you," she told him. "I rejoiced that when you came home on leave you would be with me until you had to return to the service. Now even when you are with me, you are not; your thoughts are always with her. Please, I beg you, send her away; give yourself time to think carefully about your future!"

My father's response was uncharacteristically strident. "You ask me to turn her away as though she were a vulgar mistress, when I tell you over and over again that in fact I adore her! Was it not you who made me an acolyte of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who said that we are all born good and capable of self-improvement? Have you not all your life taught me to appreciate the noble attributes of people regardless of their class?"

My grandmother only stared at him, helpless to explain the difference between what is in a mother's head and what is in her heart.

They went round and round, each wounded, each hoping the other would come to understand their version of the irrefutable truth. The dinner table, once gay with stories and laughter, was now all but silent, the clinking of silverware and the murmur of the servants the only sounds.

It was Jean-François Deschartres who finally resolved the issue in a bold move, one that came with dire consequences.

Deschartres was my father's tutor. He was a secularized cleric, having studied for the priesthood without being ordained, and he was under my grandmother's employ. He was inordinately devoted to both my father and her.

He was an odd man, very thin and tall, pale of skin and eye. He kept his tonsured hairstyle, and he favored wearing knee breeches and stockings and yellow gaiters. In cold weather, he always wore the same ancient brown coat. He had a stutter that was more pronounced when he was nervous, and he was occasionally excitable in the way of an old woman. He had, too, an air of perpetual distractibility, as though he held the Almighty in one hand and you in the other and could never quite decide to whom he should give his complete attention.

But Deschartres was also highly intelligent, an expert in teaching a great variety of subjects. He had no understanding of love or passion, however. He looked upon such emotions as something that must be tolerated in his fellow human beings, a kind of tic of personality he felt fortunate not to be burdened by.

Hearing the arguments between my father and my grandmother must have distressed Deschartres greatly; he had never before seen them behave toward each other in this way. And so early one morning, while the rest of the household was asleep, he went to see Sophie. He intended to persuade her, for the good of all, to leave immediately.

He picked a bouquet of flowers before he left, and on the ride over, he practiced in his mind what he would say to her. When he got to the inn, he quickly climbed the stairs to her room and knocked at the door.

No response.

He knocked again, loudly now, and heard a low voice, sweet in tone, say, "Maurice?"

“It is I, François Deschartres, Maurice’s tutor.” He felt a sudden rush of blood to his head, an outbreak of perspiration. He wiped his upper lip and leaned forward to speak authoritatively into the crack of the door. “I have come with an important message for you.” He put his ear to the crack to listen for her response and heard Sophie walk quickly across the floor. There were sounds of rapid dressing, and then she flung open the door.

Upon seeing her, Deschartres was at first speechless: she had been sleeping, and there was a soft pink flush to the cheeks of her heart-shaped face. Her eyes were wide and dark and very beautiful, direct in their gaze. She was barefoot, and her black hair was not done up but loose around her face, cascading over her shoulders. Her bosom was ample, her waist narrow, and she had about her an air of sultry grace.

He asked if he might come in.

“Bien sûr,” she said, most pleasantly, and stepped aside to let him pass. She was very small in stature, and it must have given even dry-souled Deschartres pause to think about delivering such a stern directive to one so tiny.

He offered her the bouquet, and she took it without looking at it. “Has something happened?”

“Only this,” Deschartres said. “Your presence here has made for a great rift in the relationship between Maurice and his mother, whom, as you must know, he loves more than any person on earth. Every day they argue bitterly, and I can tell you most assuredly that this is not their way; they have always been unusually close. I have come to ask you to go back to Paris. Maurice says you love him; what better way can you prove it than to spare him the terrible pain you are now causing him? Give him distance, give him time, do not subject him any longer to such terrible strain, especially when he has so recently been freed from prison. Surely, without any need for elaboration, you can see that you are not meant for each other. He is in need of peace and care and quiet. Now, if you will kindly collect your things, I shall arrange—”

“Out of my sight, you fool!” Sophie cried, flinging the bouquet to the floor. “Go back to kissing the withered feet of your benefactress! Do not spoil Maurice’s and my happiness with such a ridiculous demand. Do you imagine that I do not know what Maurice needs now? You may rest assured it is not his mother!”

And then, small as she was, she forced Deschartres from the room, slamming and locking the door after him.

An outraged Deschartres knocked again and again, to no avail. Finally, he said, “Have it your way, then, ignorant girl! You leave me with no choice but to call upon the authorities. Then we shall see how long you stay here spinning your web! You are a common prostitute, rightfully worthless in the eyes of respectable people, and you do not belong here!”

“I’ll leave this pedestrian place all right,” Sophie shouted. “And I’ll take Maurice with me, you’ll see! You have no idea how much he loves me. Every day, he begs me to marry him! I’ll take him with me and we will never return!”

Users Review

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