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The Bug



Synopsis

In 1984, at the dawn of the personal-computer era, novice software tester Roberta Walton stumbles across a bug. She brings it to its inadvertent creator, longtime programmer Ethan Levin, and the two embark on a hunt for the elusive bug, nicknamed "The Jester" for its tendency to appear randomly and only at the least opportune moments, jeopardizing the fate of the company. Ethan's attempts to find a solution soon become a frightening obsession that threatens to destroy both his professional and personal life. Roberta, on the other hand, is drawn to the challenge. Forced to learn how to program, and seeking refuge from her own private troubles, she becomes enthralled with learning to speak the computer's language. Expertly merging code with prose, big ideas with intensely personal stories, Ellen Ullman brilliantly illuminates the space between human beings and computers—a space we occupy every day as we peer into our monitors.

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Customer Reviews

Among other works, Ellen Ullman has previously written the non-fiction CLOSE TO THE MACHINE and "Programming the post-human: computer science redefines 'life.'" It was the gosh-wow aspects of these two works that convinced me to anticipate, seek, and read her first, vivid novel, THE BUG. (What an excellent metaphor! The 'bug' does more than double duty: there is the software bug, the bugs in Ethan's life, how Joanna bugs him, etc.) The surprise? That someone who has spent the

majority of her adult life writing code - you know, 1s and 0s, Boolean logic gates, etc - could so artfully employ the writer's art of metaphor, simile, misdirection, style, and a winking eye (always anathema when programming computers)! Within the novel, Ullman shares computer-programming arcana that could be, should be fodder for inducing sleep... yet isn't. Where do these writers come from? How do they do it - i.e., make it appear so easy? And yet nothing adequately prepares the reader for *THE BUG*. Wow. Ellen Ullman breathes life into each character, especially core protagonists Ethan Levin and Roberta Walton. For example, as master-coder Ethan races to find and extinguish the bug in his software, he finally realizes that he must first de-code his life; unfortunately, he makes this 'vision quest' unaided and pays the price. And when things happen (to say more would be to divulge too much), all the birds come home to roost. Near novel's end, a dead-on comment made to Ethan from another character galvanizes him to action. His life will never be the same. Ullman has also excellently foreshadowed the novel's seemingly unexpected dénouement; her use of Conway's *GAME OF LIFE* as metaphor, as meaning, is both expert and masterful. The novel's theme resolves in a coruscating coda to the main story. If you are uncertain about reading this novel, try the pages that begin Part 2 (pp 87-95); there is no inherent betrayal of the novel's secrets. Moreover, they were particularly fun to read, and redolent of the late 1990s. What an assured, salutary debut. Highly recommended.

I recently read *The Bug* by Ellen Ullman. She's been one of my favorite writers on computers. Close to the Machine was her memoir of working as a programmer. I thought she'd done an excellent job of explaining what the inner life of programming was like. It's the only book on computers that I've ever insisted that my wife -- a non techie -- read. (She didn't like it, but nevermind.) My anticipation grew as soon as I heard of her new novel. It's about a programmer, a tester and a bug that drives them crazy. My expectations were so high that I worried I could only be disappointed. The book is unsettling and it's taken me some time after reading it to decide what to think of it. Of course, the fact that it's made me think automatically means it's worthwhile. First off, it does a good job of portraying what it's like to work, day after day, programming and testing: the dreadful meetings, the insane deadlines, the endless nerdy humor, the overwhelming technical minutia. Secondly, it's a grim story, and it only gets grimmer as the book progresses. It contains several allusions to *Frankenstein*, and doesn't make programming look much fun; if you're looking for a paean to programming, stick with *Wired*. I checked many reviews from other readers. Mostly, they cited these two aspects -- its verisimilitude and darkness -- as reasons why they did or didn't like it ("too technical", "won't disappoint programmers", "lacks humor", "a cautionary tale"). The surprise ending

certainly made me uncomfortable. The veracity allows it to be quite haunting. The story centers around a bug that is hard to reproduce and that mostly occurs when the product is being demonstrated to investors and potential customers. The cause of this bug is eventually explained. I disagree with several readers who have said that they couldn't believe that this bug could happen or could remain dormant for so long. Bugs often look obvious when you actually find them. Others have sniffed that the code on page 337 actually contains a second bug, which is true enough. It's pretty glaring. I suspect that even non-coders who compare the code to the diagram on the facing page will find it. But this only proves how easy it is for bugs to happen in the first place. (I suspect this bug will be fixed in later editions of the book.) Personally, I appreciated how the story hinges on how the programmer and tester must overcome their mutual hostility before they can work together to eventually understand the cause of the bug. Encouraging programmers and testers to work together better has been a theme I've written about and is central to my own consulting practice. It's nice to see more writing on the topic. The book also offers a bit of advice for consultants. The tester eventually becomes a quality assurance consultant. It's from this vantage point that she narrates the events of the book. She reports that the ruder she became to her clients, the more money they would pay her.

First, let me state that I have a lot of respect for Ms. Ullman as an Essayist on computer technology and techie org behavior. Being a refugee from geekdom, THE BUG: A NOVEL accurately describes the technology and socio-dynamics of writing software in those bygone days. However, the novel is wan and bloodless. Ms. Ullman's prose is crisp and clean to read, but it fails to convey strong emotion. In particular, she misses the potential for the humor, ironic, puerile, or otherwise in the story. THE BUG: A NOVEL is a read that evokes in me a lot of nostalgia, but it is hardly, "gripping, exciting, and compelling".

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