



The Definitive Albert J. Sterne

Julie Bozza

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This edition of the novel incorporates the stories first published separately in the ebook Albert J. Sterne: Future Bright, Past Imperfect.

Albert Sterne, forensics expert with the FBI, is so obnoxious on the surface that no-one bothers digging deeper. When he's sent to Colorado to investigate what turns out to be the work of a serial killer he encounters Special Agent Fletcher Ash and they end up reluctantly joining forces to unravel the case. It's only a matter of duty, though; it can't be more, because Albert doesn't do friendship - and he certainly doesn't do love!

The Definitive Albert J. Sterne Details

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Author : Julie Bozza

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From Reader Review The Definitive Albert J. Sterne for online ebook

Rosa, really says

I was hesitant to buy this book. It's 628 pages, people.

628. PAGES.

That's not a book, that's a major commitment. That's like a marriage: Is *this* the man I want to divorce?

But much like my first engagement (ha, ha, ha – actually I'm completely serious) I said what the hell, sucked it up and opened my screaming wallet. It was \$7.95.

I lost you at \$7.95 didn't I?

Oh, c'mon, people, it's not some NOOB. It's Julie Freakin' Bozza. The author of such wonders as The Apothecary's Garden (love), Butterfly Hunter (no, I haven't read it, but I OWN it) and Homosapien ... a fantasy about pro wrestling. Which is about *wrestling*, fer chissakes. It's not my favorite of her books, but it's at least awesome in its singularity. (It's a gay romance novel...about *wrestling*. It bears repeating.) That's what I love about Julie Bozza; each of her books is so different. She's eclectic and it shows.

Now. Albert J. Sterne. He's kind of a shit. He's isolated and he likes it that way. No, he's not isolated because he has social anxiety and he's waiting for someone to notice that his rose has not yet bloomed and love him into friendliness. He really doesn't like YOU. He's a genius and he isn't afraid to tell you he's a genius. Not to mention that your intelligence is just a micro-drop in the Waterworld-like ocean of his intelligence. If it ever occurred to him to give a shit, he would be confused as to why a simple statement of fact would bother you. Then he would totally dismiss you from his mind.

Somehow, however, he becomes friends, whether he likes it or not, and later more than friends, with rising FBI talent Fletcher Ash. Fletcher is intelligent, handsome & likeable. He has a supportive family. He's also chasing a serial killer, with Albert's help, that completely changes his idea of himself.

This is my experience while reading the book:

It's a little...dry.

I like it.

I wish Albert would unclench his asshole, for, like, FIVE MINUTES.

I like Fletcher (or Ash).

I really like this book.

I really like Albert, even if he still needs to unclench.

This is definitely leaning more toward police procedural than romance, but that's cool.

I HATE THAT FUCKING FLETCHER ASH. I saw it coming, but he really PISSES ME THE FUCK OFF. His major mistake is similar, but different, to Tornado's in Bareback.

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The FBI part is awesome. I don't care if it's factual or not. What do I know from factual?

This book is fantastic.

I love Ash & Albert.

I love this book but I may never read it again 'cause it's such an emotional roller coaster.

I love this book and I'm going to reread it.

But Albert still needs to unclench his asshole.

Then today: Some fuckhead on lendle wants to borrow it? But I *need* it. FINE. Read it. I need to share the love anyway.

I think this is a love it or hate kind of book. It's a bit dry in the beginning, but once you push though that and kind of go with the flow of the novel, it's awesome and singularly different from other MM books.

Also fantastic? This is not the story of how grumpy Mr. Sterne is healed by the powers of Ash's magical penis. There's hope for him at the end, he's changing -- and that makes me happy even if I won't be there to experience it. Bravo, Ms. Bozza!

I highly recommend it. I want to hug it. And, hell, if you don't want to spend \$7.95 I'll let you borrow it. I GUESS.

(I got the ebook, but this one includes Albert J. Sterne: Future Bright, Past Imperfect.)

Maya says

5 stars

“A single flower was staring back at him now, pert in its stubborn survival.”

Not an easy review to write. Not because I didn't like the book, just the opposite, *The Definitive Albert J. Sterne* is one of these books that will stay with me for a long time. It has so many layers that my amateurish review will most likely fail to give it justice, but here I go.

Albert Sterne and Fletcher Ash are two of the most complex and interesting characters I've had the pleasure to read about.

Page by page Julie Bozza reveals the depths of these two characters on the background of, or should I say parallel with, a years-long pursuit of a serial killer. What starts as a friendship between Albert and Fletcher slowly transforms into intimate relationship full of self-doubts, unsaid truths and uncertainties, and yet, one thing is beyond question for the reader – it is love what they share, both deserved and needed. The question is what has to happen for these two men to believe in it. And trust me - it's a journey like no other.

Albert is a perfectionist, both in his job and in his expectations towards other people. He is a scientist and as such has found a scientific explanation for himself of everything including human emotions. He consciously deprives himself of connecting with people since his experience has proven to him that this only leads to disappointment. Albert is convinced that most people don't do their best to achieve their potential which in his opinion is a goal that everyone should chase.

I don't think there's a detailed description of Albert's looks in the book, except to say that he is fit and he keeps his hair very short. He is, however, more than once referred to as ugly and that's mainly because he is either glaring at someone or his facial expression is "*shielded, impatient, a touch of arrogance*".

He doesn't talk a lot and when he does it's usually to make a witty but rude remark. It is often that his silences speak more than him (thankfully, these are decoded by Fletcher). Many times he is described as hard, difficult and unlikable. And these are all true.

So how on earth did I care for Albert so much? I think this is where Julie Bozza's magic comes. Because there were those precious moments when she allowed me to see beneath this hard façade. And there's this person there who doesn't believe he is worthy of love.

Fletcher comes into the story as the main force that will disarm Albert. That much is clear from the first chapters. However, he is no less important character than Albert. Fletcher is an optimist and an idealist, he has strong intuition which is the reason why he sees and understands Albert and deliberately seeks his friendship. He describes himself as extremely selfish (which I didn't believe for a second) and Albert, of course, often refers to him as melodramatic and makes fun of the way he speaks "*using lines from soft porn romance novels*". But Fletcher is also the only person Albert knows who endeavours to reach his potential.

Fletcher not only empathises with the victims but he also feels a strong connection with the killer - he sees the darkness that drives him. And often identifies himself as capable of such evil. When that feeling overwhelms Fletcher, only Albert can keep him sane.

But Albert and Fletcher have something in common.

“You dislike yourself about as much as I hate myself, don’t you, Albert?”

Because of that their relationships has more downs than ups. One of the things I enjoyed the most about this book is how closely the progression of the investigation was linked to the dynamics of the romance between Albert and Fletcher. It starts when Fletcher needs to chase the darkness brought by the serial killer away. And hits bottom when he feels that he is at a dead end with his work.

“I need more from you, Albert. I need your passion.”

“I have none to give you.”

“Don’t be ridiculous, of course you have passion. Bucket-loads of passion.”

“If I did, I wouldn’t trust you with it.”

Then, once Fletcher knows who the killer is and his determination is back, the relationship changes yet again.

“You have a lot of faith in me, Albert.”

“If so, it is not undeserved.”

“This might not be perfect, what we have. It might be fraught with difficulties. You might not be willing to call it love. I might have lost my faith. But, Albert, I’ve come to realize that it’s necessary. You and me together, it’s necessary. That’s all. Very simple, really. And I’m willing to proceed on that basis.”

But don’t get me wrong, none of these changes happen magically after a few exchanged words or because of sudden realizations. It’s all subtle and clever and just perfect. Not to mention how brilliant the ending is.

I must say that John Garret – the serial killer is also a character in the book. His chapters are unsettling to read to say the least, but I felt his presence was necessary and contributed to the story.

Also, this book is over 600 pages but at no point I was bored or felt that it has lost direction. Every chapter mattered.

There’s only one thing that bothered me and it was that there was no chapter from Albert’s POV during the events in March 1985. I wish I knew what was going on in his head at that time.

Highly recommended read.

Trisha Harrington says

[he cheated on Albert and broke up with him. Only to get back together with him. (hide spoiler)]

Rosa, really says

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I highly recommend it. I want to hug it. And, hell, if you don't want to spend \$7.95 I'll let you borrow it. I GUESS.

Lady*M says

The Definitive Albert J. Sterne is not a mystery, although I've seen it labeled as such. The identity of the murderer is known pretty much from the beginning, making this novel a police procedural and a thriller. This isn't a romance either, although a good part of the novel concentrates on the relationship between the two protagonists, but rather a love story and subtle character study. Having said all this, *The Definitive Albert J. Sterne* is a terrific novel, ambitious in both its scope and complexity and it is a wonder that it wasn't picked up by some mainstream publisher. I bet the folks from Manifold Press are happy about it though.

The story is set between 1971 and 1985, a period of change for both the FBI and gay people. Although he's gone, the shadow of Edgar J. Hoover lingers over the FBI, affecting both the agents and public perception. The outbreak of AIDS is a new and present danger. The DNA profiling is still in its infancy. Against this backdrop unfolds the search for the serial killer, organized, controlled and smart as they come, but slowly disintegrating, as well as the evolution of a relationship between two complicated, driven and very different men.

Both the investigation and relationship develop slowly over the years. It is a testament of the author's skill that the story never gets boring. We see how the working relationship between these two people transforms into friendship and then to love. The men are so different that they practically speak different languages. Their relationship is fascinating, occasionally heartbreaking and so complex that a simple review can't even begin to scratch the surface. Along the way, the men learn things about each other and change, but they never change completely and never completely understand each other.

To say that Albert J. Sterne is a forensic expert is an understatement. He specializes in so many fields that it would make anyone's head spin. As Fletcher says, he would be called a genius if people could like him better. But, he is rude, arrogant, repressed and paranoid. He coldly informs his superior of his incompetency and his colleagues — of their stupidity. I alternately cringed and laughed while reading the first pages of the book. The way he loses his virginity speaks volumes. As a reader, I was bought, but his colleagues aren't willing to look beneath the surface. Except Fletcher Ash. Unlike Albert, Fletch is charming, personable, intuitive and curious. It is his curiosity that motivates Fletcher to look beneath Albert's unpleasant veneer as much as his intuition and empathy make him understand the murderer they are after.

Gradually, we learn of Albert's past that damaged him so much. We see how he changes an inch at a time as well as his fears, his loyalty, dry sense of humor, pride and sensuality. There is this lovely symbolic arc that describes these changes and his grudging acceptance of some of them and refusal of others. Albert is obsessively trying over and over to get rid off the plant with blue flowers that grows wild in his garden.

He stood alone in the twilight, staring back at the blue flowers of the rogue groundcover that had infiltrated his garden. He'd fought it long enough. It was time to accept the inevitability. Albert muttered, "Let the damn thing grow.

And, later:

He should never have let the thing grow.

Interestingly enough, it is not Fletcher who falls in love first. But, it is Fletcher who gives himself completely, something Albert isn't capable of. As Fletcher's drive to catch the killer turns into obsession, he loses his ideals and faith in himself. His understanding of the murderer makes him recognize the capacity for evil in himself, something he is conflicted about. Unable to find the comfort he desires with Albert, he looks for it somewhere else. It was heart-wrenching to watch how these men were hurting each other, how miserable they were at times. My heart ached for them and I hoped that they would find the way to happiness. Did they? You'll have to read the book to find out.

The investigation was realistically handled, especially considering its complexity, time span and the fact that the gadgets we all know from *CSI*, at this time, still belong to the realm of science fiction. The rivalries between different law enforcements, the pedestrian data searches, different investigative techniques (especially, analytical vs. intuitive), etc. were all handled well, but it's the portrait of the murderer that stands out. John Garrett is almost a textbook example of a sociopath and represents everything we find so morbidly fascinating in serial killers. The public part of him echoed Ted Bundy with his handsome face and friendly, dependable and respectable social mask. His point of view will be disturbing to some readers, because we get to see things he does to his victims. As the story progresses, his mind and tight control are slowly starting to disintegrate. At first, I was mildly disappointed by the resolution of this story line, but upon reflection I decided this was the only possible outcome, especially considering that Fletch didn't have any official support for his manhunt.

If you are expecting a light, fluffy read, with everything nicely tied and resolved — this book probably isn't for you. Some things remain unanswered, especially concerning Albert's past, his family, his former guardian and some of his sexual misgivings. Fletcher's family also remains strictly in the background: his father, author Peter Ash, is just a voice on the phone, his idolized brother just a reference. Will the author give us a sequel? I, personally, wouldn't mind, but all these answers aren't necessary for this novel to be a fascinating and engrossing read. I can't comment on the accuracy of FBI procedures and description of the cities (and the investigators follow the murderer to many places across the U.S.), because I'm not familiar with them. They seemed genuine enough. However, I've noticed one minor factual error. Albert and Fletcher are discussing the results of their AIDS tests in September 1984. As far as I know, the first commercial AIDS test became available in March 1985.

Finally, there are things this review couldn't touch simply because it would be too long: the writing style that precisely reflected characters' nature (Albert's intellect, Fletcher's idealism, then becoming almost lyrical when the occasion required), all the nuances of characterization, the humor, etc. This isn't a book that you can read during your afternoon break, not just because of its length, but because it requires the reader's entire attention. However, if you have patience and enjoy the challenge and complex characters and relationships, you will be rewarded by this gem of a novel. Highly recommended.

Written for Reviews by Jessewave

Irina says

I have so many thoughts regarding this book, but I'm not sure I want to bore everyone to death with them. So I'll try to be short and to the point.

First, the book is amazing. The plot, the storytelling, and the characters are each a study in itself. Julie Bozza is a wonderful writer. Her style is classy and sophisticated. She keeps her readers on their toes.

A few words about the characters.

Albert. The loner. An intelligent perfectionist, no-nonsense man with the healthy dose of pride and vanity, who's been suppressing his feelings for so long, he considers himself being incapable of such *human* emotions. Had he lived a few centuries ago, I could have easily pictured him sitting in a richly decorated study in a gothic castle situated miles away from any civilisation. I think it would have suited him best.

But despite his impenetrable walls and outer indifference, there's a vulnerable side to Albert, when it comes to Special Agent Fletcher Ash.

Now **Ash**

I could express my disapproval of his actions and frivolous behaviour, but I won't. If there's something I'll take from this book is that there's no black and white in life. Everything could be explained, looked at from both sides and even understood and hopefully forgiven. Doesn't mean it didn't hurt like hell, but

“He had never expected to feel temptation. He wondered if Miles or Rebecca ever had.” ~

Albert

So. Albert understood, too.

Temptation is an intense and usually unexpected impulse. But any human being, single or not, is privy to it. The difference is in whether one is willing to act on it, and, by crossing that line, sacrificing something more precious on the way, making decision to satisfy one fleeting impulse, and by doing so hurt a person you care about immensely.

But there might be reasons for it, explanations. What does one do when something's missing in a relationship? How to move on after some major mistakes, betrayal? Is it possible to save such relationship and reach a compromise without losing one's identity and too much pride? Without losing hope, and friendship, and love? Not to allow bitterness and regrets make your life miserable?

The agony I've gone through reading this book was worth finding those answers. At least, for Albert and Ash. They are so different, yet each of them complements the other perfectly. They have something really special together. And I'm sad to let them go.

The only thing I've missed here is some glorious make up sex. I was running on the painful memory of the X-intruder and everything *they* have done for so long! All I wanted was just little something to erase the nasty images from my mind. It would also have been nice to see Albert acknowledge the missing part of their intimate relationship and try to change his ways or at least indulge Ash on occasion. As it was, it did feel a little *dry*, as some other readers had pointed out already. But I have a suspicion that it was just the author's intention.

The mystery/suspense was perfect, in my opinion. Being in the serial killer's head felt as disturbing as watching a horror movie. It certainly will make me extra weary of any charming, friendly and good-looking men from now on. Lesson learned :)

All in all, highly recommend, with the word of advice to consider it more of a psychological thriller and be patient with the character building for the first half of the book. It will all be worth it in the end.

4.5 stars

P.S.: Looks like I haven't managed to be short, after all. Sorry :)

KatieMc says

Wow, that was excellent. A psychological crime thriller tightly knit into an unconventional love story where the words "this is necessary" become wildly romantic.

Simsala says

Lightyears away from the standard m-m romance.

Or better said, this isn't a romance at all. First and foremost it's a psychological thriller.

An ambitious and complex -and sometimes painfully slow- murder investigation and chase for a serial killer. It's also the story of the relationship between two complicated men who couldn't be more different and how the case affects their unexpected friendship, the slowly growing love for each other and their very lives. >A warning: Sometimes the author let the reader take part at the thoughts, fantasies and actions of the killer so this is not a story for the faint-hearted.<

The Definitive Albert J. Sterne is a terrific book - unusual, fascinating but also emotionally exhaustive.

I'm glad I've read it but thank God it's over!

I'm looking forward to other readers opinions and their more proper and detailed reviews!

A.B. Gayle says

This book is about charm.

The use of it. The abuse of it. The lack of it. The strength of it.

Albert Sterne is not a charming man.

He is impatient, abrupt, arrogant, irascible, the list goes on.

Fletcher Ash, the only person who has managed to penetrate his defensive field, possesses charm in abundance. He gets on with everyone. His work mates. His superiors. He likes people.

On the surface, you'd assume that being charming is a good thing, yet one of the hardest hitting sections of the book involves a scene where Fletcher comes to realize that he's been charmed by someone else. That charm can be used as a weapon.

The villain also charms his victims into a false sense of security before striking like a snake.

It is this shared ability to charm that allows Fletcher to gain an insight into the murderer's psyche.

It is this recognition of the danger of charm that makes Ash seek out a man who doesn't use charm. Inside Fletcher is this fear that he, too, could unleash his natural charm in unethical or criminal ways, and he needs Albert as a counterbalance and foil for this tendency.

There are four linchpins in every murder mystery. Whodunit? What was their motive? How did they do it? And will they get away with it?

The same questions could be addressed to the book itself.

The first? Easy. Julie Bozza spent the majority of her life in Australia but has now returned to England, the land of her birth. Is this relevant? Yes, in that I gather from other reviews that she has some of her facts wrong regarding American FBI procedures. If she has, those errors didn't bother me, as my awareness of them is based on what I've gleaned from TV. Can we be sure that what we see on TV is correct, anyway. Do they follow the same procedures in all cases? And what happens if you have people whose nature ensures they do things their way, not necessarily the correct way? I gather from correspondence that she researched it as much as she could (not just TV), finding in the process that even "Silence of the Lambs" got some facts wrong.

In the end, the procedural aspects didn't bother me because I was too wrapped up in solving the mystery of the people themselves to be bothered about these sorts of things.

The plot itself revolves around one man's obsession in tracking down a serial killer. Given the title, you'd think that man was Albert Sterne, but it's his friend, Fletcher Ash who takes centre stage for most of the book.

For a large section, Albert isn't even physically present, however, the nature of his personality and their relationship still impinge on Ash's actions. As his frustration grows because of his inability to solve the crime and prevent more murders, Albert is the one constant he can depend on. It is Albert who gets him back on track when he goes off the rails. He is the one definite thing in Fletcher's life. The constant.

Albert's irascible nature actually becomes a relief because it is honest. It is who Albert is. He hasn't charmed anyone. Not even Fletcher. If anything, he has held Fletcher at arm's length. Struggling against allowing anyone into his life.

Ash could distract him at the most inopportune moments. A complete waste of energy. But he realized there was no way to undo the damage. He could only hope to minimize its effects, give it the necessary time to wear off.

What a gorgeous way to say he's in love without saying the "I" word.

I enjoy books where you have to decipher the "shows" or the clues, for yourself. Books that are a mystery on another layer. We're not told how much Albert loves Ash. We are told that on one level, he doesn't want to be. But deep down, it's another matter. If you examine the text, paying attention as you read, all sorts of clues crop up to what is really driving him. For example, Albert's obsession with the color blue. The analogy of the weeds that infiltrate his garden. The ones he grudgingly accepts because of their blue flowers that remind him of Fletcher's eyes. The way he cooks and prepares a haven for Fletcher even while verbally

warning him away. The descriptions we get:

Ash's face brightened again, then slowly began to outshine the spring sun.

How can a man who thinks like that be described as cold and unfeeling? Why is he like that might be a better question.

Fletcher has to resort to this type of detection to determine how Albert feels about him. This inability of Albert's to share his feelings and his passion openly frustrate Ash. Hence his need to seek out what he thinks at first is a more honest relationship only to have his eyes opened to some unpleasant truths.

One of the benefits of eReaders is the ability to annotate as I go. I mark paragraphs that strike me as worth remembering, or quoting. By the time I finished reading, I had a stack.

Woven into the text were some thought-provoking comments on society and people in general. At one point, Fletcher has a conversation about minorities with Xavier, a black gay politician:

“A minority people wants to maintain solidarity, to create a home or an identity without internal divisions, so that it can face the rest of the world. They want to present a positive image. So dissidents, like gays within that minority are silenced twice over because they’re disruptive and they’re seen as a negative. You find that with blacks, with Jews, with Chinese Americans, whatever.”

And then he goes on to say later:

”We need to mingle to successfully co-habit this small world of ours, but mingle without imposing templates on everyone. We need to appreciate the individual, celebrate differences rather than persecute them.....a minority within a minority, like gay black men, needs to first find pride and dignity in its own identity, on its own terms....A small group needs to develop authentic self-determination and then they can choose to become part of mainstream society - a part of the wonderful diverse whole that deserves and demands as much respect as any other part.

Wonderful words, and yet Fletcher was later to question this man’s morals.

This concept of good co-existing with evil or at least cold-hearted pragmatism lies at the heart of each of the four cornerstones of this story: Garrett, Xavier, Albert and Ash. It is the struggle to balance these that I found really fascinating.

Does the end justify the means?

How do you determine where that boundary lies? How did Fletcher?

One telling phrase was

“But if I wouldn’t approve of your means and tactics in the hands of a right wing reactionary, then I can’t in all conscience approve of you.”

From a traditional story telling structure, this whole section in the centre of the book, where Albert Sterne is absent breaks all the rules. Yet even though he is not present, what happens here, the need for Fletcher to seek a different type of relationship and what he learns from it are all totally necessary.

Without it, the guilt, the change in direction, the recognition of what was lacking would not have resonated so soundly.

What other structural points make this book stand head and shoulders above the rest? Incorporation of dreams into text. We are slipped into them seamlessly. No italics to jerk us awake. We are as unaware of them as Fletcher is but soon learn to recognize the sign. See them change to reflect the action leading up to it and the inner turmoil that they are reflecting. These aren't the typical m/m romance's clichéd dreams of sex, these are psychologist's bread and butter. Yearnings for connection, fear of failure.

When awake, Fletcher is acutely aware of the problems with their relationship. And so is Albert who recognizes that he

expected too much, as well, and neither could meet the other's needs.

But they keep trying. They don't have hissy fits. They may not lay all the cards on the table when they communicate, but that reflects their own natures and backgrounds.

I have yet to read the follow up story to this, which I gather is a prequel of sorts. I gather it explores their pasts to show how they became the men they are in this book and what motivates them to act the way they do.

Profiling is an important part of whodunits. Building a picture of the perpetrator from the crimes they commit. Trying to gain an understanding about who they are and why they did what they did. In some ways, I've done that with the characters already. It will be interesting to see how accurately I interpreted the clues in this book.

Did the story work? Did Julie get away with doing something different?

Even though it's long, I loved the book and devoured it almost non-stop. For once, the head hopping didn't bother me, because it was necessary. The sections inside the killer's mind are gruesome, but I felt they were needed to heighten the sense that it was important that Fletcher solve the crimes before he struck again. It's not pretty being inside the mind of an evil man, but this is a rare case in a whodunit where I think it is necessary. Not for the graphic details but to see the extreme version where charm is harmful.

It's not an easy read. If you want a light-hearted book about two special agents catching a serial killer with lots of graphic sex, read the Cut and Run series.

In some ways, the relationship between the two men reminded me of Dan and Vadim in Special Forces. But whereas that, too, was a story about a man with irresistible charm and another more dour and introspective, Albert is not Vadim. He's more aware of and sympathetic to the fact that Ash has changed over time.

And even in Fletcher had been there, the fire of him all but irresistible, Albert would still have been wholly unsure how to respond. All he could do was watch that relentless happy optimism of Fletcher's die. All Albert could do was hope this wasn't revenge,

This isn't a romance, but it is a love story. Not romantic love but deeper, more meaningful love.

"One of the reasons I love you," he finally said slowly, "is that you always insist on me doing my best. We both know how often I fall short of the mark but on the important things, you insist and I try."

Trust and respect mean more than the three easy words. In this case, two simple words broke through the barriers he'd erected

"It's necessary.

I'm so glad others who have read this story liked it and appreciated it.

Rebecka says

Crime stories are not for me, yet this is so perfect that it doesn't matter that it's a crime story, it still gets 5 stars. EVERYTHING about this book is perfect, and reading it made me really, really happy. Now let's see how many times I can use the word "perfect" in the review.

The thing about murders and all that is that it may be OK as a movie or a tv-series or something, 1-2 hours of grim entertainment. But spending days reading about it? I just don't find the idea very appealing; I'd rather read about actual murders in that case. With Bozza, however, the crime story in itself doesn't matter. There's nothing spectacular about it, classic serial killer theme. It's the characters and how they relate to the story that is interesting. No, not interesting; fascinating.

NOTHING about the entire story rubbed me the wrong way. No detail anywhere had me sighing in exasperation, wishing the author just hadn't gone *there*, and I'm the kind of reader I would hate to bits if I were an author myself. Following the murderer, seeing his perspective? Brilliantly done. I enjoyed reading about him, he's actually credible and not just a one dimensional monster. The change of perspective between Sterne, Ash and Gareth? Perfect. I could identify with all three of them. The amount of grisly details? Perfect. You understand the terror, anxiety and pleasure on behalf of victim/murderer respectively, you get to experience Ash's *reluctance with understanding*, and Sterne's utter indifference. Some poorly executed books go too far, like *Cut & Run*, with childish killers that are supposed to shock with their oh-so-clever modus operandi. Some well written books can go too far and beyond and it works, like *Waiting in the throes*, where you need all the horror to understand the complete and utter breaking of a person. Here? You don't need that much, and that's the point - it's perfectly portioned out. It's just right. Lagom.

I thought I would love Sterne about this book, and that would be that. Obviously, he's my dream come true (I've got the exact same awesome skills as he when it comes to comforting people in distress), but having finished the book, I realize that I love everything about it just as much as I love Sterne. This isn't a cute and sweet MM romance. There isn't even a lot of sex, lots of it is fade to black and what scenes there are aren't that explicit, yet it's perfect. No melodrama, because Albert efficiently nips that crap in the bud every single time. I want him in all books to just shut whiney characters up before they ruin book after book!

I'm utterly impressed by Bozza. I previously read her *The Apothecary's Garden*, and that one just got 3 stars from me. But this? I can't even tell it's written by the same author, and now I'm thrilled about seeing what else she has produced.

I could go on, but at the same time I'm at a loss for words and I can't really explain how awesome this book is. I'm sad it's over. So, time for some funny quotes (I'm not sure they count as spoiler:ish, but still). Because yeah, the book is funny as hell as well.

(view spoiler)

R * A Reader Obsessed * says

I'm going to be one of the few who didn't like this book, mainly stemming from how this did not encompass the qualities of how I like my romance.

Now I *know* not every book has to have hearts and flowers or epic love, and I *know* that not every book has to be erotic or titillating - but I honestly could not quite wrap my head around, nor fully understand, the "grand love" depicted here, for it left me feeling mostly frustrated and sad.

This is mainly a murder mystery where two G-men, Special Agent Fletcher Ash and forensic pathologist Albert Sterne, try to catch an elusive serial killer over the course of several years. While they work together, their relationship evolves and grows more and more complex.

As a warning, there was nothing overt when it came to these two. Rather, it focused on the immense genius of Albert and the dogged determination of Fletcher, as they work case after case of various murdered victims. Fletcher is the only one who sees beyond the hard mask Albert presents to the world. It goes from admiration of Albert's skills, to a confounding friendship that slowly evolves into a codependent relationship - a relationship that Albert refuses to acknowledge. He doesn't need emotions, melodrama, or intimacy; he doesn't want it, nor does he think he deserves it, and damn Fletcher for putting him in such a position! In turn, this was understandably aggravating, as Fletcher tries to get Albert to concede more and more, and Fletcher must grapple with how much he'll compromise to be happy and to keep Albert in his life. Equal weight was put on the sadistic serial killer, and it became a procedural in and amongst the convoluted dance between these two men.

Maybe it's that very dance that many readers loved and appreciated. However, I often wanted to throttle Albert for his resistance in letting his barriers down, and I scratched my head at Fletcher's subjecting himself to such torture. Albert's need and want was not lacking, but the need for control often won out.

I get the conundrum of why someone is just *it* for the other; sometimes it's just unexplainable. Alas, I didn't quite understand the push/pull of these two, and despite the rare, sweet gesture, I couldn't really rejoice in Albert and Fletcher's win. If you want realism (for I know every relationship is far from perfect), then this is probably right up your alley. For me, I read to escape, and this left me with too little, too late, regarding their supposed HEA.

Lena♥Ribka says

OhmanOhmanOhman

I really don't know how to rate this book.

As I picked it up I hoped to find a well written mystery and the beginning didn't give away, not in the slightest way, that it was NOT a mystery!(If you're looking for a mystery, then you should look for it somewhere else.) The part about chasing a serial killer is incidental here.

I also can't say that it is a romance book, but the relationship between two VERY different men, between Albert, an FBI forensics expert, and Special Agent Fletcher Ash, who is obseesesed with the idea to find a murderer but who is not very persuasive in his attempts, is the main focus of this book. And it is exactly where I have my issues. I just can't believe that this relationship can and could work. The idea itself is interesting but less credible.

The first half of the book was a pure struggle for me – an extremely slow pace of the story and the absence of any investigating activities, my permanent disconnection to the MCs, and my desperate waiting for something to happen here was almost the reason for my DNF. But something kept my attention on the story, that I can't put in words. Maybe it was the unique writing style of Julie Bozza, or maybe a simple human curiosity supported by highly appraised reviews from my GR friends.

And now, when I managed to finish it, I would say, you should give it a try. Not everyone's cuppa, but for sure something very unusual.

Ije the Devourer of Books says

What a masterpiece!!

An excellent story!!

Epic!!

And incredibly long!!

But incredibly and deeply enjoyable.

This book took me ages to read but it was worth it!! I read the paperback version and it is somewhat heavy

because it combines two books - the Definitive Albert and Future Bright, Past Imperfect.

Despite the heaviness of the paperback I was not deterred and I was determined to enjoy my reading experience. So I luggered this book all over London, up and down on my journeys to work because I simply couldn't put it down and I don't really know how to do it justice in a review.

I read it in the bath, red it in bed, took it to Southwark Cathedral, Costa Coffee, Cafe Nero, work, the coffee place down the road, University College Hospital, and the tube. I have had this book as my constant companion over the last month.

I took this book everywhere. And the characters travelled with me and it was an excellent journey.

The story has a 'Silence of the Lambs' feel to it with a serial killer who commits his crimes over a number of years, and the FBI detective (Fletcher Ash) and the forensics expert (Albert Sterne) who eventually track him down. That is exciting enough but there is more to this story.

Albert is a highly talented forensics expert but he is terse, unfriendly, rude and most people in Bureau keep well away from him. He has no friends and he quite likes it that way. Ash on the other hand is someone who desires love and actively seeks friendship from men and women. He is talented, able to see and discern things that most people miss and he is able to see things about Albert that most people miss.

Not only do these two men manage over the years to track down the ruthless serial killer, they also find the most unlikely love in an unlikely relationship with each other.

The best thing about the story was that the crime was not easily solved. The reader gets to know who the murderer is and enters into his history and psychotic personality. This is a bit nerve wracking because the reader is then present when some of the murders are happening and they are brutal. The reader gets to experience the long dogged investigation which takes place over a number of years as the relationship between Albert and Ash has its ups and downs.

Then at the end the reader gets to experience the confrontation and psychological battles between the two men and the murderer as they confront him and do their best to bring him to justice, struggling to find the evidence they need and battling with their own justice system.

This book is truly excellent and worthy of much more than a measly five stars. It has found a place on my list of exquisite reads for 2014. That is my creme de la creme list and any book on that list is a book that has touched me deeply and delighted me. These are the books that I will remember for years after reading them and this story is definitely one of them.

Julie Bozza is an excellent author, so unique with her own innovative way of telling stories. I find this refreshing and will read anything and everything she writes.

Krissie says

This was simply wonderful. I need to read the companion piece and when I'm finished with that, I might even break my self-conscious and lazy habit of not writing reviews. I think I might need some light read

before the sequel though, because while wonderful, it was also emotionally exhausting.

Sofia says

One of those books that left me incoherent and it took me a couple of days to digest and write some things down. I say some because lots of thoughts, feelings remain floating hazily in my mind.

Bozza's writing has the chameleon-like quality of adapting to story, circumstance and character. Yes, as so many have said before me, this book is dry but then, Albert is dry, no effusions or emotions from him, not even an extra word if not absolutely necessary.

Both Garrett and Albert have been dealt a bad hand, dealing with it, has its effect on them and on others. Whilst Albert has ideals and lives strictly by them, Garrett rebels and creates havoc. Enter Ash, an uncompromising idealist with his love for one and his revulsion for the other but with empathy for both. The darkness of Garrett in contrast with the honesty and charm of Fletcher tempered by the pragmatic Albert.

In the midst of the hunt for the serial killer, Bozza touches difficult themes like:

- *do compromising our ideals take away the value of the ideal.
- *If a partner does not fulfil our needs, what are our options?
- *whether we lose in conforming whatever we gain in solidarity.

My first love in this story is Albert. A man who has rooted out all but the basic wants from himself. **Because to expect, to want, to need is to make yourself vulnerable, open to pain.** So, tight and controlled with others but even more so with himself, as if, allowing some expression of feeling, would result in some great pain, as if he could not even allow himself to dream of love, let alone be loved. I wanted so much to reach in and help him out. The slow unfold of Albert is a masterpiece.

But mostly there was need, an age-old need, that few would fail to recognise.

No instant cure here, and that is truly magical, the magic of living with hurt and slowly bit by bit making it through. I left Albert still unfolding and happy that this was so. The last scene is so simple, but brilliant.

Loved it, love Albert most of all, love Ash as well (view spoiler). I say love not loved because the love is still current, they are still out there and Albert is still unfolding, could not accept it otherwise.
