



# Two Serious Ladies

*Jane Bowles*

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## **Two Serious Ladies** Jane Bowles

Eccentric, adventurous Christina Goering Meets the anxious but equally enterprising Mrs. Copperfield at a party.

Two serious ladies who want to live outside of themselves, they go in search of salvation: Mrs. Copperfield visits Panama with her husband, where she finds solace among the women who live and work in its brothels; while Miss Goering becomes involved with various men. At the end the two women meet again, each changed by her experience.

Mysterious, profound, anarchic and very funny, 'Two Serious Ladies' is a daring, original work that defies analysis.

## **Two Serious Ladies Details**

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Author : Jane Bowles

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# From Reader Review **Two Serious Ladies** for online ebook

## Jim says

This book was recommended by film director John Waters. I expected something a bit out of it and was not disappointed. Jane Bowles has been associated in my mind strictly with her husband, fellow writer and beard Paul Bowles. In *Two Serious Ladies*, Jane has anticipated the work of Argentinian writer César Aira in creating a work that drifts from event to event seemingly without any plan.

In an introduction to her work, Joy Williams wrote:

There was no discernible narrative strategy. There was no way of explaining or analyzing the processes at work. Interpretation was useless. The vistas were dispiriting, the food foul, the wind always howling. Her people were mournful, impulsive, and as erratic in their particular journeys' flights as bats.

The two serious ladies of the title are Christine Goering and Mrs. Copperfield. At first, we have a section on Miss Goering, in which she meets Mrs. Copperfield. Then we follow Mrs. Copperfield on a madcap voyage to Panama. The Final chapter brings the two together, but alas, they find they no longer have anything in common.

Typical is this exchange in Section Three:

"I don't know why you find it so interesting and intellectual to seek out a new city," said Arnold, cupping his chin in his hand and looking at her fixedly.

"Because I believe the hardest thing for me to do is really move from one thing to another, partly," said Miss Goering.

"Spiritually," said Arnold, trying to speak in a more sociable tone, "spiritually I'm constantly making little journeys and changing my entire nature every six months."

"I don't believe it for a minute," said Miss Goering.

"No, no, it is true. Also I can tell you that I think it is absolute nonsense to move physically from one place to another. All places are more or less alike."

Curiously, it is Miss Goering who does most of the moving, while Arnold comes across as a couch potato.

My only problem with **Two Serious Ladies** is that, without any real organization, the book could have gone on forever and stopped at any point. César Aira realizes this in his own books, which are always short and crisp, like a Roomba vacuum cleaner gone mad. Still, I find the book interesting, but tending to drag at the end.

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## Nate D says

...it is against my entire code, but then, I have never even begun to use my code, although I judge everything by it. (p.19)

Found via a list of John Waters' favorite five books, and general rave reviews from trusted GR sources. They did not lie. I think my enjoyment of this has already been summarized by my explanation in the comments section:

"This is all I've read of hers, and I'm not quite done, but I think I love it. What I like, beyond the characters and the situations, is how she gives the distinct impression that the characters themselves are putting themselves into these situations due to believably irresistible personal systems, rather than the situations being imposed from outside by a manipulative author. Which is not so easy to do when your characters and storyline are this weird."

I think I loved the first half, Mrs. Copperfield's story, a little more than the latter, but they are two parts of a weird whole, different versions of semi-self-destructive truth-seeking that feels right in some sense even through its inexplicability. Jane Bowles was a very strange woman, and it is a shame that she only wrote this one novel.

Tourists, generally speaking ... are human beings so impressed with the importance and immutability of their own manner of living that they are capable of traveling through the most fantastic places without experiencing anything more than a visual reaction. (p.45)

What separates a man from a wolf if it is not that man wants to make a profit? (p.21)

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## Russell Bittner says

I must confess, I picked this novel up only because I'd recently read that the wife of Paul Bowles (a rather well-regarded twentieth-century itinerant writer and composer) was the author and was, herself, a woman of much talent but limited repute. I believe I actually saw her described as "a writer's writer."

If so, I guess I ain't no writer – or, at the very least, I can't support that particular view of Jane Bowles's work.

*Two Serious Ladies* is, in a nutshell, bizarre – and I don't mean because of its content. I mean that the writing is bizarre. On the one hand, I kept asking myself whether English was really Ms. Bowles's native language. On the other hand, the descriptors 'fey' and 'airy-fairy' occurred to me over and over again. I was consequently not in the least surprised that Tennessee Williams should've proclaimed *Two Serious Ladies* "(m)y favorite book" – and added – "I can't think of a modern novel that seems more likely to become a classic."

I'm sorry. I really wanted to like it – and to be able to declare with Claire Messud, who wrote the

Introduction, that “I (too) simply could not put it down.” My problem was the opposite: I kept having to poke myself to pick the book back up and read more of Ms. Bowles’s drivel.

Yet I plunged on, wanting to find out why: “John Ashbury called Jane Bowles ‘one of the finest modern writers of fiction in any language’; Alan Sillitoe anointed the novel ‘a landmark in twentieth-century American literature’; Truman Capote deemed her ‘one of the really original pure stylists’; James Purdy said she was ‘an unmatched talent’; and Tennessee Williams (once again) announced that she was ‘the most important writer of prose fiction in modern American letters’” – all on p. vi of Claire Messud’s Introduction.

I had to wonder whether Ms. Bowles had been trading sexual favors for flattering reviews – or, more likely (given their separate but equal sexual proclivities), maybe this was payback time to *Paul* Bowles for a bit of past authorial kink.

To take just a random example (this one on p. 72): “‘All right,’ said Mr. Copperfield. He looked sad and lonely. He enjoyed so much showing other people the things he liked best. He started to walk away towards the edge of the water and stared out across the river at the opposite shore. He was very slight and his head was beautifully shaped.”

Why would a man who’d been married to the same woman for decades suddenly look “sad and lonely” because she opted not to accompany him on a little stroll through the Panamanian jungle? Disappointed, yes. Annoyed, yes. Possibly nonplused if he’s like most men whose wives change their minds at the last minute. But “sad and lonely?” *Really?* And would that same woman then suddenly observe that that same husband of ten thousand and one nights between the sheets now appeared to her to be “very slight(.) and his head was beautifully shaped?” If he’d been reaching up for a banana in that same instant (not out of place, given the setting of the incident), she might well have observed that he was ‘a simian delight to behold, my exuberant little tropical punch,’ but God knows *not* that “(h)e was slight(.) and his head was beautifully shaped.”

(Please forgive: I first learned the word ‘simian’ forty years ago *chez* Theodore Dreiser –who in fact used it three times in the same novel – and I’ve been dying to use it myself ever since!)

Or maybe this is the answer (on p. 76), ostensibly from the mouth (or thoughts – it’s always a little difficult to tell with Ms. Bowles’s idiosyncratic punctuation) of Mrs. Copperfield, although I think we can safely assume that that same Mrs. Copperfield serves as something of a mouthpiece for Ms. Bowles here and elsewhere: “‘Now,’ she said, jumping off the bed, ‘now for a little spot of gin to chase my troubles away. There just isn’t any other way that’s as good. At a certain point(.) gin takes everything off your hands(.) and you flop around like a little baby. Tonight(.) I want to be a little baby.’”

I like a snifterful (or “hookerful,” as she calls it in the sentence immediately following) as much as the next guy or chick, but I’m also ever-mindful of Hemingway’s dictum: “Write drunk; edit sober.” I have to wonder whether Ms. Bowles ever bothered to pull herself up from under the table long enough to heed the second part of that dictum.

I *will* give Ms. Bowles credit for one rather trenchant observation early on in the novel – viz., “(t)ourists, generally speaking,” Mrs. Copperfield had written in her journal, “are human beings so impressed with the importance and immutability of their own manner of living that they are capable of traveling through the most fantastic places without experiencing anything more than a visual reaction. The harder tourists find that one place resembles another.”

As she and her husband were particularly well-traveled, I have to concede to her a well-earned authority in

this quasi-aphorism. I just don't understand how it could've been penned by the same hand that wrote so much tripe. Maybe – just *maybe* – she was actually sober when she wrote it.

But the long and short of it is that this book, in my opinion, is an amateur piece of work – **AMATEUR** writ large and bold. There is one anecdote or action after another that leads nowhere and hardly advances the plot of the book – if advancing the plot was ever even a thought in Jane Bowles's head. Categorize it however you like – modern; post-modern; post-post-modern; irony; parody; buffoonery; critical social commentary – it just didn't work, at least for *this* particular reader.

But as I never fail to add, *de gustibus non est disputandum*. If my fellow reviewers found the work enchanting, I'm certainly in no position to question their judgment or their choice of enchantment.

**RRB**

**11/30/14**

**Brooklyn, NY**

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## **Aubrey says**

For one reason or another, the most likely one being I can't quite put my finger on what it is I'm getting from it, this book draws a number of other titles and times to my mind. The introduction mentioned Carson McCullers, I had suspicions of Flannery O'Connor, and then there's the famous husband and the quoted (more?) famous playwright on the cover. I'm sure this has as high a chance of amounting to an indication of personal interest as it does the obsessions of today's academia, what with the word Modernism being thrown around at times, but that doesn't lessen the instance of when I thought of *Under the Volcano* and everything clicked. I read that one long enough ago to not have had an awareness of exotification in literature and all that colonialist jazz (the irony), but the messy scrabbling at the corners of civilization for a barest scrap of ethics is familiar. Putting UtV's lushfest of a military industrial complex next to TSL's quagmire of white female performance of sexuality and class in the late 30's and early 40's, you can't really say one's more obvious than the other.

A number of people describe this book as crazy, or the author as crazy, or use the word crazy somewhere in the vicinity of their review; all I can think is that if I were looking into this book today, I wouldn't have added it like I did two years ago. As someone whose history of "crazy" could get her fired or institutionalized if the wrong individuals catch wind of it, the carelessness with which people throw this word around is both threatening and lazy cause seriously, what crazy we talking about? Major depressive disorder? Bipolar disorder? Borderline personality disorder? A mix of all three and then some? Cause things get really fun when the diagnoses cross borders and doctor's don't want to know what the hell is going on.

Crazy's got a hierarchy like any other grouping of human beings, from the marvels of creative folks to the recent adaptation of *Deadpool* having his schizophrenia erased cause producers don't want him to be "too" crazy. Look up the way schizophrenia literally eats at your brain, compare how often schizophrenic individuals are killed compared to the rest of the not "too" crazy, and you can see the mess these adapters are

trying to avoid. In light of that, next time you call someone/something/somehow "crazy", are you doing it cause they're weird? Cause they're different? Cause they shot up a school and that correlation between mental illness and violence must be upheld as absolute? I can't tell if one person did it and the others are just following or the ideological connectivity of the concept's really that universally convincing and it's flat out unnerving.

Trust me, I liked the picking at presentations of femininity, socioeconomic brutalization, the ethical heaven of one being the moralizing hell of another, the rich being rich and the poor being poor and a modern day saint of a woman instantly regaled to the line of sex work cause that's how females on the lam *always* function in this society of ours, but seriously, where the fuck is this lazy "crazy" business coming from. Do you actually know what you're talking about in the wider spectrum of what many have to take into account every day of their lives? Or are you just being cute. The slurs didn't help either, but someone's going to throw a tantrum about chronological universality if I go down that pathway, so I'll just leave that there.

Look, if you're some sort of crazy like I am in the literal, biological, governmental sense of the word, you can do whatever with the crazy cause that's your *life*. The rest of you, I'll be over somewhere else for the sake of my well being while you figure out what exactly you mean by this "crazy", and what you intend to accomplish.

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## **Nidhi Singh says**

One must allow that a certain amount of carelessness in our nature often accomplishes what the will is incapable of doing

This is a weird little book with the weirdest people I have come across. The two serious ladies are adorably weird. Adorably impulsive. They make something tap against the unopened doors. To remind that don't we all have that eccentric 'seriousness' within us which we got chained and domesticated like the most docile dogs. They make something flutter within. To just go where you want, do what you want, say what you want. This heady desire for freedom, for being dangerously uprooted from your place of security, for rushing back again and again to whatever the heart longs for. To identify it, and to want it, with all the strength, with all honesty and the wolfishness of desire. To want it so badly that it breaks you to pieces, leaves a beautiful mess around. Just to be giddily unhinged. To disarrange everything you picked up and dusted and shelved to security, all your life. And to have your consciousness forwarded to you again like a crumpled piece of paper, left to you again to smoothen, erase, and draw and redraw.

No one among my friends speaks any longer of character-and what interests us more certainly is finding out what we are like.

They attract all the odd ones; the whimsical, the curious, the vulnerable, the delusional, the disgruntled ones. It is interesting and almost endearing how they respond to such oddities; with naturalness, and a lack of

consciousness of the self. There is the urgency to connect and the need to let go. I wonder what is the primary driving force behind their decision to unfasten themselves, to forego all control and discipline. Maybe they recognize that gaping void in their lives. It necessitates escape. It requires freedom and novelty. It warrants happiness. Happiness and desire of the certain kind, which has been recognized only in the most personal spaces of their minds. They would not really bother telling you about it, defining it for you, but nevertheless, have done it for themselves. Not the conceited type of self-interest, but a self-determinism, an autonomy, a recognition of one's own responsibility towards happiness and fulfillment. And a responsibility towards the effect of it, as the making and unmaking of their own desires. They are different, without any awareness whatsoever of their own difference. They display a most uncommon curiosity towards their surroundings. A most uncommon, almost juvenile interest towards the people they encounter. It is often unsettling for the reader. But it is hard not to see that it is also the most essential kind of awareness that comes as a surprise. Like unwittingly finding your fingertips at that point on a map you had been searching for. They respond erratically. They have an unpredictable liking and disliking towards people. They amuse, befuddle, and sometimes make you laugh. And throughout the story, they warm up the heart with the most foolishly insightful ways.

'The idea,' said Miss Goering, 'is to change first of your own volition and according to our own inner promptings before they impose completely arbitrary changes on us.'

I really have no sense of shame, and I think your own sense of shame is terribly exaggerated.

That has everything to do with what is beautiful in the world. When you wake up in the morning and the first minute you open your eyes and you don't know who you are or what your life has been-that is beautiful. Then when you know who you are and what day in your life it is and you still think you are sailing in the air like a happy bird-that is beautiful. That is when you don't have worries. You can't tell me you like to worry?

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## **Tony says**

*"One must allow that a certain amount of carelessness in one's nature often accomplishes what the will is incapable of doing."*

Ah, if one could only plead Glib in real life. It would not exonerate me, but might get me to a halfway house earlier.



I'm sure the cultists got much more out of this than I did but, if I didn't exactly see myself in this story, I could nevertheless follow the two main characters with something like sympathy. Harm, in fiction, only comes if the author intends it, and Jane Bowles was very kind instead.

Fiction, really, can't improve upon the storyline of the M/M Bowles' marriage. But, for what it's worth, I prefer Jane's glazing to Paul's.

Other Goodreads reviewers (I'm pointing to Aubrey, here) have noted the feeling of derivation in this book, one way or the other. I got that feeling too, although I tasted Elaine Dundy and Carole Maso.

There's a feeling here of experimentation, for experimentation's sake. (You could read this as allegory, but you should be ashamed of yourself if you did so.) Every rational thought should have our character saying "No, that's absurd. I can't go with you." But our character(s) always say yes.

That there are two main female characters, one entranced by very young female prostitutes and another following every man from abrupt to dangerous, speaks obviously of the bisexual nature of the author. And, more.

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More, you say? It's the political season. It always is. So, here:

The appropriately named *Dick* is perorating in a bar:

*"I'm interested in the political struggle...which is of course the only thing any self-respecting human being could be interested in. I am also on the winning side and on the right side. The side that believes in the redistribution of capital." He chuckled to himself and it was very easy to tell he thought he was conversing with a complete fool.*

....

*Miss Goering (our heroine) by now was very anxious to get into the conversation.*

*"You," she said to Dick, "are interested in winning a very correct and intelligent fight. I am far more interested in what is making this fight so hard to win."*

*"They have the power in their hands; they have the press and the means of production."*

*Miss Goering put her hand over the boy's mouth. He jumped. "This is very true," she said, "but isn't it very obvious that there is something else too that you are fighting? You are fighting their present position on this earth, to which they are still grimly attached. Our race, as you know, is not torpid. They are grim because they still believe the earth is flat and that they are likely to fall off it at any minute. That is why they are so hard to the middle. That is, to all the ideals by which they have already lived. You cannot confront men who are still fighting the dark and all the dragons, with a new future."*

*"Well, well," said Dick, "what should I do then?"*

*"Just remember," said Miss Goering, "That a revolution won is an adult who must kill his childhood once and for all."*

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Agree or not, transpose or not; this is not a simple lark. It is woman untethered. A shifting paradigm.

The men here are not admirable, but human enough to utter this:

*"Do you know . . . how beautiful and delicate a man's heart is when he is happy for the first time? It is like the thin ice that has imprisoned those beautiful young plants that are released when the ice thaws."*

Maybe it is just like that.

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## Alex says

"It is against my entire code," says Miss Goering, "But then, I have never even begun to use my code, although I judge everything by it." She's about to change her code.

### Things ladies are serious about

- drinking
- hookers
- escape

Mostly that last thing in Jane Bowles's defiantly, extravagantly weird 1943 novel. Her husband (also a novelist) was bewildered by her inability to "use the hammer and the nails that were there. She had to manufacture her own hammer and all the nails." She feels like Dostoevsky in that way - you know how everyone acts like fucking aliens in his books? Because they just say what's literally in their heads, instead of trying to be civilized about it? Miss Goering and Mrs. Copperfield are like that, too, except that the rest of Jane Bowles' world is normal so everyone is just thoroughly put off by them all the time.

Miss Goering moves herself to a dingy island with several hangers on, and finds herself a series of increasingly distasteful lovers as some kind of bizarre...penance or something. "Heroically unaware of her strangeness, or indifferent to its effects, Miss Goering seems to do everything she can to reject the life that is expected of her," is how the New Yorker describes it. Meanwhile Mrs. Copperfield goes on vacation to Panama with her husband, and then goes on vacation from the husband, involving herself with a young prostitute and a great deal of alcohol.

What both of these bourgeois ladies do is they steadfastly untether themselves from the demands society makes of them. They don't seem to have conscious plans to do so, but they also don't seem capable of or willing to not do so. They're acquaintances, and they're not together most of the time. When they finally meet near the end, Mrs. Copperfield says to Miss Goering: "I *have* gone to pieces, which is a thing I've wanted to do for years." I was reminded of Kate Chopin.

Mrs. Copperfield "hated to know what was around her, because it always turned out to be even stranger than what she had feared." And you get the impression that Jane Bowles was one of those poor people who actually looked around her all the time, and what she found was so much stranger that she had to invent her own hammer and nails and laboriously construct this strange little book about it, which barely anyone even understood a word of. "You call yourself an artist," says someone or other, "and you don't even know how to be irresponsible." This book is downright irresponsible. I loved it.

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## Sam says

A thoroughly strange performance. As the title implies, the story of two serious ladies, although the story itself is too far from the usual social conceptions of light and dark to be called "serious," and you might even take exception to the word "ladies," since both the women who are the center of the book seem to be running headlong away from the conventions of femininity, looking for something very strange: maybe their own wholesale destruction, or maybe just an authentic experience of living? Anyway, Bowles doesn't seem to have much of an interest in explaining or defining what they're looking for, and her aesthetic project might also have to do with discarding the idea of "purpose" or even "narrative drive" in fiction, replacing it with a series of seemingly random, gruesome, and often highly amusing episodes.

The structure (plot) is virtually nil. Miss Goering, Serious Lady #1, collects a series of strange admirers and moves them to Coney Island. Mrs. Copperfield, Serious Lady #2, decamps with her husband to Panama, where she decamps to a sleazy brothel and becomes progressively obsessed with a beautiful Spanish woman named Pacifica. These plot points - if you can call them that - are really more about combinations of possibility and exploration of the deep confusions and desperate evasion tactics of the Two Serious Ladies than they are about advancing any kind of conflict or theme, and your interest in the story will be conditioned by your interest in following these confusions and evasions, despite the fact that they don't add up to a coherent whole, simply because they are darkly perverse and very, very funny.

I would argue that a measure of respect towards Bowles' style reaps grand readerly dividends. Every short episode included here, from Mrs. Copperfield's brief, awkward dalliance with a Panamanian prostitute to Miss Goering's increasingly bizarre dalliances with shady Brooklyn (?) men, is so thoroughly unmoored from conventional fiction-making that it creates a (to me) irresistible propulsive effect: you actually have **no idea** what will happen next, and once you realize that this thing will invariably be either gruesome (delightful) or comic (delightful) it only makes you more eager to see it, like some endlessly re-combinatory car wreck, one involving several semi trucks, a trailer full of iguanas, and a small Studebaker driven by a poodle.

Not to say that this is a light affair. Mrs. Copperfield's story is also quite sad, in its own way, and the world Bowles works with is truly awful, a tank full of sharp-toothed fish whose memories last only five seconds at best and who are half-unaware of their own desire to rip each other to shreds; the fact that it bears a tenuous resemblance to reality gives the book more weight than its loose collection of episodes might suggest.

Not recommended if you require a plot. Highly recommended for everyone else.

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## Jesse says

By the time I felt like I was *finally* getting a handle on this bitter, black-hearted little novel, it was all over. As I quickly discovered, to make the acquaintance of these titular two ladies is to be initiated into a state of perpetual disorientation; I was not, I'll frankly admit, adequately prepared, even if Bowles's novel frequently brought to mind the work of her contemporaries Djuna Barnes and Flannery O'Connor, two favorites of mine.

All three authors have an uncanny ability to distill unsettling visions of the world into terrifying portraits of individuals who, by simply defying the "natural" order of things, unleash an aura of chaos and existential

anarchy around everything they do. Yet turmoil is often the source of humor, and I'd say the work of all three is funny—albeit in bleak, dark ways. But where Barnes and O'Connor employ violence (both emotional and physical) and grotesquerie to elicit the kind of laugh that transforms into a horrified gasp before it manages to escape the throat, Bowles's approach is more akin to screwball comedy, a comedy of manners where the main players have decided to redefine what "manners" entail, upending the world around them (ie "until recently [Miss Goering] had never followed too dangerously far in action any course which she had decided upon as being the morally correct one"). That said, these forms of comedies depend on a sense of order and decorum reestablishing itself by the resolution, typically with a romantic pairing reinstating the "unruly" female safely back into the social order. Not so with *Two Serious Ladies*: it's instead a whirligig of despair whose last words offer no sense of solace. Instead it feels like a temporary stopgap in an inevitably continuing story destined for misery and destruction.

But also, in the meantime, a sense of escape, even freedom.

Perhaps?

$$[\dots]$$

I can't say I actually much enjoyed the process of reading this novel, but I nonetheless sense that it will be joining the small cadre of texts I find myself returning to on occasion, almost inexplicably, trying to scratch some kind of deep itch it has created. To try and discover some answers to the unnerving existential questions it poses—even if I never really expect to ever actually find them.

*"She thought that she was only interested in duplicating a dream, but in doing so she necessarily became the complete victim of a nightmare."*

[My full review can be found on my blog *Queer Modernisms* . Apologies for the inconvenience, but as posting a review on Goodreads is to "expressly grant" full license to the content, it's my small attempt at maintaining some control over my writing.]

**Siv30 says**

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## **Diane Barnes says**

Sorry, Doug. I've never been on a bad acid trip (or a good one either, for that matter) but this book is what I envision one to be like. I read the great reviews, even went on-line at the midway point to see what I was missing that everyone else was raving about. "Avant-garde, modernistic, hallucinatory prose" is apparently just not my thing, although I will agree with the hallucinatory part. At the end of the mercifully short 200 pages, I still have absolutely no idea what this book was about. I am awarding one extra star because some of the sentences were very witty and made me sit up and take notice. With apologies to all my GR friends who love this book, it just wasn't my thing.

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## **Frona says**

What at first seems as a sequence of peculiar acts and events, occurring without an explanation and disappearing without a trace, soon reveals its substance and connects causes with effects in a most unconventional manner. It is briefly mentioned in the book as a »dispensation from the world«, but its presence radiates through every sentence.

The world as known to common people, without enough luck or money to follow every impulse to the end, is quite foreign to the two serious ladies. They possess wealth and with it a chance to create their own universe; they are free of worries about their future, consistency and composure. Without external obstacles to overcome and goals to reach, their reality is entrapped in the present flow of affairs. They don't know the need to escape anything that happens. Everything is interesting to them, if anything is interesting at all. A lack of any but prosaic initiative of their own, brings their fears to the surface and their world becomes as claustrophobic as it is free. If in a way their experience is similar to that of a child - their pride and self-respect are subdued to an interest in what each opportunity can provide-, it differs in one crucial aspect. The child learns by trial and error, while they know no errors. The more they try to change something for sanity's sake, the more it becomes obvious that their errands have ends only in themselves.

If at the beginning of the book I couldn't care less about this imaginary life-style, I felt like walking through a funfair with them later. I'm not sure whether I could stay there for long, but I certainly lingered on the question "Who of us is freer and merrier?" for more than a while.

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## **Jimmy says**

Jane Bowles is a crazy woman, and I love crazy women. She has written a great book here, which oddly has all the lightness of Kafka when he is light, but a different kind of darkness. This book is about freedom, and desire, but not exactly of the sexual kind. More like a passion for life, or alternately, a sadness for the lack of life. It is constantly surprising and hilarious, and filled with weird and somewhat naive characters who act unconventionally but in a way that makes you think "well, why *not* act that way???" However, at no point did I feel like the character's surprising behavior was unwarranted or random. Each character felt genuine, each with their particular brand of individuality. Because of how strange and funny it is, it may be easy to overlook how resonant and deep it is as well. I loved this book immensely and I think it is criminally overlooked and under-read.

*"But you still look terribly morose."*

*"I am less morose. I am just showing the results of the terrific fight that I have waged inside of myself, and you know that the face of victory often resembles the face of defeat."*

p.186

Here's the awesome author photo on the back cover:

PS - When I said that the desire was not sexual, I don't mean there wasn't a lot of reference to sex and sexual tension. Just that the sexual component seems to be a result of boredom, or an extension of the character's independent searches, than something arising from lust or love. I may be way off, though.

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## **David Corvine says**

Two Serious Ladies: Jane Bowles.

It is a great loss to literature that due to illness, both physical and psychological, that *Two Serious Ladies* represents the only full-length work produced by Jane Bowles. Only from this novel and a slim collection of short stories, "Everything is nice", in particular, can it be surmised what might have resulted from her long residence in Morocco and the relationships that she formed there. It can only be speculated as to what a mine and minefield such work might have been for critical theorists from a broad spectrum of disciplines.

The characters in *Two Serious Ladies* inhabit a shadowy borderland between the probable and the possible... it is unlikely that an uninvited caller at an address, with only the most tenuous connection with the owner, should take up residence there the following day. Improbable but not impossible, Mrs. Bowles, in creating her strange and unnerving world never extends beyond the realms of reality.

Both Mrs. Copperfield and Miss Goering seem to form and discontinue relationships in a decidedly arbitrary manner. They appear to be victims of hangers-on being buoyed along by the flow of the current. But careful analysis reveals that they are, in fact, making all the significant decisions. They are not unwitting passengers in the drunken boat they are at the helm.

Bowles seems to create the impression that the ladies are in some way vulnerable, a sense of underlying threat pervades the text which erupts... breaks through the surface tension, in minor injuries, whether accidental or intentional.

They don't lead normal lives but that is precisely because they are not normal. Ordinary people are burdened with the necessity of having to earn a living or are reliant on others to support them whereas the ladies are both financially independent. "After all, it's mostly my money," she (Mrs. Copperfield) said to herself. "I'm footing the bulk of the expenditure for this trip." When Miss Goering perfunctorily decides to abandon her former home, with her erstwhile housemates still in residence. They make a request for financial assistance to find alternative accommodation. This elicits the ambivalent response... "No, no, that is not necessary. Is there anything more that is new?". Necessary? It certainly seems more necessary for the abandoned Miss Gamelon but Miss Goering has already moved off on another tangential shift and agreed to take up with a man who has mistaken her for a prostitute. He in turn discards her with as a little consideration as she herself seems to show to others.

Unfortunately, Jane Bowles has been as underrated as she has been overlooked. The world she portrays with its random connections and the changes of direction is strangely portentous of our own age where people meet total strangers on the internet and arbitrarily abandon their settled lives to pursue them. Although this strangeness should not come as too much of a surprise... originality is, by its nature, strange.

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## Mary says

*"I'm unhappy," she said.*

*"Again?" asked Mr. Copperfield. "What is there to be unhappy about now?"*

*"I feel so lost and so far away and so frightened."*

Do we really need another unfulfilled-women-reach-breaking-point-and-self-destruct story? Don't ask me – I happen to adore those. But this little gem from Mrs. Paul Bowles is not your cookie cutter crisis tale. Something inside these Two Serious Ladies has severely cracked and we're along for the ride. These oddball seekers are a little fancy and a little artsy, and they embark on a series of bizarre and impulsive actions amongst a cast of quirky and almost equally weird husbands and roommates and strangers. There's an overwhelming sense of "oh, fuck off" at play here; to hell with the world, these Serious Ladies said. To hell with you all, Jane Bowles seemed to be snarling.

The more I read, the more my heart sank with the knowledge that this was Jane Bowles's sole novel. Her writing spoke to me. She created a completely unexpected atmosphere of suspense and confusion and her story was unpredictable, darkly humorous, and quietly gloomy. This seemed to be her biting commentary of the social constraints that she must've felt as a bi but mostly gay woman married to a bi but mostly gay man (who happens to be one of my favorite writers). I was ready to adore this book; and I absolutely did.

*"True enough," said Mrs. Copperfield, bringing her fist down on the table and looking very mean. "I have gone to pieces, which is a thing I've wanted to do for years. I know I am as guilty as I can be, but I have my happiness, which I guard like a wolf, and I have authority now and a certain amount of daring, which, if you remember correctly, I never had before."*

What is a 'normal' life? Can happiness only be obtained through living an arbitrary existence? These ladies are longing for an authentic life, free from the ordinary and the expected. But what about sadness? What about that dark, brooding place inside? These roadblocks mean our ladies are perhaps doomed, but they're going to go down fighting (and drinking).

*"Darling," she said, "something terrible has happened to that woman, I feel it in my heart. Please don't be bad-tempered with her."*

Also, this book is really funny. Funny-sad, funny-strange.

*"Well, lady," he said to her, "are you an artist too?"*

*"No," said Miss Goering. "I wanted to be a religious leader when I was young and now I just reside in my house and try not to be too unhappy."*

There's something unsettling about this book because it's easy to imagine that breaking-point isn't as far off as we'd like to think. These women may have become impulsive and reckless, but they were not entirely nonsensical. They didn't completely lose it and maybe that's what's so scary. It's not that far outside the realm of possibility to leave a husband, or sell a house, to wander around aimlessly and strike up random conversations, spend all your money, or heck, even to move in with a Panamanian teenage prostitute. Right?



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## Lee says

I'd read Paul Bowles long ago and vaguely knew his wife wrote but not until I heard Paul Lisicky discuss this one on Book Fight (a literary book-discussion podcast thing run/posted/performed by two grad school friends) was this one on my radar. Turns out it's a well-loved classic, deservedly so. After listening to three writers talk about it for an hour, I had some preconceptions about its apparent irregularity/unconventionality -- and I expected something crazier per the podcast. But it seemed aligned with Salinger's stories of neurotic upper-class/upper-middle-class urbanites. There's the same sort of spiritual anxiety. Think of that surprisingly good-natured intelligent American angst in *Franny & Zooey*. They're of the same era, peri-WWII, precursors to the Beats. A generation later these serious ladies would explicitly conceive of their restlessness, impulsiveness, and need for freedom from traditional morality/activity as "finding themselves," and they'd be doing it en masse. Other than the stellar insightful sentences, the unpredictable movement, the rampant cleverness that never became cloying for me, the wonderfully dramatized conflicts between thought and action (ie, so often one of the ladies thinks no way she wants to do something and then says of course let's do it), for an American novel published in 1943 this one's a serious literary lighthouse for what once was called Women's Lib. Explicit physical lady love is still mostly under wraps in this and the book prospers thanks to that tension and subsequent attention to tenderness and affection, especially, as Paul Lisicky points out in the above-linked podcast, in the scene when Mrs Cunningham and Pacifica go to a rocky Panamanian beach for a morning swim after staying up all night. What makes this great is that the men also long for liberation, no matter how abrasive or proto-slacker these men might be. Everyone's after their freedom -- Arnold from his parents, Arnold's father from his wife, Andy from his past, Mrs. Cunningham from her depression, Ms Goering from her class. No mention of the war in Europe or the Pacific, interestingly -- not even a suggestion of it? In general, I loved the language, the crazy bits like Belle (the woman without arms or legs), descriptions of interiors of various bars and momentary side characters in Panama, the parallel feelings of elation felt by Cunningham and Goering, parallel suggestions that the ladies suffered some major insult/abuse/tragedy when younger, parallel letters from men trying to rationally explain their feelings, realistic non-melodramatic dramatization of disconnects in general, the fragility of Arnold's borrowed image of a plant trapped in thin ice. Not to mention the weird Javanese parallel, with Ms Gamelon (as in the percussive repetitious music of the Indonesian islands) and the crazy needy half-Irish/half-Javanese girl in Panama. Structurally, I didn't find it so odd. It felt more like a multi-part story than a novel? Anyone familiar with the movements of an attentively written, clever, contemporary short story would be at home here -- there's no overt plot other than sensing and calibrating the characters' spiritual progress and registering/associating thematic resonances (freedom, loneliness, friendship, hope). To say that nothing happens wouldn't make sense since stuff happens and moves the internal/thematic plot forward. Otherwise, certain sections were a bit of a drag for me often thanks to lack of transitions between scenes or not quite being sure who's talking -- lots of short paragraphs and dialogue throughout, with sudden unpredictable movement -- I had to go back and re-read after mini-zoneouts. Also, although I was interested in the characters, it's hard to pull for them (ie, "like" them), in part because, as life is described in the book, they're "medium fair" -- neutral good, not diabolical. They're real: they're selfish and generous, in search of internal peace and external beauty, complicated, acting not always in their best interest, and I guess that's likeable, or maybe I anticipated overindulgence in terms of the freedom quest and a cosmic smackdown for getting their way? Anyway, a great short book I'll try to reread one day since it's the type in which you surely miss so many dimensions and laughs the first time through.

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## **Paul says**

Ahhh, this is getting serious: another book about people who I didn't necessarily like, but that greatly reminded me of myself. What does this say about me? I must simply be a mess. Of course, unlike the characters, I hardly ever shack up with underage prostitutes (I mean, it's been WEEKS since the last time) so maybe I shouldn't draw umbilicals between us.

Having said that I didn't necessarily like the people in this book, I should cement that I did love them as characters. I found them endearing. Their constant state of wanting, without ever quite knowing what they're wanting. And their constant state of finding, without quite ever knowing they've found. They're looking for chaos so that they can have a little peace.

I could go on and on about this book, talking about how the floating structure perfectly matched the character's searches, or how the book was amazingly erotically charged, without having much (any?) in the way of sex, but the book should be experienced as itself, by itself, and for itself. Anything else would do it discredit, like a slide show of someone else's first date.

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## **Claire McAlpine says**

Two Serious Ladies introduces us to two characters Christina Goering, daughter of a powerful industrialist, now a well-heeled spinster, adrift and bored with her comfortable, predictable existence and Frieda Copperfield, married to a man who pursues travel and adventure, dragging his wife (who funds this insatiable desire) out of her comfort zone, to the untouristed, red-lit parts of Panama, where she finds solace and digs her heels in, at the bar/hotel of Madame Quill, befriending the young prostitute Pacifica.

Christina, referred to as Miss Goering and Frieda, Mrs Copperfield, acquaintances, meet briefly at a party and will come together again briefly at the end, both having had separate life-changing adventures, driven by a latent, sub-conscious desire to radically change their situations, both of which come about in a random, haphazard way.

Miss Goering invites a companion Miss Gamelon, to move into her comfortable home and at the party where she encounters Mrs Copperfield, she meets Arnold. Though she doesn't particularly like either of these characters, when she decides to sell her palatial home and move to a run-down house on a nearby island, they agree to come with her. Neither are enamoured of her decision, to remove them from her previous comforts, which they were quite enjoying.

"In my opinion," said Miss Gamelon, "you could perfectly well work out your salvation during certain hours of the day without having to move everything."

"The idea," said Miss Goering, "is to change first of our own volition and according to our own inner promptings before they impose completely arbitrary changes on us."

Once on the island, still restless, she abandons her invitees and takes the ferry to the mainland, opening herself up to whatever random encounters await her, as if seeking her destiny or some kind of understanding

through a series of desperate and reckless acts.

Mrs Copperfield seems less to seek out the depraved, than be attracted by a perceived sense of belonging, she spurns the comfortable, pretentious trappings of the Hotel Washington, declines to go walking in the jungle with her husband and instead takes the bus back to the women she has met at the Hotel les Palmas whom she feels an affinity with, despite their lives of poverty and prostitution being so far removed from her own. She recognises they possess a kind of freedom and strength she lacks; in their presence, she begins to feel energised and empowered.

It is a strange book at first, it requires finishing and reflecting upon to figure out what it was all about. It is recounted in a straight forward style, we observe the actions of the two women without reflection on their part, making it necessary to unravel their intentions, which inevitably becomes a matter of reader interpretation, to find the meaning, if indeed there is any.

For me, it was clear the women lacked something significant in their lives, in their existence, even if they were unable to articulate it or even search appropriately for it, they sensed something missing in their lives of privilege and sought it among the downtrodden. They were experiencing an existential crisis.

Bowles takes two female characters from a similar social class (similar to her own) dissecting a woman's presence and existence in society in a form of confrontational daring that was liable to elicit both scorn and eye-brow raising in her own time and continues to provoke a certain amount of bemusement in our own.

"I know I am as guilty as I can be, but I have my happiness which I guard like a wolf, and I have authority now and a certain amount of daring, which I never had before." – Mrs Copperfield

Reading it alongside the life of Jane Bowles, was a pleasure, I enjoyed reading it and taking the extra time to understand the context within which it was written.

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## Eve says

**"It wasn't exactly in order to have a good time that I came out. I have more or less forced myself to, simply because I despise going out in the night-time alone and prefer not to leave my own house. However, it has come to such a point that I am forcing myself to make these little excursions." – Miss Goering**

*Two Serious Ladies* was an absorbing literary train wreck that I just couldn't avert my eyes from! I was reminded of why I loved the documentary series *Grey Gardens* and *The Beales of Grey Gardens*. It's not like I can rightly explain why it's a huge favorite of mine, or why the two eccentric women at the center of the nonexistent plot steal my heart with each viewing. Questions that follow each viewing include: what is the definition of "normal" or of a "conventional" life?

Christina Goering and Frieda Copperfield are two women desperate to live their lives devoid of fear despite their restrictive roles in society. Throughout a momentous year, Miss Goering pursues asceticism in hopes of reaching sainthood, and Mrs. Copperfield chooses to take the reigns of her life back from the hands of her overbearing husband. In the process, the women meet a slew of shady hangers-on and degenerates. Equally hilarious and grotesque, I had a wonderful time reading this little book. Bowles has a unique way of writing; what she chose to share and omit really created an element of suspense and mystery.

Esthetically, I am so in love with my copy of this book, published by Ecco Books. I'm kind of a typography geek, and I loved the typeface used throughout the book. Check out the page numbers! The cover art, designed by Suet Yee Chong, is also awesome eye candy as well; it definitely reflects Bowles's avant garde style. This edition included an introduction by Claire Messud, author of *The Woman Upstairs*. I usually skip introductions, but in this case I found it so fascinating, and I was glad I chose to read it after I finished the book. Messud sheds light on Bowles's personal life, and her disappointment with the mixed reception of her work. Overall a great read; I'm sure I'll glean much more with further readings.

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