

# Maureen Langloss

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## Bernadette: The Perfect Spring Break Companion



It's the time of year for tropical drinks, sand underfoot and a good, breezy read. *Where'd You Go, Bernadette* by Maria Semple is the book to toss into your spring break suitcase this year. It's a smart, satiric tale about a genius architect who disappears into thin air when her husband tries to commit her to a mental institution.

I know you're asking, didn't I just read a book about a depressed wife who cannot be found in *Gone Girl*? (It does seem this storyline is becoming its own genre. Remember Allison Lynn's wonderful page-turner in 2004, *Now You See It*?) But while I've already forgotten *Gone Girl*'s name, profession and source of ennui, Bernadette is... Ah... Bernadette... Thankfully, she's no *Gone Girl*.

She is a curmudgeon. She can be mean. She's overcome with bitterness – for her husband moving her to Seattle to take a job at Microsoft, for the destruction of a house she designed twenty years before, for the judgmental parents at her daughter's school who assume she's a terrible mother simply because she doesn't volunteer at the PTA. Everyone in Seattle hates her and she hates everyone in Seattle.

But I adored her. Adored. I loved her irreverence, her quirkiness, her willingness to call it like she sees it. I loved that, while her husband is staging an intervention on her, she just really needs to pee. I loved that she takes to wearing fishing vests because having so many pockets is irresistibly convenient. Bernadette is a vivid character I will not soon forget. She made me laugh (tell me when you get to the re-rape scene; it's hilarious) and is endearing to boot. She loves her daughter above all else, and is even capable of forgiving her husband. Most of all, despite how zany she is, she's believable. Real.

Semple's book is full of clever details. Like Bernadette's houses. She designs them out of abandoned eyeglass factories and Catholic reform schools. The confessionals make great closets. For one project, she restricts herself to using building materials sourced from a twenty-mile radius. When she loses interest in most aspects of life, in particular her own creative genius, her home comes to embody her state of mind. It is mushy all over from leaks that are never fixed. A labyrinth of blackberry vines thrives under the floorboards, inhabits the basement like a ghost and becomes a menace to her next-door neighbor.

The setting for the book's grand finale is equally rich. Bernadette's husband and daughter end up in Antarctica, of all places, to search for the lost woman. Apologies if the cold air

interrupts your spring break vibe, but Semple's descriptions of the qualities of ice are pure fun.

Indeed fun is the focal point of the novel. Semple pokes fun at all sorts of things, and pokes fun well, from the omnipresence of Craftsman architecture in Seattle, to self-help groups, to the fundraising efforts of private schools, to big brother Microsoft, to public radio.

If I had any quibble with the book, it would be its format – an epistolary novel that is told mostly through emails, letters, blog posts, TED Talks and police reports. I have never written or received an email as long as some of the emails in this book. And the format makes for some exposition. But I was willing to forgive this narrative device for an otherwise delightful read.

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