The Bug: A Novel

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Author of *By Blood* and *Close to the Machine*

THE BUG
A Novel

ELLEN
ULLMAN

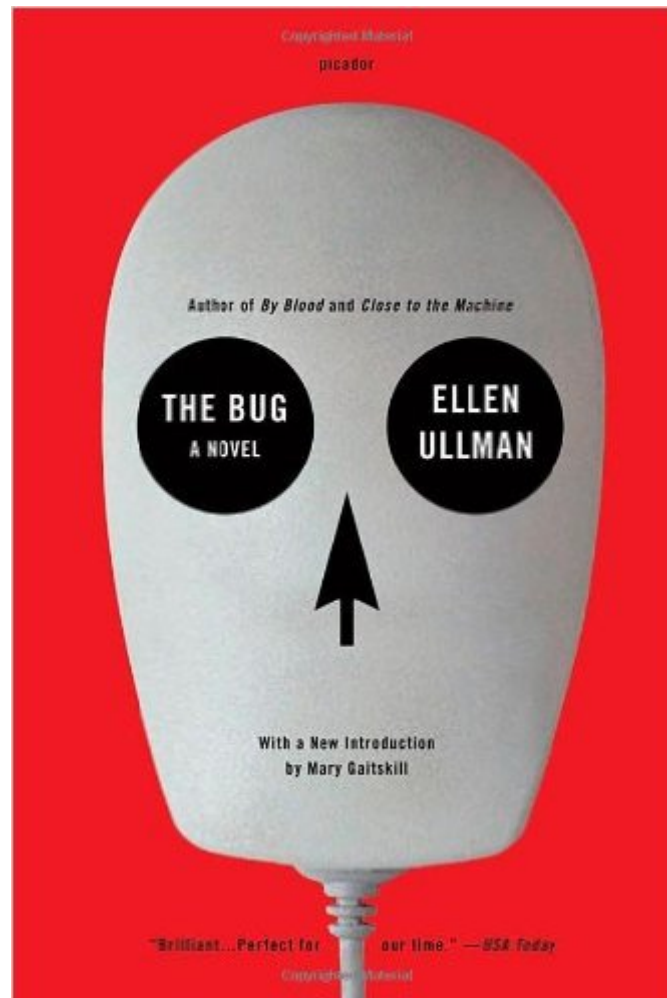With a New Introduction
by Mary Gaitskill

"Brilliant...Perfect for ___ our time." —*USA Today*

Synopsis

With a New Introduction by Mary Gaitskill A PEN/Hemingway Award Finalist A New York Times Book Review Notable Book Ellen Ullman is a "rarity, a computer programmer with a poet's feeling for language" (Laura Miller, Salon). The Bug breaks new ground in literary fiction, offering us a deep look into the internal lives of people in the technical world. Set in a start-up company in 1984, this highly acclaimed first novel explores what happens when a baffling software flawâ •a bug so teasing it is named "the Jester"â •threatens the survival of the humans beings who created it.

Book Information

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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.

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 its 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 peaen to programming, stick with Wired.I checked many reviews from other readers. Mostly, they cited these two aspects -- its versimilitude and darkness -- as reasons why they did or didn't like it ("too technical", "won't dissapoint 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.

This is one of the most impressive novels I've read in the last few years. It takes on issues of love, hate, ego and the much written about "human condition" and views them through what to most outsiders seems the most inhuman world of computer technology and software engineering. It takes the reader into the soul of the machine as only a few non-fiction works have previously done - "The Soul Of The New Machine" and Clifford Stoll's "The Cuckoo's Egg" spring to mind - and weaves a

very human story of love, betrayal and madness around and within it.Ullman's writing is clean, precise and emotionally spot-on, her characters are all too real to anyone who has worked in the software industry. Ethan Levin, software engineer lost between the world of dbx, cc and his broken relationships with human beings, is finely drawn and involving. A flawed tragic character descending into a madness Shakespeare would have recognised instantly. Roberta the software tester and former linguist who becomes a programmer as Ethan decays in front of her is also tragic, lost and very human, if more capable than Ethan of introspection and thus survival.The wisdom with popular science books is that for every equation they contain the readership is cut in half. I would have thought things would be at least as bad for a novel that contains C code... but not in this case. Ullman fits the technical explanations and some code into the text with admirable dexterity and clarity that anyone should be able to follow. It was a very brave course to take, it could easily have ended up as an indigestible geeky info dump, but she pulls it off extremley well.

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