

# DISCUSSION GUIDE

## *Where'd You Go, Bernadette* by Maria Semple

BOOK GROUP

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## **AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY**

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Maria Semple spent her first few years traveling around Europe with her parents. While living in Spain, her father Lorenzo wrote the pilot for the TV series *Batman*. The family packed up and moved to Los Angeles. After Lorenzo became established as a screenwriter, the family moved to Aspen, Colorado. For high school, Maria was sent away to Choate Rosemary Hall and loved every minute of it.

College was at Barnard, where Maria had big plans of becoming a novelist or a teacher. Those dreams got derailed when she sold a movie script to Twentieth Century Fox just after graduation. The movie didn't get made, but she moved to LA and made a living writing more screenplays that didn't get made. Maria got into TV when her friend Darren Star – whom she'd met on the ski slopes in Aspen years earlier – gave her a job on *Beverly Hills, 90210*. Thus began a fifteen-year career in television, writing for good shows like *Ellen*, *Mad About You* and *Arrested Development*. And bad shows you'll have to look elsewhere to find.

Maria had a baby, quit television and finally gave novel-writing a try. *This One Is Mine* was published by Little, Brown in December 2008. Maria, her boyfriend and daughter moved to Seattle where her new novel, *Where'd You Go, Bernadette*, begins. Maria loves living in Seattle – thank you for asking – where she teaches writing, studies poetry and tries, with mixed results, to stay off the internet.

*Where'd You Go, Bernadette* was published by Little, Brown & Co. in August, 2012.

## **BOOK SUMMARY**

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Bernadette Fox is notorious. To her Microsoft-guru husband, she's a fearlessly opinionated partner; to fellow private-school mothers in Seattle, she's a disgrace; to design mavens, she's a revolutionary architect, and to 15-year-old Bee, she is a best friend and, simply, Mom.

Then Bernadette disappears. It began when Bee aced her report card and claimed her promised reward: a family trip to Antarctica. But Bernadette's intensifying allergy to Seattle - and people in general - has made her so agoraphobic that a virtual assistant in India now runs her most basic errands. A trip to the end of the earth is problematic.

To find her mother, Bee compiles email messages, official documents, secret correspondence - creating a compulsively readable and touching novel about misplaced genius and a mother and daughter's role in an absurd world

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

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1. *Where'd You Go, Bernadette* is told from the point of view of a daughter trying to find her missing mother. Why do you think the author chose to tell the story from Bee's perspective? What light does it shed on the bond between Bernadette and Bee?
2. What are your thoughts on Bernadette's character? Has she become unhinged or has she always been a little crazy? What, if anything, do you think sent her over the edge? Have you ever had a moment in your own life that utterly changed you, or made you call into question your own sanity?
3. When Bernadette relocates from Los Angeles to Seattle, she must cope with being a transplant in a new city. Have you ever moved, or even stayed put but switched jobs, and had to adjust to an entirely different culture? What was it like?
4. The idea of going to Antarctica becomes too much for an already frazzled Bernadette to bear, but the trip itself, surprisingly, turns out to be exactly what she needs to get back on track. How do other characters in the novel experience their own breakthroughs? Which character is most transformed?
5. How are Audrey Griffin and Bernadette Fox more alike than they realize?
6. Bernadette often behaves as if she is an outsider. Do you think she is? If so, do you think her feelings of being an outsider are self-imposed, or is she truly different from the other members of her community? Do you ever feel like an outsider?
7. The book has a very playful structure. Do you think it works? Why do you think the author chose it rather than a more straightforward, traditional structure? Think about other books with unusual structures and how their formats influenced your reading experience.
8. What do you think of Bernadette and Elgie's marriage? Is it dysfunctional? Is there real love there? How has their marriage changed over time? Think about romantic relationships you've been in that have evolved, positively or negatively, and why.
9. *Where'd You Go, Bernadette* is, at its core, a story about a woman who disappears, both literally and figuratively. Were you able to relate to the book? How and why? Do you feel Bernadette's disappearance was unique, or do all women, in a sense, disappear into motherhood and marriage?

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