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Perfection can be deadly.

# THE PROGRAM

a novel by Charlie Lovett



May 2008

Original trade paperback

280 pp | \$19.95

ISBN 9781597190138

*"The size-positive characters are heartfelt and quirky, the suspense keeps building and the bombshell on page 25 is not to be missed. Enjoy!"*

LYNNE MURRAY  
author of *Larger Than Death*

A new weight-loss clinic in New York City has an offer for you—give them \$5,000 and they'll make you as thin as a supermodel. You can eat whatever you want and you'll never gain an ounce. Tempted? Fledging journalist Karen Sumner would be—if only she had \$5,000.

But when Karen finally walks through the blue and gold doors of The Program, she's on the trail of the hottest story of her career. If she and her friends are right, The Program is doing something even worse than creating an army of unnaturally thin women. Will they be able to stop The Program before it's too late?

*"A lively first novel. Highly recommended."*  
LIBRARY JOURNAL

*"Brilliant! I recommend The Program to every woman who feels insecure about her body because she thinks she weighs too much. In fact, I recommend The Program to every woman! Charlie Lovett has managed to weave romance, intrigue, suspense and mystery into this story while clearly depicting the insecurities of women who don't like their bodies and how far they will go to become what they think (or society tells them) is the 'perfect woman.'"*

PAT BALLARD  
author of *The Best Man, Abigail's Revenge, & Dangerous Curves Ahead*



an excerpt from

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Karen Sumner stood naked in front of her bathroom mirror contemplating her breasts. On the countertop lay an open copy of *Perfect Woman* magazine sporting a pouting portrait of Celinda, the sexiest woman in the world. Karen looked back and forth between the glossy image in the magazine and her own reflection in the mirror. There could hardly have been a greater contrast.

Celinda leaned in a doorway, clutching a sheer piece of fabric that barely kept her decent. Her form was all about straight lines. A straight line from her ankle to her armpit—undisturbed by bulging hips or thighs, a straight line across her shoulders, and a straight line down each arm. Her torso, from belly to breasts, was as flat and smooth as the prairies of western Kansas where Karen had grown up, the plane interrupted only by the ridges of her ribs rippling across the surface like summer wheat in the breeze. Celinda was a perfect geometric figure of a woman—even her face was square.

Karen was all curves and roundness. Her thighs sprouted from her knees like giant tree trunks that spread into the mighty width of her hips. Just when this line seemed to be going somewhere it curved tightly back into her waist. But the roller coaster ride of flesh was not over. Crowning her trunk were her breasts. They were—well, they were big. She had been a 36-C since ninth grade, and lately her cup had been running over. She cringed at the thought of reaching to the back of the rack searching for the elusive D-cup. Perched above Karen's curving body, above her sloping shoulders, was her round head with cheeks not like the beautiful pale hollows of Celinda, but full and florid. *God*, she thought, *even my cheeks are fat*.

Of all the places where her body deviated from the model of perfection in the magazine, Karen was most annoyed by her breasts. When she was fourteen they had just grown there—cropped up unbidden and unwanted, these escarpments of roundness, flouting straight line perfection and mortifying her with embarrassment until she learned how to hide them. Hold books in front of you, lean forward with your shoulders, wear loose blouses and armature bras—she had done all this for ten years now, as if through sheer willpower she could banish them. But there they still stood, already starting to sag, but massive as ever.

Her left breast was slightly larger than her right. Its nipple no longer pointed straight forward but a few degrees down, as if indicating some sight far off on the horizon. Her right

breast, perhaps because of its smaller size, still rode closer to its original position. Two dark hairs, which she plucked religiously every Monday morning, sprouted where her skin changed color from pasty white to faded pink. Her right nipple had always been the more sensitive. Even now, in the cool air of the bathroom, it stood erect—a rigid button of nearly half an inch that her bras were chosen to conceal.

She didn't need to see a picture of Celinda naked to know what *her* breasts looked like. Nothing interfered with her lines, and the line across her chest was as straight as any. Celinda never wore a bra, had never gone through the humiliation of trying on a size too small in a department store fitting room. True, her nipples were always visible, pressing through the sheer fabric of her high fashion gowns, but those buds were enough to assert her femininity. She had no need for mountains of flesh. Celinda was perfect.

Below her picture, in large gold type set off by the plush blue carpet under her feet, were the words "Get With The Program."

The Program. According to the television ads, over half a million women had attained bodily perfection through The Program, with more signing up every day, anteing up the \$5,000 fee and disappearing behind the blue and gold doors that had appeared in every major American city in the past few months. No one knew what went on behind those doors, but the bodies that came out were Celinda-perfect—not a curve in sight.

Five thousand dollars. This morning Karen's bank balance was \$428.45, her unpaid bills amounted to about \$300, the refrigerator was empty, and *Ear to the Ground*, the alternative paper for which she wrote feature articles, was skating on thin financial ice. Karen couldn't afford the perfect body.

*But I can dream*, thought Karen, and for a moment she flicked her eyes back and forth between her reflection and Celinda's picture so fast that the two images became one, and for a moment she saw the angular version of herself trapped beneath the curves. It was a daily ritual, this exercise in persistence of vision, a way of tricking herself into believing that another Karen existed, a Karen of lines and angles, a perfect Karen.

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*Praise for*

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**PAT BALLARD**

author of

*Dangerous Curves Ahead,*  
*Abigail's Revenge &*  
*10 Steps to Loving Your Body*  
*(No Matter What Size You Are)*

“I stand in awe of Charlie Lovett's powers to draw stories out of the air, stories which are compelling and filled with interesting characters....

I so enjoyed reading *The Program*.

What talent!”

**JENNIFER PORTNICK**

Fitness Trainer

“Would you sell your soul to lose weight? What if you did and your husband found you less attractive? In Charlie Lovett's *The Program*, the Devil has gone into the weight loss business, and an unlikely band of heroes must try to defeat him at his soul-stealing game. The size-positive characters are heartfelt and quirky, the suspense keeps building and the bombshell on page 25 is not to be missed.

Enjoy!”

**LYNNE MURRAY**

author of

*Larger Than Death*

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# CHARLIE LOVETT

author of **THE PROGRAM**

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Charlie Lovett is Writer-in-Residence at Summit School in Winston-Salem, NC. His plays for children have been seen in over 1,000 productions in all 50 states and five foreign countries.

He is the author of 11 previous books, including works on Lewis Carroll and the acclaimed memoir *Love, Ruth*. *The Program* is his first novel.

LOVETT WAS BORN in Winston-Salem, NC and graduated from Summit School (1977), Woodberry Forest School (1980) and Davidson College (1984), where he earned a B.A. in theatre. After living in Atlanta, GA briefly, he returned to Winston-Salem to open a rare book business, which he operated for several years.

He owns one of the largest collections of Lewis Carroll books and related materials in the world. His first book, *Alice on Stage*, was published in 1990. (Yes, Alice does make a cameo appearance in *The Program*.)

After moving to the Kansas City area in 1993, Lovett devoted himself full-time to writing. He attended the Sewanee Writer's Conference in 1994 and in 1997 earned an MFA from the writing program at Vermont College of Norwich University.

READ AN ESSAY on *The Program's* path to publication at <http://www.charlielovett.com/mainpages/studyguides/programessay.html>.

## ALSO BY CHARLIE LOVETT:

### BOOKS

*Love, Ruth*  
*Sparrow Through the Hall*  
*Lewis Carroll's Alice*  
*Alice on Stage*  
*Lewis Carroll's England*  
*Lewis Carroll and the Press*  
*Lewis Carroll Among His Books*  
*Everybody's Guide to Book Collecting*  
*Olympic Marathon*  
*J.K. Rowling*  
*Onward and Upward*

### PLAYS

*Twinderella*  
*Wooing Wed*  
*Widing Hood*  
*Snew White*  
*A Hairy Tale*  
*Porridgegate*  
*Romeo and Winifred*  
*Omelette: Chef of Denmark*  
*Unwrapped*  
*A Nose for the News*  
*Supercomics*



## Book Club Guide to

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1. Were you drawn in by the opening scene of *The Program*? What did you learn about Karen from her thoughts and actions in the first scene? Based on that scene only, what sort of person would you say she is? Do you think her view of herself differs from your view of her? How?
  2. The main character of a novel usually undergoes some sort of change during the course of the narrative. How do you think Karen changes? How would you describe her at the end of the novel? How does she overcome obstacles? Do you think the notion of a change of character over a fairly short period of time (in this case a few months) is true to life or only a device of fiction? In what ways has your own character changed through your life? How have the obstacles you encountered shaped that change?
  3. The author has said that one of the things *The Program* is “about” is the ways in which we all present a false façade to the world. In what way does the novel show characters putting on such false façades? One question the book raises (see especially the conversation on pp. 45–47) is where we should draw the line between altering our appearance or behavior as a necessary way to become part of a society (wearing appropriate clothes, for instance) and changing our identity in an unnecessary way because we feel compelled to by societal pressures. Where would you draw the line? When should we listen to our own identity? What have you changed about yourself that you later felt you should have left unaltered? Why did you make the choice to change in that way? How can we help our children understand the difference between necessary and unnecessary conformity?
  4. If *The Program* is at least partially about identity, how do you think Karen would describe her identity? How about David? How would you describe your own identity? How much of your identity is defined by what other people think about you and how much by how you actually think of yourself? How do you think Karen and David would answer that question?
  5. One of the themes of *The Program* is temptation. Discuss the different types of temptation that the characters deal with. What tempts you? Was there a scene in the book in which you would have been especially tempted by a character’s temptation? How do you resist temptation? What happens when you fail to resist? How do you feel?
  6. Why do you think the author includes homelessness as a prominent feature in the novel? In what ways are many of the characters symbolically “homeless”? What does “home” mean? How do they find “homes”? Do you see *The Program* as a novel of two worlds? If so, how might we divide those worlds besides the homeless and the non-homeless? In what ways do you see the real world as divided? How do the residents of the rectory in the third section of the novel see the world as divided? How can such divisions be overcome?
  7. Authors make many basic decisions in creating a novel, all of which have a bearing on the readers’ experience. Consider some of the following decisions and discuss how you think they do or do not shape the novel. How might *The Program* have been different if the author had gone another direction with
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- one or more of these decisions?
- The story is set in New York.
  - The story takes place mostly in winter before and after Christmas.
  - The novel is divided into chapters and into three major sections.
  - The novel is told in the third person.
  - The novel is told mostly in the past tense (you might discuss why the author uses present tense on pp. 75–76).
  - The novel is set primarily over a period of just a few months.
8. In order to keep a reader's interest and build tension throughout a novel, there is generally an increase, as the novel progresses, in what is at stake. How do the stakes rise in *The Program*? What are the stakes at the beginning of the novel? At the end of each of the major sections? At the end? Did this rise in stakes help keep you invested in *The Program*?
9. On page 180 we discover the identity of the person behind The Program. Do you see this character's identity in the book as literal or metaphorical? What do you think is the nature of evil—is it latent within each person, or is it an external force? How do you think the characters in *The Program* would answer this question? How does the novel differ for a reader who takes a literal interpretation of the mastermind behind The Program versus a metaphorical interpretation?
10. Were you expecting the major development at the end of the second section (p. 212)? How does the author let you know that something important was about to happen? What tools does an author have to guide (or fool) the expectations of the reader? How does pacing work in this regard? Are there places in the novel where foreshadowing is used? How does the gap between your expectations and what actually happens affect your experience of the novel?

11. What did you think was the purpose of the inclusion of the film *My Sister, Myself* in the novel (see especially pp. 75–76)? How did the film reflect on the rest of the novel? How is Hollywood portrayed in the novel? If you were casting *My Sister, Myself* with current movie stars, whom would you cast? How about if you were casting *The Program*?
12. What did you think of the ending of *The Program*? Were you satisfied with the way the loose ends were tied up? Would you say in general it was an open or closed ending? Ambiguous or unambiguous? Were some things left unresolved that you would have liked to see resolved or vice versa? What do you think the future will hold for these characters?

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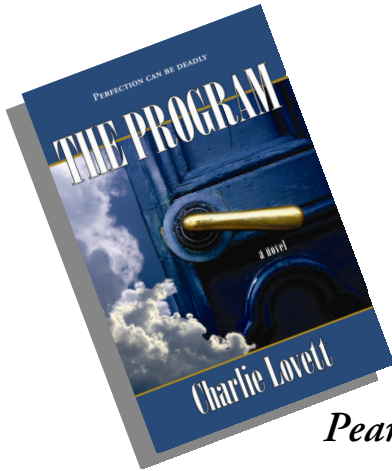
More information about Charlie and his works is available at [www.charlielovett.com](http://www.charlielovett.com).

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*THE PROGRAM can be purchased from your favorite online or offline bookseller as well as directly from the publisher at*

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# An Interview with Charlie Lovett author of **THE PROGRAM**

by Rachel Pitt  
*Pearlson Press Intern Fall 2007*



Charlie Lovett does more than dabble in the world of literature. The Winston-Salem, North Carolina resident is a playwright, writer, and teacher, but that is just the tip of the iceberg. Lovett's plays for children have been performed in 50 states and seven foreign countries, and his portfolio of 10 nonfiction books range from personal memoirs to the literary work of Lewis Carroll. Lovett owns one of the world's largest collections of Lewis Carroll books and related material, and has even owned a rare book business. On top of all this, Lovett founded a private foundation for the betterment of future generations, as well as society. Charlie Lovett is a man who has accomplished more than many do in a lifetime, and feels the best is yet to come.

Lovett's appreciation for books started before he ever worked in the literary world. As a teenager, he became interested in rare books when his father began collecting different editions of *Robinson Crusoe*. After graduating from college in 1984, Lovett went to work for a rare bookstore in Atlanta, but preferred the idea of being in the book business for himself. He opened and ran a rare book business over the next several years.

"I loved having a bookstore and the constant search for treasures that the second-hand book business brought," Lovett says. Owning and operating a rare book business not only helped ignite Lovett's interest in the world of literature, but also served as an inspiration for his work as a writer.

Not surprisingly, Lovett developed into quite a book collector. Following in his father's footsteps, he began collecting different editions of *Alice in Wonderland* while in college. His collection continued to grow through the years, and eventually developed into thousands of items, including many rare works by Lewis Carroll, translations of *Alice in Wonderland*, illustrated editions, and much more. Lovett's collection is one of the largest collections of Lewis Carroll books and related materials in the world.

His fascination with Carroll, the Victorian world, and theater culminated in his first book, *Alice on Stage: A History of the Early Theatrical Adaptations of Alice in Wonderland*, published in 1989. Since then, Lovett has written several books, pamphlets, and articles on Carroll's life and work. Lovett even served as president of the Lewis Carroll Society of North America. Though all this, Lovett says, "the happiest result of my interest in Lewis Carroll has been the many friendships I have made with other Carrollians around the world."

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peggyelam@pearlson.com | www.pearlson.com | Page 1

After working in the world of rare books, Lovett pursued a serious career in writing. He has been writing fiction seriously for about 15 years, but most of his published works have been nonfiction. The nonfiction works grew from his interests in topics like Lewis Carroll and rare books.

In the early 2000s, Lovett began working on what became his first published novel.

“I made notes on old credit card receipts and on the backs of envelopes (my wife kindly never throws away anything with my nearly illegible scrawl on it), and eventually I just knew it was time to start to write,” says Lovett. The scrawls and scraps of paper eventually became *The Program*.

*The Program* is a novel about a young female journalist struggling with her body image while uncovering the truth behind a mysterious weight loss program in New York City. The novel revolves around an eponymous weight loss clinic that has an offer that seems too good to be true: Give them \$5,000 and they’ll make you as thin as a supermodel. You can eat as much as you want of whatever you want and never gain a pound.

This offer attracts the attention of journalist Karen Sumner. Karen’s interest in *The Program* transforms into the hottest story of her career. If she’s right, *The Program* is doing something even worse than creating an army of unnaturally thin women. When Karen finally walks through *The Program*’s doors, she must fight temptation to uncover the secret behind the mysterious clinic and try to stop *The Program* before it’s too late.

Lovett writes about weight and body image with undeniable understanding of a woman’s internal struggle with her appearance. Many things influenced him to write on this topic, but the main reason was his two daughters.

Lovett was disturbed by the troubling images his daughters were seeing in the media on a daily basis—images glorifying the bodies of ultra-slim females. He saw several of his daughters’ friends trying to change their natural and healthy figures into that unhealthy yet popular slim ideal, and was perplexed as to why the popular feminine ideal is so at odds with the biological feminine ideal.

“I thought *The Program* would be a good way to address the problems of body image in our society,” Lovett says, “a fun read with some adventure and mystery, a little romance, a little sex, but with a serious undercurrent that was the message to all the women of the world who have been made to feel unattractive just because of their (perfectly normal) shape.”

Lovett wonderfully captures the emotional state of a woman struggling with her body image in *The Program*—in part, he says, because he listens to the women in his life as they talk about everything from their worries and fears to their passions and insecurities.

*The Program* is definitely about weight loss and body image. But Lovett sees his novel as also embodying two big ideas—themes he only came to understand as he worked on the third draft.

First, he says, the novel is about temptation, and what we will actually do for the things we desire. Second, the novel is about how we falsely present ourselves to the rest of the world. Many of the characters in *The Program* put on costumes and portray themselves as something other than what they really are.

“In a way that’s no different from trying to change body shape,” Lovett says of this concept of putting on a facade. “I think this theme of our struggle to reshape our identities into something less than true re-echoes throughout *The Program*.”

*The Program* is not the only book on Lovett's plate right now. He is also working on a novel called *Marginalia*. The main character in this work-in-progress, Peter Byerly, is an antiquarian bookseller who escapes the world by moving to an English country cottage after his wife's death. Peter is a bookseller, a murder suspect, and even a potential murder victim, racing against the clock to uncover the mysteries behind what could be the most important literary artifact ever found.

Lovett draws his writing inspiration from many different places. In particular, he tends to be inspired by what he might be reading at the time. He even re-reads some of his favorite novels while writing his own work. His favorite writers include Charles Dickens, Eric Kraft, John Irving, David Lodge, and J.K. Rowling.

Lovett enjoys novels with a great story, but even more important to him is that he enjoy spending time with the characters. That could be the secret behind Lovett's ability to construct characters we want to get to know a little better.

Charlie Lovett's plays for children are being performed all over the world, his career as a novelist is growing, and he's Writer-In-Residence at Summit School in Winston-Salem, NC. He shows no signs of letting up any time soon. Only time will tell what Charlie Lovett will do next in the world of literature.

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