

Reading Group Guide



No Direction Home: A Novel

MARISA SILVER

A tensely emotional debut novel of abandonment, loss, and the unexpected shapes families take to survive. "Silver is masterful at orchestrating her complicated cast of characters and settings....Moving and resonant."—*Los Angeles Times Book Review*

From the Author

I am often asked where the idea for my novel, *No Direction Home*, came from. Trying to answer this question is difficult because, unlike specific memories of things we do or say, or of events that happened, it is hard to recall a thought process. And because my novel did not spring from a single plot idea, its inception is not easy to pinpoint. What I've come to understand about my writing process is that it can be best understood in terms of a collage. I have a group of ideas in my head—images, characters, small situations, random yearnings—and if I play with all these notions enough, arranging them and rearranging them, and if I trust myself enough not to apply some predetermined idea of what these random fragments “mean,” I will discover why they are all in my head at the same time. Their connections will reveal themselves, and they will come together in such a shape as to form a story.

So here are some of the “fragments” that were floating around at the time I began this book: An image of two twin boys, both wearing thick, highly corrective glasses, holding hands, helping each other negotiate their way down a set of stairs. An old woman described to me as “a fire chaser,” someone drawn to the sound and fury of fire engines. My own grandmother’s slide into dementia long ago, what she remembered from her deep past, what she forgot of the present even as it happened around her. I thought about a friend’s border-crossing experience, and about the myriad stories of those treacherous journeys that have become so commonplace here in Los Angeles, about how routine and yet continually heartbreaking it is each time someone reveals that he or she has left a wife, mother, son, or daughter back “home.” I had the notion of the strange, unequal relationship between an immigrant caregiver and his charge—the way illness changes the balance of power, the way language or the lack of fluency becomes a mode of communication. I thought about those brilliant orange-and-black monarch butterflies making that repetitive trip each year, one generation going south, another one returning north. A dog I once knew bore her puppies and then disappeared. . . . What it’s like sitting in a supermarket parking lot in Los Angeles. . . . The river that isn’t a river. . . .

All these notions, as well as others, were there for me at the same time, and as I began to explore them, to develop characters and scenarios around them, I discovered that what connected them, and the reason they were all wandering around my brain at the same time, was because they all dealt, in ways large and small, with the issue of abandonment and the question of how one reinvents a life, a family, and an identity in the face of such loss.

Early on in the writing of the book, I knew that movement was important and that all the central characters should be unmoored and on very literal journeys. So, as Rogelio is making his way through Mexico and across the border to the United States, Caroline and her sons Will and Ethan move from their home in the Midwest to Los Angeles where they will live in Caroline's childhood home. Marlene takes herself on a journey to find a father she has never known. The grandmother, Eleanor, wanders nightly through her neighborhood, lost and not lost at the same time. And Amador, her caregiver, makes a daily journey across the invisible borders that segment Los Angeles as he rides a city bus from his largely immigrant neighborhood to his job. This sense of dislocation provided the engine for the book; it became a way of externalizing the internal struggles of the characters. Movement became, in a sense, my "plot."

The most important thing I do as a writer is try to stay out of my own way. Once I have identified a theme or themes, once connections between characters and events have solidified in my mind, it becomes critical that I not write "to" these ideas. In other words, it is important to me that, in a way, I forget about all this "significance" and focus instead on the specifics of character, of place, of smell, of speech. If I am too aware of the overarching themes of my piece, I find that the writing begins to sag under the weight of its own best intentions. My goal is to keep it light, keep it surprising, and let the stories do the talking rather than me doing it for them. So writing becomes a kind of strange game wherein I know the rules, but try to ignore them, where if something strikes me as "thematic" or rich with meaning, I have to jettison it immediately. I have to play the game blindfolded. I think of writing as imagining things and then reporting on my imagination. I try to keep it simple, direct, objective—to clear the way for the reader to make his or her own discoveries, to decide for himself or herself what my story is all about.

Discussion Questions

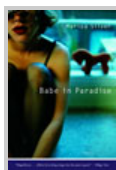
1. National identities are sometimes linked with the concept of a "fatherland"—a place, yet one that in a sense also plays a parental role. Many of the characters in *No Direction Home* are seeking homes, fathers, and identities. To what extent are these searches linked—for Rogelio, the Burtons, and Marlene? Do they need to have fathers to feel "at home"? Do their identities need to be linked to a specific place—or is place secondary to knowing their biological heritage?
2. Marlene comes to California in search of her unknown father and meets Will and Ethan who have known and lost that same father. Is one experience better than the other? Whose pain or sense of abandonment seems greater? How are the teens able to seek solace in their overlapping plight?
3. What is the effect of having Spanish sprinkled throughout the book, in both dialogue and description, sometimes mixed with English but sometimes independent? To what degree does language divide or unite characters?
4. At one point, Amador describes the United States as a "country of a million strangers." Do you share this view? Is it ever possible to feel at home in such a place?
5. Migrating butterflies, creatures that undertake a long and treacherous journey, only to return or to have their offspring retrace the same journey, are a metaphor for some of the characters in the book. Does this compulsion to leave only to turn around and return seem to you like a curse? Or is there a redemptive value in what on the surface might seem like a futile journey? Are the humans any more in control of their migrations than the butterflies, which are driven by natural instinct?
6. Explicitly, fathers are very important to the searching children in the book. Yet there are numerous mothers and mother figures that play just as active—if not an even greater—role in the lives of their offspring. What are the views of motherhood presented by these characters (Eleanor, Erlinda, Caroline, Diane)? To what extent do the mothers define what home is?

7. Caroline and Frank, Diane and Frank, Amador and Erlinda, Amador and Caroline—most of the romantic or sexual relationships in the book are marked by infidelity, abandonment, almost predestined termination. Is there any hope in romance? Are the teenage romances any different than these adult ones? If not sexual relationships, which relationships are hopeful?
8. Vincent imagines that, like characters in a movie, parents are meant to adhere to a child's idea of their role, and "that they are destined to always flub their lines." Is this an excuse for what he perceives as his own shortcomings as a parent? Does "flubbing one's lines" necessarily make one a bad parent?
9. How does Will and Ethan's impaired vision affect their interactions with the world? In what ways does Eleanor's Alzheimer's parallel the boys' blindness? Are there characters that are impaired in less obvious, physical ways?
10. What role does Tonio's murder play in Rogelio's quest to find his father and himself?
11. Compare Los Angeles and El Rosario as they are portrayed in the book. What draws all of the characters to Los Angeles? What draws Amador and Rogelio back to El Rosario? What does it mean to call either one of these particular communities home?
12. Rivers are a recurring image throughout the book—Ruben's cold swim that leads to his fatal fever and Eleanor's strange obsession with the "river" below the overpass are but two examples. Is there anything in common in all these rivers? What is it about the image of a river that makes it a compelling ending for the novel?

About Marisa Silver

Marisa Silver is the author of *The New York Times* Notable Book *Babe in Paradise*. She lives in Los Angeles, California.

Books by Marisa Silver



Babe in Paradise: Fiction

A *New York Times* Notable Book and a *Los Angeles Times* Best Book of 2001, the critical success of *Babe in Paradise* heralds Marisa Silver as one of America's most talented young writers.



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