

Richard Linklater's *Where'd You Go, Bernadette*: A creative “genius” suppresses herself

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Directed by Richard Linklater, written by Linklater, Holly Gent and Vincent Palmo Jr., based on the novel by Maria Semple

American director Richard Linklater's new film, *Where'd You Go, Bernadette*, is based on a popular 2012 novel of the same title by Maria Semple.

The central character, Bernadette Fox (Cate Blanchett), lives in a rambling house on the top of a hill in Seattle with her daughter, Bee (Emma Nelson), and her husband, Elgie Branch (Billy Crudup), who works at Microsoft.

Bernadette is at odds with her current conventional, upper-middle-class environment. She doesn't care to leave her house much, although the roof leaks badly in various places. She has largely antagonistic interactions with her next-door neighbor, Audrey Griffin (Kristen Wiig), and the other parents at her daughter's private school, to whom she refers as “gnats.” A “virtual assistant” from India, Manjula, handles the details of her daily routine. In general, Bernadette sneers, somewhat fruitlessly, at the “banality of life.”

Bee asks her parents to live up to their promise of giving her “anything I wanted for a graduation present” if she obtained perfect grades in middle school. What she wants is “a family trip to Antarctica.” Her parents agree, but the proposed expedition helps precipitate a crisis. Bernadette has no use for traveling or other people.

First of all, getting to Antarctica will involve crossing the Drake Passage (between South America's Cape Horn and Antarctica), the most turbulent body of water on the planet. Bernadette looks into dangerously powerful drugs to help her survive the proposed voyage.

Moreover, the only method of reaching the Earth's southernmost continent, she learns, is by cruise ship. Even the smallest one, Bernadette calculates, holds 150 passengers, “which translates,” she explains in the novel, with the same thought echoed in the film, “into me being trapped with 149 other people who will uniquely annoy the hell out of me with their rudeness, waste, idiotic questions, incessant yammering, creepy food requests, boring small talk, etc. Or worse, they might turn their curiosity toward me, and expect pleasantries in return.”

Bernadette's relations with her neighbor Audrey take a turn for the (far) worse. First, a confrontation outside Bee's school leads Audrey to claim—falsely—that Bernadette drove over her foot. Moreover, Bernadette takes steps—or fails to take steps—in regard to her own property that results in a torrent of mud inundating Audrey's house in the middle of a significant social event.

Bernadette's marriage appears threatened too. Elgie spends most of his time at Microsoft, where he seems to be growing especially close to an ambitious, perhaps underhanded colleague, Soo-Lin (Zoë Chao). In turn, his concerns about Bernadette, heightened by the discovery that she has been hoarding prescription drugs, are encouraged and amplified by the dreadful Dr. Kurtz (Judy Greer), a therapist of some sort. The latter strongly urges that Bernadette needs to be committed, involuntarily, if necessary.

Meanwhile, an FBI agent, Marcus Strang (James Urbaniak), arrives on the scene and informs Elgie that there is no “Manjula” and that Delhi Virtual Assistants International is an alias for an identity-theft ring operating out of Russia. Thanks to Bernadette's

indiscretion, the ring now has the family's personal financial information, including bank account numbers and all the rest. Elgie and Bernadette are on the verge of being wiped out.

Interspersed among the current goings-on, pieces of a picture of Bernadette's earlier life emerge. She was once an innovative and famed architect in Los Angeles, the winner of a MacArthur "Genius" Grant. She built the Twenty Mile House, constructed entirely out of materials found within 20 miles of the home. However, a vile television magnate, best known for his smash-hit game show, "You Catch It, You Keep It," moved in next door and essentially drove her out. Furthermore, he subsequently purchased the Twenty Mile House, and Bernadette was traumatized by the fact that the structure, "which had taken three years to complete, had been demolished in a day." She fled Southern California and society in general, and abandoned architecture. Her misanthropy, combined with a highly developed sense of failure, resulted.

In any event, in the present, responding unfairly to both real and non-existent transgressions on Bernadette's part, Elgie—with Dr. Kurtz's eager assistance—stages an "intervention," confronting his troubled wife with some of her failings. When weeks in an institution are proposed, Bernadette disappears through a bathroom window. She heads for Antarctica on her own, with her husband and daughter eventually trailing her.

Linklater's film is a slow burn, and never truly bursts into explosive flame.

The first portions of *Where'd You Go, Bernadette* are flat. The source novel is relatively slight. A drama based on what a privileged girl would like for a graduation present is not promising. Bernadette's idiosyncrasies, along with her harsh opinions, seem petty and even unappealing. And Blanchett, in these sequences, tries to do too much, perhaps to make up for the thin material.

The film develops some life and emotion as the "conspiracy" against Bernadette takes shape. The scene of the ridiculous and oppressive intervention is effective. Greer is convincing as the smug, coercive psychiatrist convinced of her erroneous diagnosis and determined to do only "what's best" for Bernadette, even if it destroys her. It is genuinely moving when Bernadette climbs out the window and seeks refuge at

the home of her supposed enemy, Audrey. When Audrey, in fact, hides Bernadette from her well-meaning pursuers, the film reaches its most poignant moment.

However, *Where'd You Go, Bernadette* subsides in its latter sequences and shrinks back for the most part to its previous slightness. Aside from certain breathtaking images of Antarctica, there's not too much here. Bernadette predictably (and rather effortlessly) revives as an artist and creator. Elgie realizes he has failed his wife. For example, he says, in both the novel and the film: "She was an artist who had stopped creating. I should have done everything I could to get her back." That sort of truism is not likely to get anyone too far.

Linklater (*Slacker, Dazed and Confused, Before Sunrise, The Newton Boys, Waking Life, School of Rock, Fast Food Nation, Bernie, Boyhood*, etc.) has assembled a group of talented actors and directs them well. Billy Crudup in particular impresses the viewer with his straightforward and elegant performance. Kristen Wiig and Judy Greer are always flexible and intriguing, with ever-present hints of mischief and mayhem. If the film's central premise, that Bernadette is a significant intellectual-artistic figure who has been damaged or disillusioned by her life's experience, holds a certain amount of water, it's because Cate Blanchett is someone capable of suggesting genuine depth and intelligence.

Linklater's humane liberalism has a certain value as an antidote to the brutality and foulness of official political life and culture, but we live in times more turbulent and perilous than the Drake Passage. His films, it has to be said, lag seriously behind.



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