BACK BAY · READERS' PICK

Reading Group Guide

SO FAR AWAY

a novel by

MEG MITCHELL MOORE

A conversation with Meg Mitchell Moore

Meg Mitchell Moore sat down with Lisa Steinke of the blog SheKnows.com to dish on writing, motherhood, and why she has photos of lobstermen taped over her desk…

Tweet us a blurb about your novel So Far Away *(in 140 characters or fewer, of course).*

A thirteen-year-old cyberbullying victim connects with a heart-broken archivist and an Irish domestic servant from the 1920s through an old diary.

How is So Far Away *different from* The Arrivals*? In what ways, if any, is it similar?*

I think of it as very different, and I'm really curious to know how readers respond. It's darker. I think it's more ambitious. And in many thematic ways, it's the exact opposite: *The Arrivals* was about people returning home in search of solace, and *So Far Away* is about people looking outside their usual circles for solace that they couldn't find at home.

Your debut novel, The Arrivals, *is now out in paperback (time flies!). How would you describe your first year as a published author?*

Busy! And exciting. And a great learning year. I was a lot more nervous last year at this time. This year, I have learned how to chill out about the stuff I can't control. I have no Google alert on my name. I don't read any reviews unless they are sent to me from my publicist. I take real joy in the writing time I have (I'm working on my third novel) because I understand more than ever that that is where the real happiness is.

You're a mother of three and a full-time author and you even have a dog! We always ask authors about balance. What does it mean to you and how do you achieve it?

Oh, balance is elusive. Time is always a challenge, so when I do have time to write, I try really hard to focus and let everything else in life fade into the background, even if only for an hour or two. I also do *not* try to write when my kids are around. I think it's impossible, so I don't put myself through the torture. Writing happens only when I'm alone. I think all working parents are trying for balance. All you can do is do the best you can to get to everything and try not to beat yourself up when you don't succeed.

What are five things in your writing space that give us some insight about you?

1. A jar of colored pencils and crayons — my first-grader doesn't have a desk in her room so she does her homework here.
2. Two giant bags of books I have been meaning to donate to a wonderful small volunteer-run library in my town. Packed them up five weeks ago, and they haven't moved since (see previous question about balance).

3. Photos of lobstermen taped above my desk, inspiration for my third novel, now in progress.
4. A bottle of Kombucha, my afternoon treat.
5. A box of index cards with notes for my third novel. I am not very good at plotting ahead, but I tried really hard to do that this time. I'm not sure it's working.

One of the key plot points in So Far Away *involves a diary. Do you keep a journal?*

I don't! In fact, the journal was one of the hardest things to write in the book. I kept resisting the idea that it needed to be written—in the first several drafts, I alluded to the journal but never showed it; I told the entire story of the journal writer in third person.

So you are working on your next novel? Can you tell us what it's about?

I'm really excited about it. It's tentatively titled *The Captain's Daughter*. It's about the daughter of a lobsterman from a small fishing village in Maine. When her father's boat goes missing, she returns to the town she thought she'd escaped and confronts her past as well as some uncomfortable truths about her present.

This Q&A was conducted by Lisa Steinke and originally ran on the "Book Lounge" section of the blog SheKnows.com on May 24, 2012.

The Social Network

When an author includes in a fictional work a current social issue, he or she faces certain challenges and responsibilities. I thought Anita Shreve did an admirable job of meeting these challenges in the novel *Testimony,* which depicts the fallout from a sex scandal involving teenagers at a New England boarding school. So too did Helen Schulman in last year's *This Beautiful Life,* which examines one family's deterioration following a sexting incident. I recently spent some time thinking about these books and wondering why and how they worked, and I decided that it was because the books themselves didn't serve as comments or judgments on the topics; they used these very particular and very modern issues to explore universal human experiences and reactions.

I was thinking about these books because my second novel, *So Far Away,* has a teenage cyberbullying victim as one of its three main characters, and a few recent interviewers have asked me about how and why I chose to write about the topic.

The *why* is pretty simple. When I first pulled together the plan for the novel, I knew my thirteen-year-old character was struggling with something, but at first it was merely her parents' separation. I really wanted to up the stakes for her, and cyberbullying was and is so much in the news that I started thinking about how

terrifying a cyberbullying experience would be for an already fragile young girl. The more I read about the topic, the more I knew I wanted to explore those fears.

The *how* is a bit more complex, and ultimately it involved trading in my novelist's cap for my journalist's cap (long unused, but still hanging in the mental closet). Many outside sources were invaluable to me during the writing of the book—they included a wonderful employee at the Massachusetts Archives, the curator of my local historical society, a couple of doctor friends, and my cyberbullying expert, a professor at the University of Wisconsin–Eau Claire and a cofounder of the Cyberbullying Research Center. I found him through a Google search and approached him the way I used to approach sources in my journalism days, with a mixture of hope, trepidation, and awe at people's ability to master a topic I knew little about.

This kind and patient person allowed me to interview him several times by phone and tirelessly answered my follow-up emails. He offered me a few scenarios that a teenage victim of cyberbullying might encounter. He helped me figure out how adults in this girl's world might react—both correctly and incorrectly—to bullying incidents, and what the fallout might be.

Once I had the facts, I switched back to my novelist's cap, and this is where, of course, some of the most important work happened. Though cyberbullying is a crucial element in the book, it is not the only element. And even if it had been, I didn't want the novel to read like a journalist's treatise on the topic. I didn't want to judge my thirteen-year-old character or any of the adults around her. I wanted their fears, thoughts, and actions to speak for themselves, and I wanted them to fit into the overall narrative, which included two other main characters with seemingly unconnected story lines.

Then—and here's the most important part—I didn't let myself

be finished when I thought I was finished. I went right back to my cyberbullying expert and asked him (a very busy man, involved in his own teaching and writing and family life) to read a close-to-final draft of the book and give me an honest assessment of where I'd gone right and wrong. He did it! And I will be forever grateful.

In preparing for this post, I looked back through my in-box to see when I first contacted my expert. Tomorrow it will be exactly two years since my initial email to him. (I don't know if that detail is truly telling or not, but it seems significant to me.) And so, two years later, I am indebted to people's willingness to share what they know with random authors they've never met. I am humbled by the responsibility I feel to treat an issue as important as cyberbullying with honesty and care. And I'm grateful to the authors who have shown me how to do it right.

This essay first appeared on the website *Writer Unboxed*.

Meg Mitchell Moore's Top Ten Books

Kate Atkinson, *Case Histories*
Ford Madox Ford, *The Good Soldier*
E. M. Forster, *Howards End*
John Irving, *The World According to Garp*
Katherine Mansfield, *The Collected Stories of Katherine Mansfield*
Ian McEwan, *Saturday*
Alice Munro, *Too Much Happiness*
Ann Patchett, *Bel Canto*
Elizabeth Strout, *Olive Kitteridge*
Virginia Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*

Questions and topics for discussion

1. The main characters in *So Far Away* are all female but very different in terms of age and experience. What similarities do they share, and what connections do they forge throughout the course of the story?
2. Thirteen-year-old Natalie becomes a victim of cyberbullying, which escalates in intensity as the novel progresses. How do the adults in her life react to her troubles?
3. Does any adult do the right thing to help Natalie, and, if not, what would the right thing have been?
4. Natalie's bullying problems are particularly painful because one of the main perpetrators was formerly her best friend. Is this depiction of shifting adolescent female friendships realistic? Why or why not?
5. Kathleen's daughter, Susannah, who ran away from home as a teenager, is a constant presence in the book, though we never meet her directly. How does her story enhance or illuminate Bridget's and Natalie's struggles?
6. The existence of Bridget's journal, which details a period of time in her life as a domestic servant in the 1920s, eventually serves as a connection between Natalie and Kathleen. What other purpose or purposes does the journal serve?
7. A main theme of the novel, which Bridget O'Connell Callaghan writes in her journal, is that solace can come from unlikely sources. Do you agree with this sentiment? Which of the characters eventually find this to be true?

About the Author

Meg Mitchell Moore is the author of the acclaimed novel *The Arrivals*. She worked for several years as a journalist, and her articles have been published in a wide variety of business and consumer magazines. She received a master's degree in English literature from New York University. A longtime New Englander, she now lives in Northern California with her husband and their three children.

. . . and her previous novel

The Arrivals is currently available in paperback from Reagan Arthur Books. Following is an excerpt from the novel's opening pages.

It was eight thirty in the morning, June, a Saturday, and the sunlight was coming in the kitchen window at such an angle that William's granddaughter, Olivia, had to shield her eyes with one hand while she bent her head to sip from the straw in her glass of orange juice. In a couple of minutes the sun would shift and begin to move over the garden, out of Olivia's eyes—William had sat at that table for too many years not to know that—but even so he rose and pulled the cord on the shade, lowering it six inches.

Sitting back down, he pushed aside a stack of coloring pages on which Olivia, who had been up for two and a half hours already, had begun making halfhearted scribbles and swirls and even, in the corner of one sheet of paper, a small triangular object that she claimed was a dog. He opened the front section of the *Burlington Free Press,* unwittingly setting the sports section on top of a small puddle of orange juice.

Olivia watched him. She was three, but she would tell you with no small amount of dignity that she was three and five-eighths. William, who had been the one to get up with her, was on his fourth cup of coffee. A fifth was not out of the question. At the stove, Ginny, his wife, was scrambling the eggs Olivia had requested for breakfast.

"Well," he said, "when do you suppose Lillian will be down?"

"I don't know," Ginny said without turning around. She extracted the saltshaker from its berth in the spice cupboard and shook. "Eventually, I'm sure. I'm surprised the baby is still sleeping."

"That baby cries *all the time,*" said Olivia. She screwed up her tiny, perfect nose. "He's a bad baby."

"He's not a *bad* baby," said William. "He's your brother. That's just what babies do: they cry. You cried too, when you were a baby."

"I did?" asked Olivia airily. "I bet I didn't."

"Oh, you *did,*" said William. "You cried all the time. You cried oceans."

Ginny carried the plates to the table and set them down before William and Olivia.

"No toast yet," she said. "I'm working on it."

"I don't like scrambled eggs," said Olivia.

"You liked them yesterday," said Ginny. "Five minutes ago, when I asked you what you wanted for breakfast, you liked them then, too."

"But I don't like them any*more,*" Olivia said implacably. "I like soft-boiled."

Lillian had called two days ago to let them know she was coming. Not to ask them if it was all right if she came, but to tell them. William listened to Ginny's end of the phone conversation from the deck, where he had the Red Sox game on the old portable television, a beer in his hand. He was looking out over the garden, still tentative in early summer.

"All of you, then?" he heard Ginny say. "The whole kit and caboodle?" Then a pause. Then "Oh, I see," but in a way that said she didn't see. At last she appeared at the door, flushed from her energetic dinner preparations, faintly flustered.

"They're coming," she said. "Lillian and the children. Tomorrow!" And off she went in a frenzy of arrangements, which took her long past their usual bedtime. There were fresh sheets to put on the beds, and the Pack 'n Play to set up for the baby in Lillian's old room. A last-minute trip to the grocery store, to purchase the very eggs at which Olivia was now turning up her nose.

Later, in the semidarkness of their bedroom—the moon was full, or nearly so—William finally had an opportunity to ask her.

"Why just Lillian and the children? Why not Tom?"

"He has to work, I suppose." Ginny was on her side, turned toward him, her hands settled tidily under her chin.

"Over the weekend? He has to work over the weekend?"

"I got the impression Lillian might stay a bit longer. Have a bit of a vacation." Ginny's eyes were closed. Her words came out in a fragmented way; it was as if she were speaking through a net. She wore a sleeveless nightgown of a color that had once been a vibrant blue but had long ago faded to muted gray.

"How long?" He was thinking of the weekend plans that would now have to be changed: the dinner with Hal and Maria canceled or postponed, the Sunday papers unread, the Saturday-afternoon baseball game unwatched.

"I don't know," Ginny said. "But shame on you for asking. You should be happy to have her."

"Mmmmh," said William.

Lillian was the oldest of their three children. She had left home ages ago. William supposed he could begin counting her absence when she went off to Boston College as a freshman, with a giant paisley duffel bag and a tangle of auburn hair. Though there had been a brief postcollegiate stint when something—a lack of money, a broken heart, a lost job—had driven her back home for six months, during which she'd slept away the days in the very bed in which she now reposed and passed the evenings in a sullen state in

front of the television or out with friends, returning from those outings in a state of mild hysteria or ebullience.

Lillian had been gone from them for so long, in fact, that sometimes, despite not-infrequent visits, William found it difficult to call her image to mind, and when he did it was an outdated picture that presented itself. A girl on a soccer field with two missing teeth and scabbed knees, not a woman who had transformed herself—effortlessly, it seemed, almost magically—from befuddled youth to capable adult and mother. Witness Olivia here on the stool beside him, witness the baby asleep in the room upstairs.

So why did he still feel this irksome responsibility toward Lillian, this desire to protect her? And protect her from what? Because, now that she was here, it turned out that despite his initial lack of enthusiasm, despite the concern about the paper and the game and the plans, nothing made him happier, nothing made him feel safer and more at ease with the world, than having one of his children under his roof once again.

"I'll go and look in on them," he said now, standing.

"You haven't eaten your eggs." Ginny's voice rose an octave. "Is *nobody* going to eat these eggs I cooked?"

"*I'm* not," said Olivia with great cheer.

"I'll have a look, and then I'll eat."

"Don't, William. If the baby's sleeping—well, you'll only make things worse. And the eggs won't keep. Nothing drearier than cold eggs."

"What's 'drearier'?" interjected Olivia.

"Worse," said Ginny. "Nothing *worse* than cold eggs."

"I'll go and listen, then," William said. "Outside the door."

And he did exactly that. Ginny had put Lillian in her old room, which she had done over as a guest room, with a cheerful flowered comforter and a vase of pastel marbles on the white dresser. Olivia was deposited in Rachel's old room, which remained much as

Rachel had left it, in a state of organized chaos, with a Kurt Cobain poster on the back of the closet door. Stephen's old room they had done up as absolutely nothing, and as a result it had become the receptacle of myriad suitcases, once-used mailers with bubble wrap sticking out of them, winter boots packed in boxes after the spring thaw had come, however late and reluctantly, to Vermont.

William paused outside the door. They had lived for so long in this house, the bunch of them, that he failed, mostly, to take in any of the details. For example: in this hallway, with its various nicks and chips, evidence of the children's (and then later Olivia's) propensity for banging things inappropriately against the walls, hung a school portrait for each of the children. Here was Rachel, toothy, dark-haired, eagerly leaning toward the camera. Stephen, the year he got his braces, pulling his lips forward purposefully to hide them, his cowlick standing at attention.

And here, next to Stephen, was Lillian. She must have been in junior high in this picture. You could see, even there in the dim light of the hallway, despite the age of the picture, the luminous skin, the beauty emerging from the little girl.

From downstairs came Ginny's voice, strident now. "William? William! What are you doing? I told you, these eggs aren't going to keep!"

He could hear Ginny as clearly as if she had been speaking through a megaphone aimed directly at his ear. That was one of the strange and delightful things about this house, the way the sound carried from one place to another, even if the first place was geographically distant from the second.

But in addition to Ginny's voice, something else. He could hear the sound—muffled but unmistakable, familiar, even, in a way that he would not have thought possible, this many years removed from when he had last heard it—of his daughter crying.

Lillian woke in her childhood bed. Beside her, in the Pack 'n Play, the baby had begun to make tiny, mewling noises, which Lillian tried to ignore. She opened her eyes just a fraction, but it was enough to see the pale strips of sunlight coming through the slats in the blinds.

She lay still, as still as possible, forcing her breathing to become deep and even, willing the baby back to sleep. He had woken three times in the night, twice to nurse and once for no discernable reason—belly full, diaper dry, that time—and on each occasion she had consulted the numbers on the digital clock that sat on the pristine white nightstand. Just after midnight, then two, then three.

She had turned on the lamp that last time, and studied the baby in the glow the bulb cast over the room. He was three months old now. He had lost the boneless look his body had had at the beginning of life, when he had curled like a semicircle on her chest to nap; he had lost, too, the alien shape to his head with which he had emerged from her womb, blinking and whimpering, then fixing her and Tom with an uncompromising stare that seemed to say, *Well, here I am. What are you going to do with me now?*

What, indeed!

What they were going to do with him, with the baby, Baby Philip, who might one day (but so far hadn't) become a Phil, was upend his tiny universe before he'd even had a chance to become accustomed to it. Or rather, that's what Tom was going to do. Tom was going to drink a few too many gin and tonics at the company party in May and sleep with his assistant, a snub-nosed snowboarder named Nina, while Lillian sat at home with leaky breasts and dark circles under her eyes, blithely unaware, nearly comatose, watching an episode of *Supernanny* and eating chocolate chip Breyers straight from the container.

Which transgression Lillian was going to learn about from a (formerly) dear friend of hers named Marianne, who had attended the party with her own husband, a leader of the product development team at the same company, and who had come to Lillian contritely and had, in painstaking detail, laid out the scene.

"He was awfully drunk," Marianne had said. "It was that kind of a party. People did crazy things, all sorts of crazy things. He wasn't the only one, not by a long shot. You know that type of party: the office party gone awry."

"I'm not sure I do," Lillian had said coolly. "I haven't worked in an office since before Olivia was born."

"Well, for example—"

"That's it," said Lillian. "I don't need to hear any more."

"He wasn't the only one," said Marianne. "If that helps."

"It doesn't," said Lillian.

"We're going, then," she said to Tom fiercely later that day—God, only Thursday, just two days ago. "I'm taking the children, and I'm going." There was some satisfaction in saying this, in watching the color rise to his cheeks—those pale Irish cheeks, quick, like hers, to display exposure to sun or alcohol or embarrassment—but not enough.

She had packed like a person in a movie, quickly and dramatically, pulling suitcases onto the bed, emptying the contents of drawers into them without considering her choices. (So it was that when she unpacked she discovered that she had brought along an old red shawl she had worn over a black dress years ago to a friend's wedding. Not quite vintage, she supposed, fingering it later in the quiet of the guest room. But certainly outdated. And pantyhose. She'd brought pantyhose! In June, to Vermont!)

Tom was remorseful, appropriately chagrined, embarrassed, all of the things he should have been. He didn't try to get them to stay. (If he had, Lillian thought partway through the four-hour drive

north, she might have acquiesced, her anger and hurt considerable but not necessarily strong enough to negate the effort of transporting the two children on her own.)

Olivia had been finger-painting in the yard in a plastic smock. When Lillian went to fetch her, the little girl was completely absorbed in her work, smearing alternating circles of blue and green on the page. Watching her for a moment, Lillian was filled with such a fierce love, such a desire to envelop and protect, that she hardly knew what to do next.

Now, in the guest room, which was formerly her room but which now bore very little resemblance to the room in which she remembered sipping from a purloined bottle of vodka her best friend, Heather, had procured from her mother's liquor cabinet, and in which she had spent numerous hours talking and listening to that very same Heather on her pink Princess phone (back when phones tethered you firmly to your location), Lillian pushed herself up on her elbows. Four minutes past eight. The baby, having settled himself again after his initial murmurings, was still asleep. Lillian could hear her mother's voice from downstairs, and Olivia's too, and a low baritone that belonged unmistakably to her father.

"Wake up," she whispered to Philip. It was time for a feeding—she could feel the tightness in her breasts that meant the ducts were filling. "Wake up," she whispered again. "I'm ready for you now."

But he slept on undeterred, curling a fist, raising it to his mouth, letting it fall again. She watched his chest move in and out, imagined the inner workings of his body, the astonishing efficiency with which his heart moved the blood around to the proper places.

Her sister, Rachel, seven years younger, not yet thirty, had driven up from New York City in a rented Impala to meet Philip four hours after he was born. Lillian had sat with sweaty, limp hair, watching Rachel, who looked particularly put together and glamorous, hold Philip. "God," Rachel said. "He looks so vulnerable."

She worked for a casting director in New York City; she had, in her years in Manhattan, adopted a brisk, no-nonsense way of talking that was a far cry from the volubility she had shown as a child. "I mean, Lilly, I think he's adorable. The fingernails and all of that—really, so tiny and perfect! But I wouldn't know what to do with him, day after day after day."

Then, in the flush after childbirth, in the brief stage of elation before the real fatigue set in, Lillian had felt pity for her younger sister, who had recently ended a relationship and was, as Ginny liked to say, "foundering." But now she thought that maybe her sister had the right idea after all: all that free time, all that *Sex and the City* posturing, all those brunches at sidewalk cafés.

The business with Tom was so awful, really so impossible to contemplate, that if Lillian let herself think too much about it she feared she might crumble, rendering herself incapable of taking care of either of her children. Which was partly—no, *mostly*—why she had come to Vermont, to be taken care of herself, and to deliver Olivia and Philip into the loving and doting arms of their grandparents.

Not that they were going to find that out. She would never—she would not, she would *absolutely not*—tell her parents. Nor would she tell Rachel, nor her brother, Stephen, whose wife, Jane, was expecting a baby later that summer, and who was so wrapped up in attending to her considerable needs that even if she told him her tale of woe he wouldn't have much time to absorb it.

Maybe, after all, she would tell Heather. Or maybe she wouldn't tell Heather. Maybe she would soldier through on her own, like those hardy and relentless women from long ago, working the fields in faded dresses and wide-brimmed hats, shouldering the burdens of the household while the husbands were off fighting in wars. Doing whatever they could, these women, to ensure the survival of the family.

She hadn't cried yet. Not when she told Tom she was leaving, not when she packed the car, not when she'd caught sight of her pouchy stomach in the bathroom mirror as she looked for the little cap shaped like a duck that was meant to go on top of Olivia's toothbrush. Not when she bent down to Olivia and told her to pick out three of her favorite toys and collect all of her bathing suits because they might be staying a little while.

"*All* my bathing suits?" Olivia's eyes grew wide.

"Yes, all of them."

She hadn't cried then, nor had she cried pulling out of the driveway or saying good-bye to the dog, who twice hopped into the back of the station wagon, thinking she was going along with them, but whom she entrusted to Tom because whatever his failings in the marriage department he was devoted to the dog.

But now, in the quiet of the room, surrounded by the things that were familiar and yet decidedly not so, it all began to seep out: the sorrow, the grief, the humiliation. Softly, with the pillow pressed to her nose, with her abdominal muscles clenched to keep the shaking of her shoulders to a minimum, Lillian began to cry.