



## Julia's Chocolates

*Cathy Lamb*

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## **Julia's Chocolates** Cathy Lamb

"I left my wedding dress hanging in a tree somewhere in North Dakota. I don't know why that particular tree appealed to me. Perhaps it was because it looked as if it had given up and died years ago and was still standing because it didn't know what else to do..."

In her deliciously funny, heartfelt, and moving debut, Cathy Lamb introduces some of the most wonderfully eccentric women since *The Divine Secrets of the Ya-Ya Sisterhood* and *The Secret Life of Bees*, as she explores the many ways we find the road home.

From the moment Julia Bennett leaves her abusive Boston fiancé at the altar and her ugly wedding dress hanging from a tree in North Dakota, she knows she's driving away from the old Julia, but what she's driving toward is as messy and undefined as her own wounded soul. The old Julia dug her way out of a tortured, trailer park childhood with a monster of a mother. The new Julia will be found at her Aunt Lydia's rambling, hundred-year-old farmhouse outside Golden, Oregon.

There, among uppity chickens and toilet bowl planters, Julia is welcomed by an eccentric, warm, and often wise clan of women, including a psychic, a minister's unhappy wife, an abused mother of four, and Aunt Lydia herself--a woman who is as fierce and independent as they come. Meeting once a week for drinks and the baring of souls, it becomes clear that every woman holds secrets that keep her from happiness. But what will it take for them to brave becoming their true selves? For Julia, it's chocolate. All her life, baking has been her therapy and her refuge, a way to heal wounds and make friends. Nobody anywhere makes chocolates as good as Julia's, and now, chocolate just might change her life--and bring her love when she least expects it. But it can't keep her safe. As Julia gradually opens her heart to new life, new friendships, and a new man, the past is catching up to her. And this time, she will not be able to run but will have to face it head on.

Filled with warmth, love, and truth, *Julia's Chocolates* is an unforgettable novel of hope and healing that explores the hurts we keep deep in our hearts, the love that liberates us, the courage that defines us, and the chocolate that just might take us there.

## **Julia's Chocolates Details**

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# From Reader Review *Julia's Chocolates* for online ebook

## Sherry Gorman says

“I left my wedding dress hanging on a tree somewhere in North Dakota.”

These are the captivating words Cathy Lamb selected to begin her wonderfully crafted novel, *Julia's Chocolates*. The mental image of a pristine wedding dress hanging limply from a lonely tree in the middle of nowhere is nothing short of genius. From that sentence on, I had to know what one has to do with the other.

Julia Bennett is no stranger to abuse. Growing up neglected by her mother and abused at the hands of her mother's train of boyfriends, Julia finds herself trapped in a repeat the cycle with her fiancée, Robert. After years of enduring physical, sexual, and verbal insults at the hands of the man she is about to marry, Julia has a moment of clarity on the day of her wedding. She reacts by fleeing to the sanctity of her beloved Aunt Lydia's farm in a small Oregon town. On her way across the country, Julia stops in North Dakota and heaves her wedding gown over a roadside tree.

At Aunt Lydia's eccentric farm, the story unfolds when five flawed women come together to offer one another love and support. Each character is delightfully unique and colorful. Julia, who is overweight, cursed with massive breasts, and afraid to love another man uses the creation of chocolate masterpieces as an escape. Aunt Lydia grows her own marijuana, keeps the love of her life at arms length, and embraces the female spirit in a host of hilarious scenes. Katie works herself ragged to support her children and her alcoholic husband. At the same time, she does her best to shield her kids from their cruel and selfish father. Lara, a prim and proper closet alcoholic, grew up brainwashed and intimidated by the constant barrage of Christianity forcefully imposed upon her by her father. She frees herself from her father's control only to marry the town pastor. Attempting to be the perfect wife, Lara is slowly dying inside. Caroline is the quirky town psychic with an uncontrollable twitchy eye.

Through their weekly rendezvous referred to as “psychic nights” the women develop deep bonds with one another. They also begin individual journeys of self-discovery and tackle the demons that have held them hostage for so much of their lives.

*Julia's Chocolates* is a novel that addresses a host of serious issues: body image, sexual, physical and emotional abuse, alcoholism, homosexuality, domination through religion, and stalking. Yet the real story is the beauty of the female spirit. The characters aren't perfect, each of their lives messed up to varying degrees, and they all must sort through the issues that haunt them. But they do it together. With the support of one another, each woman emerges stronger as they venture down the road of self-discovery. In a world where women seldom unite to display solidarity and pride in the female sex, this book is an inspiration. Through the most unlikely cast of characters, Lamb shows the reader the power and resilience of the female spirit and the pure beauty of the bond of womanhood.

After reading this novel, I am in awe of Cathy Lamb. The woman has an incredible gift – the uncanny ability to bring the most bizarre characters and imagery together and create a masterpiece. Lamb combines an eclectic mix of humor, tragedy, abuse, victimization, and outrageous scenarios to create a story that on the surface is pure entertainment, but woven into all of this is a much deeper message.

Cathy Lamb has a style all her own, and her writing skills are superb. Beyond that, it's the uninhibited

craziness that she's not afraid to introduce into the story that makes me love her work. It wasn't until after I completed the book and started looking into Cathy's blog that I learned that Julia's Chocolate was her debut novel. If Julia's Chocolates was her starting point, I can only imagine where she has gone from there. I am a true fan, and will continue to read her other books. Thank you, Cathy, for being you and for allowing the rest of us to share in your feisty spirit.

Julia's Chocolates, ★★★★★

Disclaimer: I purchased Julia's Chocolates from Amazon. I did not receive any compensation or endorsement for my review. It is an honest, unbiased assessment of the author's work.

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## **Gina Hott says**

I'm not sure what I did more while reading this book - laugh or cry. It's enlightening, humiliating, and completely enthralling!

It was amazing to me after suffering from the 'Dread Disease' myself that I could laugh when Julia contracts it and hides it from everyone - as did I. (Don't worry it's just panic attacks!) I reread and reread the description of Lydia's sprawling farm with the toilet planters and concrete pigs - mostly because the tears in my eyes kept messing with the words! And I was as heart-broken as Julia as she recounted her life. The abuse she took at the hands of the men who walked through her life and at the hands of her mother who never really cared.

This book is a must read - and reread. I've read it three times already and when I get back to it I always find something I missed before - whether it's the comfort of friends who understand, being with people who actually like the real you, or just remembering that just because the right man hasn't come along doesn't mean that you should just take what's there.

Grab the book and a box of Kleenex - but be prepared not to put it down!!

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## **Marilyn Brant says**

In the character of Julia, Cathy Lamb has created a woman who is warm, funny, unique...and quite literally on the road to self-discovery. After leaving her abusive fiancé at the altar in Boston (and her wedding veil on a gnarled tree in North Dakota), Julia keeps driving West until she gets to her aunt's house in Oregon. When she gets there, she meets a community full of quirky, offbeat characters, who show her what it means to support each other, value themselves and honor their passions.

For Julia, that passion is expressed by the making of her chocolates. It's through her ability to be creative again, and to be in a place where she's surrounded by such fierce love, that Julia is finally able to deal with the dysfunction of her past and see that a very new kind of life is possible for her.

Beautifully written!!

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## Amy says

Julia Bennett is a single 34 yr. old woman who's having a life crisis. She had a troubled childhood growing up with an abusive mother who was a drug addict and slept around. Her mother would neglect her and also bring home boyfriends who abused Julia either physically or tried to sexually molest her. Julia used to hang out at the library or the park alot sometimes sleeping there when things got too bad and her teachers and others would pitch in and bring her meals or buy her new clothes, since her mother didn't seem to care. Her one bright spot in her life was the time she got to spend with her Aunt Lydia at her farm in Oregon most summers. Aunt Lydia tried several times to get custody of Julia but was unable to win and Julia's mom didn't want Lydia to raise her out of spite.

Now that Julia's all grown up she was involved with an abusive man of her own, he was sweet at first then started ordering her around and demanding she stop seeing her friends, belittling her weight and her looks, calling her awful nicknames and telling her he cares about her even when he's beating the living hell out of her when he's angry.

In Robert's eyes she can do nothing right, and she wouldn't go elsewhere because who would have her. She's lucky she's with him. Yeah right. So because of her past and his constant abuse, she's terrified of their coming wedding and one night she up and takes off going cross country leaving him behind and her ugly wedding dress hanging on a tree. She flees to her Aunt Lydia's and tells her the whole story.

Aunt Lydia immediately takes her in and seeing her niece's black eye and swollen battered face vows that she'll be safe in her care. She also apologizes to Julia for not doing more in the past to save her from the abuse her mother subjected her to.

Julia then meets Lydia's friends: her lover Stash, his ranch hands, and her Psychic Night pals, Katie (an abused wife with a unemployed drunken lout for a husband and mother of 4 kids), Lara (an overworked and overstressed wife of the local pastor who secretly dreams of being a successful artist), and Caroline (who is the clairvoyant who does readings for them and keeps mostly to herself preferring to live frugally), and Dean who is a successful lawyer and farm owner who is interested in Julia from the first day they met. Each person has their own secrets as Julia finds out as she gets to know each and every one of them better, they all become really good friends and all work to help her and each other with their issues.

Julia soon gets a newspaper delivery route that takes her straight to Dean's house, so they see each other daily and they hit it off but she's scared to get too close because of her past and also she's afraid that her ex will track her down and get her. Dean is very supportive and protective of Julia and gently nudges her to be less fearful and more proactive and daring.

Julia also helps out her Aunt Lydia on her farm taking care of the animals, the pigs and chickens mostly, and makes her chocolates in her spare time for family and friends. She likes to cook and making things with chocolate seems to take her mind off her troubles and helps her heal.

Julia is also having panic attacks where her heart is racing, she gets cold and she can't breathe on occasion that stem from her abuse with Robert and her childhood as well. She thinks she's got some "dread disease" and will be dying but she tries to keep this a secret, she doesn't want to worry anyone else with this.

Having decided she needs another job, she gets a job hosting a story hour at a local library and meets two siblings, Shawn and Carrie Lynn whose home life is a lot like hers was with her mom. She tries to help out, bringing them food and clothes, calling social services but they don't do anything until one night Shawn and Carrie Lynn get beat up by one of their mom's boyfriends that they end up in the hospital. Julia applies for custody of them and with Lydia, Stash, and Dean's help she gets guardianship over them so they come live with her at Lydia's.

Julia also helps Katie and her kids leave her husband and get a place of their own with the help of Stash and his men. She also helps Lara develop the courage to leave town and find herself for awhile focusing only on her art. She spends a lot of time with Caroline as well getting to know her and then her Aunt Lydia gets sick with breast cancer. She leans a lot on her relationship with the kids and Dean, even though she still is fearful of committing to Dean just yet. Stash takes care of Lydia and everyone helps out, till she's better.

Robert, Julia's abusive ex does come back and threatens Julia but Caroline and her friends help out to save her before something bad happens.

I loved this book....it was quirky and funny, and yet sad and inspirational at times too. Loved her Aunt Lydia....she's the best! :)

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### **Karen says**

Well, I finished Julia's Chocolates and I enjoyed it. Whenever I finish a book, if I liked the characters and will miss them a bit then I've enjoyed the story. There sure were plenty of problems in this book and it touches on a ton of social issues. However, it also focuses on the fact that community and support networks are wonderful and very important things. Women can help other women if their hearts are open, fearless and judgment free. I laughed, I cried and I reflected. Above all, I felt a deeper appreciation for my current life and my loving husband. I recommend this book to non-judgmental gals with a sense of humor. If you've suffered any form of abuse in your life be ready for flash back feelings. If you have several years of distance from an abusive experience you had yourself, this book may add an oddly pleasant closure to some of your feelings. If you're in an abusive relationship and want a darn good wake-up call you can also give this book a try. If you were lucky enough to survive or wise enough to have left a dark abusive relationship, you know with courage anything is possible. If you're in an abusive relationship please know that you have not failed and you can and will succeed. You are not Humpty-Dumpty and you can be put back together again, by yourself and others. Just have the courage to leave, the rest will follow.

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### **Rebecca says**

This title is completely misleading. If you'd like lovely descriptions of chocolate and how chocolate pulls Julia into a new life-- nope, not here folks. Instead all the description and vivid imagery is in abuse of all kinds, including rape. Taking away the title \_Julia's Chocolates\_, and maybe calling it Men Are Pricks or Psychic Women Night would be more fair to the storyline. The book does depict stories of survival and hard themes such as abuse, love, acceptance and being authentic.

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## **Sharon A. says**

I'm not sure what to say about this book. I thought some of the characters and situations were contrived, the confrontations and conversations overblown and silly, and the wrap-ups too pat. However, I consumed this book during a weekend trip with my husband. I read for the entire trip there, every spare moment in the hotel, and the entire trip home.

So what does that say? That while I rolled my eyes throughout much of it, I am a sucker for a happy ending.

I do have one question. Why is it, in nearly every book where a woman is leaving an unhappy marriage, a horrendous relationship (in this case her ex-fiance was a human stew of every horrific character flaw) or some other life-changing situation, that there is always, and I mean always, around the next bend a delightful little town, a wildly successful talent that she can immediately turn into a new career, and a Prince Charming? I mean literally, the next man she meets will always be handsome, sexy, available, and perfect for a long-term relationship.

Give me a break. I feel like I should beat my head against the wall for reading (and sort of enjoying) another of these sappy, chick porn novels.

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## **Andree says**

DNFing this on page 63. I just, I can't.

It's not the subject matter that's the problem. I'm all for books about women fleeing abusive relationships by fleeing to the safety of their quirky aunt, and her apparent seance group (I am sure this book is about more than that, but as I said I only got to page 63). I just can't deal with the writing style. I can't deal with one more mention of breasts (or any of the euphemisms for them), or about how men are pricks (63 pages in and I'm sure this has been shouted 30 times minimum), or references to finding your inner uterus, or expressing the strength in your ovaries, or whatever (that last one might have been made up, but if it was, there is something similar in this book). I just, I can't take it. So this is a reminder to myself not to keep going. I really am trying to fight the compulsion to finish books I am not enjoying.

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## **Britany says**

The opening line of this book was the best thing about the whole thing. "I left my wedding dress hanging in a tree somewhere in North Dakota..."

Julia Bennett runs away on her wedding day from an abusive relationship, into her aunt Lydia's kooky world of giant pigs, farm life, and weekly psychic nights with Lydia's friends. Riddled with many issues, abuse, child neglect, communication, cancer, trust, alcoholism, and mostly figuring out that love completes even the most broken individuals.

For me, I just didn't connect with the characters as much as I wanted to, even though there were many deep issues going on I didn't feel vested to the stories.



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## Gail says

In the first line, Julia tells us she leaves her wedding dress hanging from a tree in North Dakota, as she leaves Boston and drives away from her abusive and dangerous fiancé on their wedding day. Her black eye a reminder of how narrowly she escaped a marriage of abuse and humiliation.

She goes to her Aunt Lydia, a feisty, strong, eccentric woman who lives on a farm in Golden Oregon. In this small town, Julia with her big boobs, wild hair, and damaged psyche, finds friendship, safety, and strength. She finds a refuge from her terrifying childhood and engagement, and finally begins to heal. A circle of women, all experiencing their own kind of pain, gather weekly at Julia for Psychic Night where Lydia exhorts the women to know their breast power, know the power of their vagina and more.

Julia creates a beautiful, powerful life but one bordered by panic and fear as she knows her fiancé will find her and kill her. As she immerses herself in the embrace of her community, she finds the strength to make her stand, to become more whole, and to love not only a lover, but a family chosen by her own heart.

The stories of the women in this book are not unusual (unfortunately) nor is the plot unusual. The characters and the writing pull you into the story and find their way into your heart. You are rooting for Julia to love her wild hair, big boobs, and tattered psyche and you laugh hysterically at the crazy-right philosophy of Aunt Lydia.

Anyone who was/is a feminist in the 1970s and early 1980s will find the subject matter of the Psychic Night not only familiar but hysterically funny!

And you have to love a book where chocolate saves a woman's life, her sanity, and her love!! Go chocolate.

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## JanB says

I wanted to like this book, I really did but it was too clichéd and trite, with too many stereotypes. While I applaud the author for dealing with serious issues the story was just silly. I like happy endings but not at the expense of at least a little realism. Out of 4 women, one repressed minister's wife leaves her small town for NYC to pursue her art and becomes a literal overnight success, a housekeeper leaves an abusive husband and has a book published practically instantly, one has her home-made chocolates featured on an Oprah-like TV show, thereby assuring wild success, not just for her but for the whole town when tourists arrive, and one psychic, although living nearly penniless, is actually from a well-known billionaire family. Oh yes, along the way true love is found, 2 abused children are adopted by a single woman when her lawyer, who just happens to be wildly in love with the woman, calls his friend the governor.

And let's not leave out the requisite breast cancer diagnosis. Along the way everyone's life improves if Julia comes into contact with them and everything she touches turns to gold.

All the Christians are the stereotypical Bible-thumping prim judgemental obnoxious characters with the exception of the minister. Men are either abusive oafs or are sensitive, caring men who cry. The incessant reference to body parts became extremely tiresome and annoying.

This book is a prime example of why I don't like chick-lit romance novels. The last 100 pages i speed read just so I could say I finished it.

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### **Krissy says**

I just couldn't get into it so this was a DNF for me

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### **Tara says**

I read this because it was recommended by a friend who could not stop raving about it. I was horrified to read it and to find that I not only didn't like it, but that I hated it. To me, it was like the writer composed what she thought was a recipe for a great book, and followed it step by step to get the desired result. Not only was the chocolate metaphor overdone, but the characters were totally unrealistic, as was much of the dialogue. Most of it was a cliché, from the horrible, abusive boyfriend, to the good ol' Southern aunt. Sophomoric, saccharine and completely unbelievable, but I would have forgiven all of that if only the writing was strong, but it was so formulaic that it was tough to see it as anything but a sloppy attempt at pleasing the powers that be.

I couldn't tell my friend how much I hated her suggestion, but I've told you, so now I feel better.

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### **Book Concierge says**

#### **ZERO stars**

One of the worst books I've ever read; I finished only because I needed it for a couple of challenges.

I had heard it compared to **The Divine Secrets of the Ya Ya Sisterhood** or **The Secret Life of Bees**. And the book actually starts with a pretty good first sentence: *I left my wedding dress hanging in a tree somewhere in North Dakota*. Unfortunately it quickly goes downhill.

Julia Bennett has left her incredibly wealthy, violent, abusive fiancé on her wedding day, driving cross-country to her Aunt Lydia's home in rural Oregon. Of course he won't let her go so easily, but before he finds her Julia will be able to bond with Lydia's circle of women friends who enjoy regular Psychic Nights. One of these women actually has visions of the future – all of which, of course, come true.

The characters are all one-dimensional (yes, ONE dimension, not even two). Here's a sample description of the women, and I quote: *A psychic with a twitching eye, a bald woman chasing down her guns, and a mermaid-type mother crying*. The men are either tall, handsome gentle giants or mean, evil, violent abusers.

But what really irritated me was the whole “Bohemian pseudo-feminist psychobabble” thing. One Psychic Night dinner features “Cheers to Vaginas Tacos” – really? Or how about this sage advice: *If you're confused,*

*summon the strength in your breasts, ask your estrogen for answers, demand that your femininity give you advice.* I rolled my eyes so often I made myself dizzy.

Well, at least it was a quick read.

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## **Jan says**

Julia left her wedding dress hanging in a tree and her abusive relationship in Boston on her way to Golden, Oregon, home of her mother's half sister, the quirkiest of them all, to find herself. Eccentric, Aunt Lydia "grounds" Julia while surrounding her with love, friends, farm animals and the chores they create. Those friends include a psychic with secrets, a minister's very unhappy wife and an abused mother of four. This oddball group gather strength from each other and are able to bare their souls on the journey to discovery. Among these new friendships, Julia meets a man she's not quite ready for, two children she's more than ready for, and makes chocolates that defy description.

Julia suffered at the hands of her abusive mother and what little self-respect remained was taken by her abusive boyfriend/fiance psychopath. The group meetings held by Aunt Lydia brought together four frightened women who disliked their bodies and their lives and empowered each other to change for the better.

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## **C.H. Armstrong says**

I think I've found a new favorite author. This is the second book by Cathy Lamb I've read, and I can't decide which one I like better. She's such a fantastic author and her books really grab ahold of me.

What is so appealing about this book? Pretty much everything. You have Julia, a young woman who escapes an abusive relationship on her wedding day and moves in with her eccentric Aunt Lydia, who unapologetically hosts women's sexuality "meetings" at her home and grows pot in the basement. Then you have the peripheral characters who become so important in Julia's life - and are each so eccentric in their own ways - that you wish you could be part of their friendship circle.

I truly loved this book. I loved the range of emotions that it pulled from me....Laughter and tears, and sometimes laughter through tears. I can't wait to decide which of the Cathy Lamb books to read next!

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## **Dana says**

I made a new rule in my house about my non battery operated reading material.. If I put a Pink Ribbon around a Book it is not to be moved... touched... donated (hey I have donated literally HUNDREDS of books so I'm entitled to keep a few ) lent or ANYTHING it means THAT much to me... I put my first pink ribbon around Cathy Lamb's Julia's Chocolates.. I was sent this book right after our devastation of Sandy. For awhile when I would pick it up to read it ..I would cry... I now know why... it reminded me of all I have lost..

and lost again... I knew this made no sense but can't help PTSD... it manifests in many ways... well I FINALLY picked it up a week or so ago and I didn't cry .. and within the first chapter I was laughing and reading out loud to my daughter... NEVER has a book touched me like this one.... The dynamics of Aunt Lydia, Julia, Katie , Lara and Caroline .... EVERYONE should have a group of friends like this.. I laughed with them I cried with them I cheered them on and hoped with them ... I wanted to beat the \*\*\*\* out of Robert ... and yell at Julia for NOT trusting Dean... I applauded Stash's love for Aunt Lydia...and being an adoptive Parent I cringed at the abuse of Shawn and Carrielynn ...add a physic and WOW... This Book will stay with me forever and I even marked pages and paragraphs that I will go back and remind myself of what this meant to me... This Book I have tears even writing this... I give this book 5 chocolate's wrapped in love... THANK YOU Cathy for sharing this book with the world!!!

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### **Connie says**

This is my first Cathy Lamb book but I see more to come in my future.

What I thought would be a "modern day chick book" actually had a bit more substance than I expected. It dealt with image issues, abusive relationships and so much more. But beneath it all it was a story about women...their value and their friendships.

Often very humorous, with some over the top characters this book took me on a delightful journey with Julia as she runs away from her life to find out who she really is.

3.5 stars. Not quite 4 but pretty close.

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### **Diane says**

Julia Bennett is the central character in this book. She has lived with abuse all of her life with her alcoholic mother and her many boyfriends, and she is reliving it all over again with her fiancé Robert. Finally, one day after being abused she sees the light and decides to leave before her wedding and go to look for refuge with her Aunt Lydia, a woman who has tried to help her in the past.

In living with Lydia, Julia also gets to know a group of women who will help her find herself and heal her soul and her body in the process. Unfortunately, for me, a lot of these characters were just too out there in regards to the psychic nights and the ability to find strength in their private body parts! I mean, who does that?! It's fun to be quirky but this was just a little too bizarre and kind of killed the story for me.

Julia, of course manages to find love and her talent in the midst of some serious situations.

While this book is indeed filled with warmth and love, I just could not get into the characters lives, thankfully so I guess since most of them are dealing with some very serious issues. I wanted to like this book but in the end, I was just glad that it was over.

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## **Stephany G says**

I really love Chick Lit, but this one would just be between "OK" and "Liked it" for me. I am a harsh judge it seems but this book was over the top. Too much going on, the main story would have been more enjoyable if the whole book was a little simplified. Julia decides to leave her abusive fiance before the wedding at the beginning of the book and runs to her Aunt in a small town knowing he will follow eventually and get even with her. Her way of coping, and her gift in life, is chocolate making. She had an abusive childhood as well and befriends some children who were also abused. She befriends some of the ladies in this town and they get together and have empowerment groups led by the eccentric pot smoking aunt who has some over the top one liners meant to make you laugh out loud but somehow fall a little short. All the ladies are unhappy about something in their life, and another lady in the group is (you guessed it) abused...anyway the story uncovers how they all find their way to happiness. Maybe my girlfriends are just different than these ladies are, but sitting around without shirts and then pants in a group meeting to appreciate one's body is just strange to me.

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