

Reading Group Guide

1. In the novel's opening scene, Ethel says to her granddaughter, Lena, "Life doesn't travel in a straight line. Knowing the end doesn't mean you can follow it back to the beginning." Where did this bit of wisdom come from? What is she trying to teach Lena? And what does this particular lesson mean to you?
2. *A Bend in the Stars* is organized by sections that are based around the Hebrew calendar. Why do you think the author made the choice to structure it this way? How does it change your experience of the story?
3. Baba's role as a successful and trusted matchmaker allows her an elevated position among the Jews of Kovno, yet it places her and her grandchildren in a liminal spot in Russian society, members neither of the working poor nor the more comfortable, respected higher classes. Is this "in-between" status good or bad, do you think, for the Abramovs? Can you think of examples of the ways in which they benefit or suffer from this unique spot in the social hierarchy? Are there any people or groups of people in our modern society who exist in this in-between space?
4. When Yuri originally agrees to take Miri on as his student and train her to be the first female surgeon in Kovno, he warns her that her choosing this career path will require them both to make sacrifices. Did you have to make any sacrifices to follow your professional dreams? What about your personal dreams? Do you think Miri would have gone ahead and followed her ambition if she'd known where it would lead?
5. At first glance, Dima and Vanya could not be more different: a gruff, violent, seaworn sailor looking only to save his hide and a timid, cerebral Jewish physicist with a head full of numbers and idealistic dreams. Yet, by the end of the book, they have both made immense sacrifices for the other. Do they have more in common than it originally appears? Why or why not?
6. Many of the novel's most pivotal scenes take place on trains. Why do you think Barenbaum made this choice? What importance do trains hold in the larger scheme of the book?
7. After Miri saves Sasha from the river and their trust begins to grow, she finds herself with an unexpected problem: she is caught in a love triangle between two good but different men, both of whom are determined to love her the best way they know how. Do you think she makes the right choice in the end? Would you have chosen differently?
8. On the day of the fateful eclipse, Vanya and his companions are starkly confronted by the dangerous superstitions that the villagers still hold about scientific events. Miri faces this in the medical community, too, when she tries to cure the tongue-tied baby who has been "cursed." Can you think of any modern day equivalents to this fear and distrust?

9. Baba encourages Miri to make her way in the world: “The word ‘Jew’ is not stamped on your forehead.” Does this idea of “passing,” of allowing your cultural, racial, or religious identity to be obscured, remind you of other similar situations either in the past, or even today? Is it ever defensible, or indefensible, to try to “pass” for something you’re not? Are there cases that can necessitate or excuse it?
10. The historical crimes of the vicious Polyakov brothers haunt the novel, but Miri and Sasha don’t agree on whether they could happen again. With whom do you agree, and why?
11. Why do you think the book is titled *A Bend in the Stars*? Is it purely about the eclipse, or does it hold other meanings for you?
12. Are Vanya and Miri right to believe that ideas can change the world, or is Dima closer to the truth when he argues that greed and a lust for power are more powerful?
13. Early in the novel, Ethel says, “History needs a narrator. Perhaps this museum chose the wrong one.” Do you agree? In your opinion, is there such a thing as a “right” or “wrong” narrator for history, and if so, how do you choose?

Q&A with Rachel Barenbaum

Where did the idea for *A Bend in the Stars* come from?

In 2014, I was reading *Scientific American*’s monthly installment of “50, 100 & 150 Years Ago” and learned that in 1914 an eclipse fell over Russia that could have proved Einstein’s theory of relativity but because of war and bad weather no scientists were able to mount an expedition and record the event. Even more, the brief noted it was a good thing because in 1914 Einstein’s equations were incorrect and a photograph of the eclipse taken then would have likely discredited him. Before I even put the magazine down I knew it was a book idea: What if someone did make it to the eclipse and did manage to take a photograph? Could he have taken Einstein’s place in history? I was already a bit obsessed with Russian history and knew it was one of the most fascinating and tumultuous times in the country’s history. And I knew that Einstein wasn’t working in a vacuum, that there were other scientists working to help him—and beat him. Could I bring that race to life?

Why did you have such an interest in Russia?

My father’s family came to the United States from Russia. When they arrived in Philadelphia they stopped speaking Russian and Yiddish and refused to speak anything but English. It never bothered me until I was around ten years old and my parents plastered our house with old family photographs, many of them from Russia. Who were those people carefully dressed in black, staring at the camera? Why did they look so scared? When I asked my grandparents and aunts and uncles, none of them wanted to talk about it beyond mentioning names and what they did in the United States. When I pushed for information about Russia, their answer was always the

same: *We left for a reason. Let's not talk about it.* And I hated that. Now that generation has passed away and I'm left knowing the end, but what I wanted more than anything was to follow it back to the beginning.

What could have been so awful that they'd drop everything they had to come to a country they'd never seen, to learn a language they'd never heard, and to look for work where none of their qualifications would matter? That question has haunted me for a long time. And it's one I ask often when I read about migrants today doing the same. Can you ever know if leaving is/was the right decision?

Are you a physicist?

No. But I love and respect science—and facts—and find myself frustrated by the common refrain “I don't do numbers.” Why not? I studied philosophy in college because I loved the idea of faith in the human ability to understand and decipher knowledge. Just because a person feels more comfortable reading a book doesn't mean they are not capable of understanding an equation, the meaning of a line of scientific inquiry, or even relativity. Einstein himself wasn't a mathematician—he was a theoretical physicist. He started with ideas and worked with others to code those ideas into equations. His greatest strength, and I might argue his greatest legacy, are those thought experiments that bring complex ideas down to a size and shape that anyone can comprehend.

I wrote about relativity because this concept is powerful and yet understandable on so many levels that I want to encourage everyone to think about it. The universe bends. What does that mean? How does that affect space and time? And how does that change the way we understand our world?

Other than the eclipse, why did you focus on the year 1914?

The turn of the twentieth century is one of my favorite historical periods because I would argue it was the last time ideas were more powerful than fear, when a rash of optimism and faith in our ability to change the world led to inventions, art, and ideas that truly altered history. There was an energy and optimism that hasn't existed since.

But that kind of exuberance brings out the best and the worst in humans. In this case, it led to greed and culminated in World War I, a moment so horrendous most of what was invented or created in those years right before is often overlooked. Today many people talk about the internet as the single invention that has changed our lives, and it has, but I'd argue it's changed our lives by encouraging seclusion—enabling people to stare at a screen, alone, for hours on end, while the inventions in the early twentieth century encouraged inclusion. People could suddenly travel freely to meet and find other people, to work and collaborate. Telephones, radios, newspapers shared ideas widely. All of these booming networks brought us together. And I like that: the romantic notion that science should bring humanity together. I wish we had more of that today.

Are the characters real people from your family?

No. Save for Einstein, none of the characters are real people. Only Baba is based loosely on someone I knew—my great-aunt. Actually, when I first sat down to write this book I thought she would be the main character. I wrote about two hundred pages before I realized she wasn't the focus—that Miri and Vanya were the center of the story. From that new perspective, the story

gained more energy and a faster pace. I found that being tied to a real person was too heavy. It kept me worried about what was “right,” whereas once I let go of that I could take Miri, her brother, and all the others on far more exciting adventures.

But I want to be clear. While the characters are all fictitious, the history and setting adhere to real life as much as possible. I wanted to drop Miri and Vanya into a world that actually existed because that world, to me, is fascinating, and as they say, “I can’t make this stuff up.” So in describing the details and settings, the math and science, I stayed as true to fact as I possibly could.

How much research did you do for *A Bend in the Stars*?

Tons and none. I love this time period and read dozens and dozens of books about czarist Russia, science and philosophy around the 1900s, and the life of Jews living in Russia long before I sat down to write. In addition, growing up around my grandparents and great-aunts gave me a sense of some of the nuances I wanted to add, like the split in the Jewish community between those who wanted to assimilate and those who didn’t, and the constant fear of the czar’s men. But all of that only gave me a base, a general feeling I could incorporate into the novel. To truly write scenes, I need to see them in my head, and so the bulk of my research involved finding photographs. The best trove I found was in an old *National Geographic* that I purchased on eBay, published in 1914 right before the war started. The issue was devoted entirely to a survey of life in Russia and featured dozens of stunning photographs of Russians from all walks of life.

Two things struck me in particular in this truly spectacular photo essay: 1. The faces of the citizens in the photos were so clear and so gorgeous I could imagine them as real people, living today. And that made the time period come alive. I could imagine what the teenager staring at me might have been thinking as she stood next to that boy, or the mother as she held her baby. 2. The vast size and diversity of the country. I was blown away by the largely uninhabited, untouched landscapes and just how separated groups of people across the empire were by those expanses. To me it was gorgeous and terrifying and something I wanted to be sure to capture in this book.