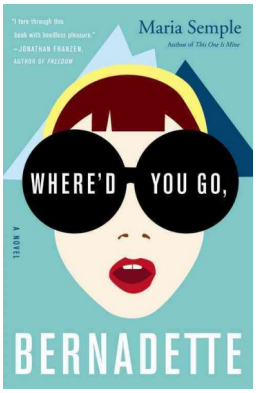
Where'd You Go, Bernadette



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TED talks, "pay yourself in chard", shoeless Microsoft techies, Molly Moon ice cream--you don't have to be a current or ex-Seattleite to enjoy this funny book by Hollywood scriptwriter (*Arrested Development*) Maria Semple. If you've ever lived in a politically correct zone (Bloomington anyone?), you'll recognize many of the interpersonal dynamics pictured here.

Where'd You Go, Bernadette tells the story of a family - Bernadette, Bee, and Elgin Branch--and their relationship to their child's school community.

Bernadette, a former architect and MacArthur genius award winner, has given up working on any creative projects to devote herself to her family. Her daughter Bee was born with a serious heart condition and for years Bernadette felt that she could not commit herself to any new designs due to her daughter's condition. But Bernadette, a woman full of prodigious talent and energy, has been driving herself and everyone around her nuts while her husband worked his way up the Microsoft hierarchy.

Minor Seattle annoyances set her off, say five-way traffic interchanges where one waits an eon for a turn at the green light. Too friendly Canadians provoke Bernadette's ire also. And turning her almost ballistic are messages from her daughter's private school that ask for volunteers. She ignores these but the fellow parents, whom she calls "gnats", mock her for her lack of community involvement--a major Seattle lapse. And then there are all those obnoxious Microsoft slogans that she must turn away from whenever she and Bee visit her husband's office.

Once long ago, Bernadette designed two wildly inventive buildings in LA using only local materials. Her name is still enshrined in architecture lore, but now she's battling her husband's employee and a neighbor, Audrey Griffin, who's on a crazybound track of her own.

The novel is made up of hundreds of e-mails, handwritten notes, transcripts, conversations, etc. many from Bernadette, some from her daughter, many from Audrey. Of course, a shrink becomes involved. Good thing she doubles as a post-traumatic stress counselor because Audrey's fundraiser with twenty singing kindergarteners is overrun by a cascading sea of mud from Bernadette's house. Audrey insisted that B. pull out all her blackberry bushes.

Meanwhile, Bee has chosen her prize for finishing elementary school with flying colors - a trip to Antarctica, but Bernadette has social anxiety issues. In fact, she's hired an Indian errand-runner, who manages myriad details from thousands of miles away. Except he's not really from India and he has all of her important bank numbers and passport info.

It's a fun rollicking ride full of lots of Seattle color and rainy weather humor, some at the great Emerald City's expense. But if you're in the mood for a book to brighten these dark winter days,

this family's escapades will cheer you up.

Another quirky novel that both celebrates and pokes fun at an American city is John Kennedy Toole's *A Confederacy of Dunces.*

For the Love of Reading Information, Answers & Reviews Family Relationships Fiction Where'd You Go, Bernadette

Posted by Dory L. on Jan 16, 2013

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