
BACK BAY · READERS' PICK

Reading Group Guide

Where'd You Go,
BERNADETTE

A NOVEL BY

MARIA SEMPLE

DEAR MOUNTAIN ROOM PARENTS

Hi, everyone!

The Mountain Room is gearing up for its Day of the Dead celebration on Friday. Please send in photos of loved ones for our altar. All parents are welcome to come by on Wednesday afternoon to help us make candles and decorate skulls.

Thanks!

Emily

Hi again.

Because I've gotten some questions about my last email, there is nothing "wrong" with Halloween. The Day of the Dead is the Mexican version, a time of remembrance. Many of you chose Little Learners because of our emphasis on global awareness. Our celebration on Friday is an example of that. The skulls we're decorating are sugar skulls. I should have made that more clear.

Emily

Parents:

Some of you have expressed concern about your children celebrating a holiday with the word "dead" in it. I asked Eleanor's mom, who's a pediatrician, and here's what she said: "Preschoolers tend to see death as temporary and reversible. Therefore, I see nothing traumatic about the Day of the Dead." I hope this helps.

Emily

Dear Parents:

In response to the email we all received from Maddie’s parents, in which they shared their decision to raise their daughter dogma-free, yes, there will be an altar, but please be assured that the Day of the Dead is a pagan celebration of life and has nothing to do with God. Keep those photos coming!

Emily

Hello.

Perhaps “pagan” was a poor word choice. I feel like we’re veering a bit off track, so here’s what I’ll do. I’ll start setting up our altar now, so that today at pickup you can see for yourselves how colorful and harmless the Day of the Dead truly is.

Emily

Parents:

The photos should be of loved ones who have passed. Max’s grandma was understandably shaken when she came in and saw a photo of herself on our altar. But the candles and skulls were cute, right?

Emily

Mountain Room Parents:

It’s late and I can’t possibly respond to each and every email. (Not that it comes up a lot in conversation, but I have children, too.) As the skulls have clearly become a distraction, I decided to throw them away. They’re in the compost. I’m looking at them now. You can, too, tomorrow at drop-off. I just placed a “NO BASURA” card on the bin to make sure it doesn’t get emptied. Finally, to those parents who are offended by our Day of the Dead celebration, I’d like to point out that there are parents who are offended that you are offended.

Emily

Dear Parents:

Thanks to their group email, we now know that the families of Millie and Jaden M. recognize Jesus Christ as their Savior. There still seems to be some confusion about why, if we want to celebrate life, we're actually celebrating death. To better explain this "bewildering detour," I've asked Adela, who works in the office and makes waffles for us on Wednesdays, and who was born in Mexico, to write you directly.

Emily

Hola a los Padres:

El Día de los Muertos begins with a parade through the zócalo, where we toss oranges into decorated coffins. The skeletons drive us in the bus to the cemetery and we molest the spirits from under the ground with candy and traditional Mexican music. We write poems called calaveras, which laugh at the living. In Mexico, it is a rejoicing time of ofrendas, picnics, and dancing on graves.

Adela

Parents:

I sincerely apologize for Adela's email. I would have looked it over, but I was at my daughter's piano recital. (Three kids, in case you're wondering, one who's allergic to everything, even wind.) For now, let's agree that email has reached its limits. How about we process our feelings face to face? 9 A.M. tomorrow?

Emily

Dear Parents:

Some of you chose to engage in our dialogue. Some chose to form a human chain. Others had jobs (!) to go to. So we're all up to speed, let me recap this morning's discussion:

—Satan isn't driving our bus. Little Learners does not have a bus. If we did, I wouldn't still need parent drivers for the field trip to the cider mill. Anyone? I didn't think so.

—*Ofrenda* means “offering.” It's just a thing we put on the altar. Any random thing. A bottle of Fanta. Unopened, not poisoned. Just a bottle of Fanta.

—We're moving past the word “altar” and calling it what it really is: a Seahawks blanket draped over some cinder blocks.

—Adela will not be preparing food anymore and Waffle Wednesdays will be suspended. (That didn't make us any new friends in the Rainbow and Sunshine Rooms!)

—On Friday morning, I will divide the Mountain Room into three groups: those who wish to celebrate the Day of the Dead; those who wish to celebrate Halloween; and Maddie, who will make nondenominational potato prints in the corner.

Dear Mountain Room Parents:

Today I learned not to have open flames in the same room as a costume parade. I learned that a five-dollar belly-dancer outfit purchased at a pop-up costume store can easily catch fire, but, really, I knew that just by looking at it. I learned that Fanta is effective in putting out fires. I learned that a child's emerging completely unscathed from a burning costume isn't a good enough outcome for some parents. I learned that I will be unemployed on Monday. For me, the Day of the Dead will always be a time of remembrance.

Happy Halloween!

Emily

“Dear Mountain Room Parents” originally appeared in *The New Yorker*.

QUESTIONS AND TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION

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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