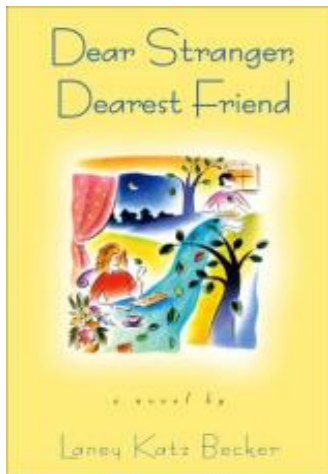


Dear Stranger, Dearest Friend

by Laney Katz Becker



About the Book

Lara is a smart, sophisticated New Yorker who is frightened about her future. In search of answers, comfort, and advice, she goes on-line. And that's where she "meets" Susan, a strong and steady, no-frills Midwesterner. No two women could be less alike. Yet from the moment they connect, it is clear that they share something deep and important, something that's nestled in the warmest corner of the heart. What begins as a chance encounter on the Internet quickly blossoms into a very special relationship. As their e-mail messages fly back and forth, Susan and Lara forge a powerful bond of trust, honesty, and understanding. And soon they are sharing their lives in full -- talking of husbands and children, dreams and desires, the daily cycle of success and setback -- and together learning to laugh uproariously over the small and large absurdities of the world. When a devastating crisis arises, they are there for each other, providing the life-affirming strength and the lightness that is needed to cope with tragedy ... and to triumph.

Discussion Guide

1. In what ways are Susan and Lara alike? How are they different? If it wasn't for their shared experience with breast cancer do you think they would have still been friends? Why or why not?
2. Susan and Lara agree to restrict their contact to e-mail. What impact, if any, do you believe that telephone conversations would have had on their friendship?
3. After biopsy, when Lara's told she's fine -- except for some atypical cells -- she calls her internist for more information. Why didn't she "just leave well enough, alone?" Do you think her proactive response is typical of most women? Why or why not?

4. Lara doesn't allow Michael to accompany her to her doctors' appointments and she gives Susan a variety of reasons she prefers to go alone. What do you think is really behind her decision?
5. Who saves Lara's life? Why do you think so?
6. Breast cancer doesn't just affect Susan and Lara. What impact does it have on Artie and Michael? How about the children?
7. Which of all the main characters changes the most over the course of the novel? Who do you think changes the least? Why?
8. Discuss the role that God and religion play in Susan and Lara's lives. Would the diagnosis of a life threatening illness affect your religious convictions or practices? If so, how?
9. Lara decides to remove both of her breasts in spite of her husband's reservations. Do you agree or disagree with her belief that it's her body, therefore her choice?
10. In Dr. Gods office Lara is both angry and saddened when she sees a teenage model considering breast implants. How much, if at all, are Lara's feelings colored by her breast cancer experience? Do you think it's fair for Lara to differentiate between breast surgery for cosmetic reasons versus reconstructive purposes?
11. The author makes sure we know that Lara has lots of friends. Keeping that in mind, why do you think the author chose to tell this story using e-mails between strangers? What points was she trying to make about anonymity, technology and friendship?
12. Similarly, what do you think prompts a woman to post her troubles, fears, and/or questions on message boards in cyberspace for total strangers to see? What can a stranger provide that a close friend or family members cannot?
13. In her acknowledgements the author tells us that this novel is based on her own breast cancer experience. What insights or aspects of the book do you think could have only been written by someone who has been there?
14. Has your thinking or knowledge about breast cancer changed because of this book? If so, how?

Author Bio

Laney Katz Becker has contributed articles to more than fifty magazines, including *Self*, *American Health*, *Seventeen*, and *First for Women*. She lives in Westchester County, New York. **Dear Stranger, Dearest Friend** is her first novel.

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