



# Mermaids

*Patty Dann*

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## Mermaids Patty Dann

*"Mrs. Flax was happiest when she was leaving a place, but I wanted to stay put long enough to fall down crazy and hear the Word of God. I always called my mother Mrs. Flax."*

So begins this extraordinary first novel about one wild year in the life of fourteen-year-old Charlotte Flax, when she and her sister Kate move with Mrs. Flax into a sleepy 1960's Massachusetts town. Mrs. Flax is a woman who wears polka-dot dresses and serves hors d'oeuvres for dinner every night, and Kate is a child who basically wants to be a fish.

And then there's Charlotte, who in Patty Dann's hands, is transformed into a young woman of infinite whim and variety. Charlotte's main ambition in life is to become a saint, preferably martyred, though she's Jewish. She's smitten with the shy young caretaker at the convent at the top of the hill. Dann has created a young girl who accepts the unkindness of the mad universe in which she's whirling and takes it on with a savage glee.

Charlotte Flax is like no one you have ever met--and someone you know very well.

## Mermaids Details

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## From Reader Review Mermaids for online ebook

### Joshua Gross says

I had always loved the movie Mermaids and when I watched it again yesterday I noticed that it was based on a book. I don't know how I managed to miss that, but I immediately went on to Amazon and got the book to read. The movie was surprisingly true to the book, but there were some parts that weren't in the movie that were just as interesting. I love Mrs. Flax and the fact that she only makes hors d'oeuvres, and the book went into a little more detail. I mean, she goes grocery shopping, she just uses the groceries to make hors d'oeuvres instead of meals, which can be just as in-depth as making a meal. And Patty Dann occasionally mentions what kind of hors d'oeuvres they're having. There was an interesting chapter in which Charlotte goes to visit the convent to speak to the Mother Superior, who had invited her to come speak to her about anything she wanted if she ever needed to. I thought this might be good for Charlotte to talk about what was going through her head and whatnot, but Mother Superior brought out cookies for them to eat (which was obviously her little addiction), and they sat there and ate cookies the whole time while Mother Superior talked about herself. Patty Dann did an excellent job of writing for Charlotte, she captured Charlotte teenage selfishness and confusion quite well. Even when the president is assassinated it's really on the periphery of Charlotte's awareness, despite the fact Charlotte's one desire is to be a selfless saint. I also like that Joe was a much more fully realized character than he was in the movie, and I found him to be particularly interesting and tragic in his own way. While the movie gave Mrs. Flax some character development through her relationship with Lou, the book focused more on Charlotte's journey to become a woman, which she's well on her way to becoming at the end when she realizes she's looking at things from a slightly different perspective. I also thought it was interesting and kind of funny that the guidance counselor at the school left her husband because she was in a lesbian relationship with the swim coach. Kate seemed not only just distraught that her swim coach left, but equally distraught that she'd been kissing another woman 'on the lips.' I really enjoy the setting, the time period, the characters, and the progression of the story. Charlotte is obviously seeking out some sort of permanence and virtue because of her mother, who never wants to stay in the same place for longer than a year, and lives a rather 'free' lifestyle for the time period. This is also a contrast to Kate, who simply has her own way of doing things and own interests and doesn't really seem to be bothered by her weirdo mother and sister. This was a enjoyable and fast read with a underlying depth and meaning that I appreciated just as much as the movie.

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### Chelsea says

This book was recommended to me by a friend, so I agreed to read it despite not liking the sound of it from the descriptions on the back and the jacket. I should have stuck with my initial intuition and not read it. I'm not sure what she liked about it, but religious undertones, pedophilia, and child neglect don't do it for me....maybe that's just me. I would NOT recommend this book to others, but all things aside I DID read the whole book, so maybe it's attraction is that it keeps you curious to find out what happens in the end.

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### ~ToniG~ says

Was I the only person in the whole wide universe who did not know this was a book first? I think I was.

I discovered this very interesting read at the local library. I loved the movie and was very excited to make this discovery. Then I read it...

Way darker than the movie to me, though Mrs. Flax seemed to care a bit more that Miss Charlotte was seeing a waaay older man. It was disturbing how old he was really. Speaking of Joe, did anyone else think he was a bit...special? It seemed that he always lived in his head, and even the dialogue with Joe and Charlotte was like two people speaking to each other in two different languages.

There was something in that water because Lou was also a very special one. Not charming at all like the movie. I did feel a bit sorry for the Nun though.

Also, what was up with the father coming in and out the picture but never seen his daughter? The mom allowed it and that was what really killed me about this book. I am so glad the movie did not have this bit in there.

Bottom line: Interesting to say the least. The first and only time I will say I prefer the movie to the book.

My Ops,  
Toni

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### **Kerri says**

Weird book. Can't believe they made a movie (Cher, Winona Ryder, Christina Ricci) out of this. The story seemed pointless and depressing unless you are into teen sex, statutory rape, child neglect, religion, and psychological trauma. Can't recommend.

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### **B. says**

The content of this book makes me surprised that it's marketed to teens. Not that teen novels should be prudish - but the religious undercurrent, uncomfortable sexual relationship, and ultimate message are a bit twisted and heavy for what appears to be just a quirky story about growing up. The story centers around the Flax family: Mrs. Flax, the wayward mother, who has moved her family to avoid her sexual reputation catching up to her 18 times; Charlotte, her 14-year-old daughter who resents this lifestyle to the extent of desiring to become a nun; and Kate, the baby of the family who would rather be underwater than dealing with this. Much of Charlotte's angst in the story stems from not wanting to be like her mother, and desperately wanting a stable family. She fantasizes about her estranged father. This parental abandonment compounded by her budding sexuality is probably what led to Charlotte's love affair with Joe, the 29-year-old groundskeeper at the convent.

The book takes on a navel-gazing quality, with much of the content being Charlotte's fantasies, thoughts and angst. These characters all seem to live inside their own heads, even in conversation. When JFK is shot, Charlotte angsts that she doesn't angst about it. The reverend mother at the convent is absorbed in her past youth and wish to be in love. This trait makes some characters almost pathetic, particularly Lou and Joe. Lou is near obsessed with his ex-wife.

...and Joe is a forlorn predator. The biggest objection I had with this book is the end after the scene of Joe having sex with Charlotte, both of them losing their virginity. It was extraordinarily uncomfortable, but not because of how it was construed. There's no indication that this statutory rape was harmful. The novel ends shortly after, and essentially Joe skips town and Charlotte only gets an occasional postcard from him after. Charlotte may or may not be pregnant. But she's only complacent. The book ends before we can see any sort of consequences for Joe's actions here. Was it purposeful, to show that Charlotte's world of religion - divine punishment for sins and clear-cut morality - doesn't work in the real world? I don't know. It could have worked with better framing. Had this been written from Joe's point of view, it would be strangely quasi-Lolita: a desperate man preying on a young girl, caring only enough to essentially dispose of her role in his life after consummating the relationship. Instead he's just a handsome, Italian taste of forbidden fruit. This also, to me, makes the book fail as a coming-of-age story - after what is arguably the most important event, we can't see Charlotte change or even react, because the book is cut short and we do not learn much of her feelings afterwards.

This was certainly an interesting novel, but I don't think it's a good teen read. Its ultimate message and the trait that ties its characters - a certain disregard for everything but their own fantasy worlds - is too bleak. It's like a jaded comment on the adult world.

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### **Theediscerning says**

This little time capsule takes you right back to late '80s American quirk. A young lass with a fly-by-night, live-by-the-hem-of-her-knickers mother can't decide whether she wants to be the saintliest girl around, or rogered any which way by any man she can get. It's a bizarre look at a hormonal teenager, and her younger sister being such an aquatically-minded sibling only adds to the oddities. It's not exactly funny, it's not particularly daring, it's certainly not a revelatory read - but heck, at least it's not been turned into an awful Cher vehicle. I dare say, skinny-dipping and flashing Christs included, it's a lot darker than the Hollywood froth that it begat, and so all the better for it, but it's still not great.

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### **Jillian Marie says**

I love, love, love this book! It's not just about coming of age, but it's about the relationship between mother and daughter have each others roles. The movie is actually very similar to the book which is amazing.

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### **Nicola Byrne says**

I love the concept of this story, but most of it being told through Charlotte ruins it, in my opinion. I would have much preferred to see more dialogue from the likes of Joe and Lou, instead of having to decipher their words through Charlotte's rambles. This fourteen-year-old girl has some serious problems. Granted she's a teenager; she's confused about everything, which is perfectly fine. But she's also completely neurotic, and her inability to stick to one thought makes this an exhausting read.

Just when she's saying something, and her story is picking up motion, Charlotte goes off on one of her wandering walks through her mind, talking about people who've said this and said that, and mentioning things they did and pointing out things they would never dream of doing in this God given lifetime, making

the reader forget what it was she was even talking about to begin with.

That sentence/paragraph really sums up a lot of what's going on in this book: whole chapters of ramblings. I found the whole thing exhausting, to be honest. I like to read a book to relax, and this was the least relaxing book I think I've ever read. I really wanted to enjoy it, and tried to, but it just didn't do it for me. Perhaps I'm just particularly impatient and like a book to hook me immediately and make me beg for more, but honestly this novel didn't even interest me in the slightest.

There was on scene where Charlotte goes to see Mother Superior at the convent. It could have been an opportunity for the character to get help perhaps, but the author chose it as an outlet for the nun to tell her story, which I found to be the most interesting part of the book. Her little talk to Charlotte was in fact the only thing I liked about it. I had to force myself to continue reading this, as I really didn't want to. The thoughts of reading the next novel on my list is what got me through it. Picking it up, felt like I had an assignment to do for school on a subject I hate, and that's not a feeling you want when you're trying to unwind with a book.

I saw the film years ago, and I know you should never judge a book by the movie, which I didn't, in this case. I found the movie very endearing and I think it succeeded in portraying the characters and the story in a way that viewers would understand and relate to. Whereas I think the book failed to do that here.

I gave it two stars instead of one because, as I said earlier, I understand the concept and what the author was trying to do, (and maybe I wanted to like it so much that I couldn't bear to give it just one star). In saying that, I won't be reading this again in a hurry.

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### **Jillian Haro says**

Honestly, LOVE this book. It was a quick read that took me two days. I had watched the movie first, though. And I gotta say, I love it when a movie compliments the book completely. Almost exactly the same as the book. I love the sarcasm and the dark comedy. xx

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### **Carol Hardesty says**

This is a pretty quirky, somewhat realistic coming-of-age story. Though it is pretty sad to see such an innocent girl like Charlotte lose that virtue (and her virginity to boot). The best part was when Mrs. Flax came out in her mermaid costume and she and the girls had real fun for once.

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### **Markie says**

I picked this book up somewhere years ago, vaguely remembering the film, and finally got around to reading it. I think this might be a rare instance when the film is better than the book. The plot and characterization is funny but a bit bland.

It's 1963 and the superficially independent women of the Flax family—Mrs. Flax, teenage Charlotte and

young Kate—are nonetheless ruled by their encounters with men or lack thereof.

They move frequently cross country when things start getting serious with Mrs. Flax's latest local boyfriend. Charlotte wants to hear the Word of God and be a nun or a saint but can't help sinning by falling in love. And Kate's obsession with swimming stems from the only fact she knows about her absent father—he was an Olympic hopeful swimmer. Will they ever learn to stop defining their lives by male absence?

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## **GlowingFalkor says**

The rare time when the movie actually WAS better.

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## **Tory says**

"I pinched my cheeks for color and tried to keep my eyes open as wide as I could. I wanted to be the most gorgeous woman on the planet Earth, so gorgeous that Joe would kneel in front of the whole town and beg me to run away and live in a teepee with him."

It was strange reading a book that is the original of a movie I have watched countless times and love so much. I didn't even know it was a book until I happened upon it at the bookstore recently.

I could hear Movie Charlotte's voice (Winona Ryder) narrating. And she fit perfectly.

The book, even though it was a super skinny novel (150 pages with huge font) it went much deeper into Charlotte and Joe's relationship. In the movie, Joe just seemed a bit strange, quiet. Yet, Charlotte was also a bit strange, so it worked out ok. But in the book, they had actual conversations, and it was less Charlotte throwing herself at him (awkward scene at the bus door? Didn't happen) as him asking her along and telling her his life story. Also? Even more relevant, Joe was a VIRGIN. So, at 29 and 14, when they became lovers, they were the first for both.

Also, in the book Charlotte spent time with the Mother Superior and had a job at the shoe store. Mrs. Flax and Lou weren't as close as they were in the movie.

So, I pretty much had to love the book, as I already loved the movie. It was funny, and cringeworthy. Quirky and sweet. A story of a girl trying so hard to forge connections and find herself while moving around the country constantly

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## **Stefania says**

Prima di commentare questa storia, vorrei porre una domanda: cosa si è fumato chiunque abbia scritto la quarta di copertina prima di scriverla?

Da qui leggiamo che Cher, la mamma, alias "la signora Flax" è una persona avara e che spende solo soldi per sé tralasciando le povere figlie, le quali decidono quindi di rifugiarsi in un mondo immaginario.

Com'è veramente la storia: la signora Flax e le sue due figlie cambiano in continuazione casa, a seconda

dell'umore della mamma, ed ora sono approdate a Grove (che Charlotte dice essere in Massachussetts..secondo wikipedia non è così, ma fa lo stesso).

La storia è narrata dalla figlia più grande, Charlotte, di 14 anni, la quale passa tutte le 159 pagine del libro ad ammorbare il lettore con 3 argomenti:

- quanto odia quella gatta morta di sua madre;
- quanto vorrebbe farsi suora, e di come il suo corpo sia un sacro tempio in attesa di sentire la voce del Signore;
- allo stesso tempo, quanto vorrebbe andare a letto con praticamente tutta la popolazione maschile di sua conoscenza.

L'unica avarizia che riconosco in questa storia è di sentimenti; sia di Charlotte verso la madre, sia (e soprattutto) della signora Flax verso Charlotte, che ignora tanto quanto ama la figlia più piccola, Kate.

Il millantato mondo immaginario si riduce a qualche scenetta verso la fine del libro dove le ragazze sono a casa da sole e fanno finta di essere mamma e papà mentre preparano e mangiano la cena.

E le sirene in tutto ciò? ah boh, l'unico accenno alla sirene si riduce in un paragrafetto misero a metà libro in cui si descrive il costume, da sirena appunto, che la signora Flax ha noleggiato per la festa in costume di capodanno tenuta dai vicini.

Comunque, il personaggio più fastidioso di tutto il libro è proprio Charlotte: una lamentela unica dall'inizio alla fine, prima perché si vuole fare suora ma il Signore non le parla, poi perché il ragazzo che le piace sembra fare il filo alla madre, poi perché la sua massima aspirazione è diventare santa (anche se è ebrea) così da essere ammirata da tutti.

La parte più assurda, e che mi ricorda tanto le domande del Cioè, è quando si bacia con Joe e va avanti per circa 10 pagine a dire di essere rimasta incinta!ma daaiiii.....

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## **Christina (A Reader of Fictions) says**

For more reviews, Cover Snark and more, visit A Reader of Fictions.

Fact #1: Mermaids came out in 1967.

Fact #2: Mermaids is not about mermaids.

Fact #3: Mermaids was made into a movie starring Cher as Mrs. Flax, the wild mother, Winona Ryder as the older daughter, and Christina Ricci as the younger daughter. Though I haven't seen the movie, this is the perfect cast for this book, which ought to tell you something.

Guys, this book was strange. Mostly, it was actually a pretty normal YA plotline, not that YA really existed back in the day, when I guess this must have been the shortest adult novel ever, since I don't imagine it would have been given to children. The Flaxes are a dysfunctional family (is there any other kind?) headed by Mrs. Flax. She's a single parent, with two girls, Charlotte and Kate, both with different fathers. The family moves constantly, whenever Mrs. Flax's romance du jour turns south.

Unsurprisingly, Charlotte holds a lot of resentment for Mrs. Flax, which is what she calls her all the time.



Children tend, most often to admire their parents and want to be like them or to want to be the total opposite. Charlotte's the latter sort, only, for her, rebelling means religion, high-necked dresses, and a desire to become a saint (even though her family is Jewish). Her little asides about saints are hilarious and, oh my, how I can picture Winona Ryder being perfection at this. At the same time, though, Charlotte's actually got a lot in common with her mother, and even feels jealous of her mother's popularity. Also unsurprising is that Charlotte has some daddy issues. She has a picture of his shoes and hopes to identify him this way (lol, gurl, not happening).

For all the tension between Charlotte and Mrs. Flax, the family's actually fairly loving overall. Charlotte's not thrilled about the situation, but she's also a teen and that tends to go along with moping. Both Charlotte and Mrs. Flax dote on Kate, who ties them together into a family unit. Mrs. Flax's endless string of affairs has clearly affected Charlotte's psyche in a really unhealthy way, but she's not intentionally abusive. Some people just aren't good parents unfortunately.

Mermaids is about Charlotte transitioning from a girl to a woman, and hoping that the family will finally stay in one place for a while. Fourteen-year-old Charlotte, daddy issues hard at work, crushes hard on twenty-nine-year-old Joe. You guys, I was super not cool with the romance plot or how the ending went freaking bananas, all of which I must spoiler tag. [View Spoiler »](#) Go home, book. You're drunk.

The audiobook was a really pleasant way to read the story, especially since it was only four hours. That took no time at all. (Well, actually, it took 4 hours.) Aaaanyway, I thought Elizabeth Evans did a good job portraying Charlotte, both the naivete and the know-it-all superiority sides of her character. She does a convincing teen voice, without sounding like an older woman trying to sound like a teen.

I would kind of like to watch the movie now, but it's not on Netflix Watch Instantly. I shall have to see if I can rustle it up somewhere. This was a weird, creepy, and entertaining read.

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