

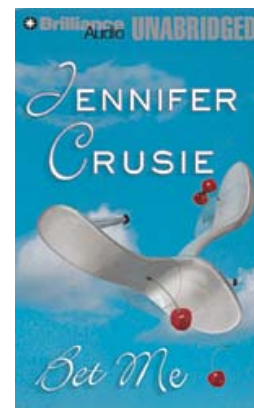
## Clever novel explores the biggest gamble of all – true love

### *Bet Me*

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*New York Times* best-selling author, Jennifer Crusie, caps a series of hit romantic comedies with a book she describes as “the first, flat-out, unapologetic romance I’d written for a long time.” Set in southern Ohio, *Bet Me* (St. Martin’s Press, 337 pages, \$22.95) is a modern fairy tale about the pot holes on the road to true love.

*Bet Me*’s heroine, Minerva Dobbs, is an Everywoman readers can root for through the trials of single life. A walking fashion disaster, Min is the daughter of a calorie-obsessed mother who incessantly nags her about her weight. However, Crusie keeps Min from becoming an object of pity by instilling her heroine with a wicked wit. In one hilarious scene, Min tries to squeeze herself into an unflattering outfit her sister has chosen for her bridesmaids, while rebuffing her mother’s disappointment in her extra pounds. “Look, Mother, I am never going to be thin. I’m Norwegian. If you wanted a thin daughter, you should not have married a man whose female ancestors carried cows home from the pasture.”

An insurance actuary, logical Min dates David, a dull but sensible choice for a boyfriend. His kisses don’t curl her toes, but at least she has an escort for her sister’s upcoming wedding. Then David dumps Min and bets his associate, Calvin Morrisey, the cost of a business seminar (\$10K) that Cal can’t bed Min within a month. Min overhears the bet but decides to string Cal along for several weeks so she’ll have a wedding date. Gorgeous Cal, who never actually accepts the bet, is intrigued by Min, one of the few women he can’t charm. As their circles of friends merge, Min and Cal are thrown together and find that opposites truly attract.

Many characters in *Bet Me* have relationship philosophies. Cal’s ex-girlfriend, a TV shrink, has written a book detailing her four-step “scientific” courtship process, while a coworker swears by a chaos theory of lust. Min’s starry-eyed friend Bonnie promotes the relationship power of believing in dreams. Min, however, doesn’t consider herself the fairy tale type. “Cal Morrisey would look right at home [in Cinderella’s castle],” Min thinks. “She, on the other hand, would be asked to try the servant’s entrance.”

Into this delicious story of machinations and maneuvering, Crusie weaves snow globes, Midwestern brats, the spirit of Elvis, Krispy Kreme donuts, great shoes, and Chicken Marsala. And for anyone who’s ever brought a date home to meet Mom and Dad, the scenes in which Min and Cal dine first with her parents and then with his are worth the cost of the book. When Cal warns Min about his parents, he says “We don’t have to chill the wine at home, the atmosphere does it for us.”

A number of authors have attempted to feature plump-to-plus-sized heroines with varying success. Crusie captures the sexiness of lush curves vs. today’s pale waif models and makes the attraction between the handsome hero and the chubby “she-ro” believable. When a friend asks Min why she wants Cal, she answers, “He was so much fun...[and] I was never fat when I was with Cal.”

Crusie, who is quite vocal about her dislike of epilogues, offers instead a brief last chapter that gives readers a glimpse into the characters’ HEA (romance shorthand for “happily ever after.”) It’s the perfect ending to this romantic, comically fractured fairy tale.