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Film Discussion Group
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Where'd You Go, Bernadette (dir. Richard Linklater, 2019)

On Camera

Bernadette Fox: Cate Blanchett: Always up for complex roles; *Truth* (15) is a buried gem
Elgin Branch: Billy Crudup: Previously starred with Blanchett in *Charlotte Gray* (01)
Bee Branch: Emma Nelson: Chicago-area teenager appearing here in her first feature
Audrey Griffin: Kristen Wiig: writer/star of *Bridesmaids* (11); *Saturday Night Live* (05-12)
Soo-Lin: Zoë Chao: mostly TV credits, including the amazing *The Comeback* (14)
Paul Jellinek: Laurence Fishburne: iconic in *Boyz N the Hood* (91) and *The Matrix* (99)
Dr. Kurtz: Judy Greer: wrote a book about being a character actress no one can place!

Off Camera

Director: Richard Linklater: Sweet, unassuming Texan who's built a varied career
Screenwriters: Linklater plus the married team of Vince Palmo, Jr., and Holly Gent
Novelist: Maria Semple: *Bernadette* was second of her three novels and her best seller
Cinematographer: Shane Kelly: Fifth Linklater collaboration, starting with an animated feature
Film Editor: Sandra Adair: Cut virtually all of Linklater's films since *Dazed and Confused*
Production Design: Bruce Curtis: Imagine bringing to life all of Bernadette's spaces and visions!
Costume Design: Kari Perkins: Another Linklater loyalist; also *Mud* (12), *Wind River* (17)

Among many other films directed by Richard Linklater...

Dazed and Confused (1993) – Linklater's widely beloved third feature follows two-dozen high schoolers in 1976 as they drift from party to party on the last day of the spring term. Many are wondering who they'll become now that this major phase of their lives is wrapping up. Bernadette, like many other Linklater characters, is also still asking herself that basic question.

Before Sunrise (1995) – First film in what became a trilogy, with *Before Sunset* (04) and *Before Midnight* (13), about an American man and a French woman who meet as college students on a train in Vienna, then reunite a decade later, then wind up in a fragile marriage. *Bernadette*'s interest in how people and relationships evolve despite their imperfections also resonates here.

School of Rock (2003) – Joyous comedy about an irrepressible musician (Jack Black, wonderful) who throws himself headlong into an environment where he doesn't fit and pulls a whole class of delighted kids along for the ride. This artist *knows* he needs to keep creating, and he does.

Fast Food Nation (2006) – Most high-profile filmmakers have at least one movie that deserved more acclaim than, for whatever reason, they attracted. I was very moved by this unusual, multi-character adaptation of Eric Schlosser's nonfiction book about the alarming facts of what Americans eat and the political, environmental, and economic contexts informing those trends.

Facts about *Where'd You Go, Bernadette* you may appreciate...

The novel *Where'd You Go, Bernadette* was published in 2012 and within a year was purchased by Annapurna Pictures, a high-quality movie studio and distributor responsible for *Zero Dark Thirty*, *Her*, *Foxcatcher*, *Phantom Thread*, *Vice*, and *If Beale Street Could Talk*, among other critical darlings and awards magnets. Controversially, Annapurna's finances have always depended on the enormous personal wealth of company founder Megan Ellison, the daughter of a billionaire. Annapurna's finances have been stretched thin after bankrolling so many aesthetically accomplished films with varying commercial appeal, and *Bernadette* has been somewhat caught in the storm of the company's uncertain health; it was supposed to open in May 2018 and has seen its release delayed five times since. At the time, though, it was an early and high-profile acquisition of a company that was barely two years old and growing.

Linklater pursued the project after reading the novel. As the father of three daughters and brother of two sisters, he appreciated its explorations of female ambition and mother-daughter devotion, as well as the running theme of artists who cannot bounce back from setbacks. He rewrote the already-finished script with two regular collaborators, which is the version Cate Blanchett signed onto in 2016. She had read the novel with delight during its long run on the bestseller lists and has mentioned relating to the difficult emotions that accompany seeing your kids age out of needing your constant care, and the renewed attention on oneself that follows.

Linklater is an amateur architect with Bernadette-ish interests in renewables, found materials, and unusual ideas. For example, he [worked](#) for years on designing a guesthouse on his property out of recycled plastic bottles. I also remember Cate Blanchett saying on *Inside the Actors Studio* in 2003 that if she hadn't gone into acting she would love to have been an architect.

Some of the details of Bernadette's design feats are outlined in the novel (for example, the interior walls of knitted bifocals in the Beeber house), but many were the original conceptions of production designer Bruce Curtis, including the doorway moldings made out of hundreds of fanned pencils and the stairwell decorations made of open books, their pages sliced into geometric shapes. Key to the design team was that none of Bernadette's embryonic ideas inside the house ever got finished; the whole space is a tomb of brief passions, eventually discarded.

The basic set for the Fox/Branch house was in Pittsburgh, which was the main filming location for the film, despite the story's marked emphasis on Seattle, where only a few location-specific scenes were filmed (the Public Library, for sure, and I think the Space Needle restaurant). The artists' hopes of shooting in Antarctica were dashed for practical and budgetary reasons, but Blanchett campaigned hard for as much authenticity as the shoot could afford, so the Antarctic sequences were mostly shot in Greenland ...with penguins digitally inserted later on.

At one point, Linklater's cut of *Bernadette* was two hours and 45 minutes, attempting to retain as much of the novel as possible. The finished film is almost an hour shorter than that, though most of the major beats of the book still exist in it. The major departure from the book involved excising Elgin's affair with Soo-Lin, which culminates in a pregnancy near the time Bernadette vanishes (though she knows nothing about it). The movie also downplays Bee's despondency after her mother disappears. She gets shipped off early, gets thrown out after less than one term with poor grades, and openly wars with her father even while they're headed to Antarctica.

Broad conversation topics about *Where'd You Go, Bernadette*...

“Presenting Reality”: This is the phrase Dr. Janelle Kurtz uses at the start of the intervention at Bernadette’s house, forcing her to come to grips with actions she has taken and their effects on her own life and on other people around her. “Presenting reality” is also sort of a mantra for much of Richard Linklater’s career, as eclectic as it is. With notable exceptions, his films tend to favor very modest displays of technique, invisible camera work, and an interest in capturing authentic experience—an impulse he carried to the hilt with his two-decade project of filming *Boyhood* in real time, with minimal embellishment. By contrast, Maria Semple’s voice as a novelist and a sitcom writer is often comically exaggerated, and the overall plot of *Bernadette* is full of hyperbolic contrivances and extreme situations. Blanchett has worked both sides of this spectrum, hewing to a subdued naturalism in some performances but more often experimenting with heightened aspects of voice, behavior, and mannerism. This film’s team thus includes artists who may have different notions of what’s “real” and different goals for showcasing it. Did *Bernadette* feel “realistic” to you? Why or why not? Did it matter?

Structure and POV: One reason the script was so hard to develop is that Semple’s novel is a mosaic of emails, faxes, invoices, magazine articles, TED Talk transcripts, and other texts Bee has acquired over time, compiling them into a narrative to try to understand her mother and what happened to her. The movie begins with Bee’s narration, but the screenplay doesn’t always favor her perspective. Some elements of the film recall the novel’s piecemeal structure, like the YouTube “video essay” where Bernadette sees her career memorialized by friends and her Twenty Mile House trauma re-explored. In some ways, the movie pointedly refuses to be consistent or “clean” in its structure or perspective—which might bring to mind Bernadette’s own creative pursuit of distinctive materials and unusual forms. In other ways, the film might just play as a choppy distillation of an “unadaptable” book. How did you feel?

Marriage: One thing I like about Billy Crudup’s performance is that he doesn’t lean into playing Elgin as a cliché or an arrogant jerk, even though his character has been work-obsessed and inattentive. To me, this choice allowed *Bernadette* to explore complicated dynamics of how a wife and husband have drifted from each other and stopped understanding how to reach or understand each other, without stacking our sympathies all on one side or reducing either figure to a caricature. Did you agree, or did you find the relationship flat? What do you see as the connecting glue in this relationship, or the key traits Bernadette and Elgin share? What are their key differences? A concrete example: Bernadette brings near-disaster on her family by giving away information to an online “virtual assistant,” in dictated soliloquies that often feel like jokes...but is this necessarily more reckless than Elgin’s development of Samantha 2, an adhesive computer chip that can read your mind and do everything on your behalf?

The Private and the Professional: The book is somewhat more overt than the screenplay in stating that Bernadette feels more grief over the humiliating destruction of her Twenty Mile House than over her multiple miscarriages. She allows Elgin and others to believe that the failed pregnancies were a greater wound, in part because she’s embarrassed that the career-based injury hurt more deeply. How did you weigh these two seismic blows to Bernadette’s happiness or self-perception, or the other factors that seemed to compound her isolation and unreliability? Where do you think Bernadette “went,” and what propelled her there?