



Today Will Be Different

By Maria Semple

Questions and Topics for Discussion

1. The first part of *Today Will Be Different* is called “The Trick.” In a later part Eleanor refers to “The Trick” and says, “Anytime I get into a one-on-one social situation, especially if there’s something at stake, my anxiety spikes. I talk fast. I jump topics unexpectedly. I say shocking things. Right before I push it too far, I double back and expose a vulnerability. If I see you about to criticize me, I leap in and criticize myself.” Where did you see this happening in the book?
2. One reason that Eleanor has not been more present in her daily life is the anxiety she feels about writing her book and the dark cloud of avoidance that hangs over it. She is also very self-deprecating when she talks about herself. Are there times when her anxiety, avoidance or sarcasm make her an unreliable narrator? Are there times when you’ve felt the same way about your own life?
3. Eleanor has a tempestuous relationship with her friend Sydney Madsen. Semple writes, “She’s like Parkinson’s, you can’t cure her, you can just manage the symptoms.” Do you have a friendship like this? Why do you think Eleanor feels that she has to maintain the friendship?
4. In the part titled, “The Flood Girls” Semple shows us the comic Eleanor wrote that is the inspiration for her book. In what way does seeing the comic, and learning more about Eleanor’s past, help to illuminate her interior life?
5. Eleanor and Ivy are pulled apart by Bucky, the derringers, and the drama in New Orleans. Despite their differences, Eleanor desperately misses her sister. Were you surprised by the twists and turns that their relationship takes? Do you think they might one day be able to reconcile?
6. On page 194, reflecting on the crumbling state of her marriage, Eleanor is overcome with emotion when Timby states calmly, “That’s just how you are.” Throughout the novel, Eleanor explains herself as having a predictable and steadfast, albeit messy, personality. Are there aspects of one’s character that are immovable? Does Eleanor need to change, or does she just need to accept who she is?

7. Throughout the story, Eleanor is trying to uncover Joe's secret. Were you able to predict what it would be? Or were you surprised by it? Why or why not?
8. Eleanor's poetry teacher, Alonzo, asks her to memorize Robert Lowell's "Skunk Hour" in advance of their lesson. At the end of the book, he assigns Elizabeth Bishop's "One Art." "Skunk Hour" was dedicated to Bishop, and Bishop and Lowell were close friends who had a deep influence on each other. How do you think these poems connect to the plot and to Eleanor's state of mind in *Today Will Be Different*?
9. "One Art" is famous for its opening lines:
The art of losing isn't hard to master;
So many things seem filled with the intent
To be lost that their loss is no disaster.
In what ways do you think that the poem connects to the lessons that Eleanor learns over the course of the book? What does she lose, and what does she gain? In what way does she have to master the art of losing in order to live her life more fully?
10. Eleanor composes a Gratitude List to help her maintain a loving relationship with Joe. She also creates a catalog of grievances in her mind. Are the grievances large enough to tip the scale? Can a marriage be quantified in the way?
11. Have you read Maria Semple's other novels (*Where'd You Go, Bernadette* and *This One is Mine*)? At what point did you realize that Eleanor is connected to Semple's other protagonists? Taken as a whole, what do you think Semple's books have to teach us about women and creativity?
12. *Today Will Be Different* begins and ends with Eleanor's incantation, "Today will be different. Today I will be present..." Why do you think Maria Semple chose to open and close the book with these words? How has Eleanor changed over the course of the day in which the novel takes place-and how do you predict the next day will be different for Eleanor?

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About the Author

Bittersweet, hilarious, wholly original, whip smart, witty, dazzling, razor-sharp, loopy, wacky and eccentric, darkly comic, achingly funny and deeply touching are some of the many superlatives used to describe the fiction of Maria Semple. She is our poet laureate of discomfort, a writer whose genius springs from the bad choices and outrageous circumstances that motivate her characters.

Semple's novels are *This One is Mine* (2008), the bestselling *Where'd You Go, Bernadette* (2012), and the recently published *Today Will Be Different* (2016).

Today Will Be Different takes place over the course of a single day and tells a hilarious and life-affirming story about a woman who wakes up determined to be her best self... until life intervenes. The book chronicles the journey of a frazzled Seattle illustrator and animator named Eleanor Flood, and is anchored by a mini graphic novel that's attributed to Eleanor, but in real life was illustrated by Eric Chase Anderson, the brother of director Wes Anderson. *Today Will Be Different* has been praised by the *Washington Post* ("darkly funny and brave") and *New York Times* ("brainy dream of a novel"). *Today Will Be Different* will be a limited series on HBO starring Julia Roberts.



National Book Award winner Lauren Groff wrote, "I had the uncanny feeling, while reading *Today Will Be Different*, that Maria Semple had somehow snuck into my house when I was asleep, took an x-ray image of my heart, then painted it by hand in neon colors. This book is searingly honest and hilarious and dark and neurotic. It is dizzying. Best of all, it is delicious."

Semple's earlier breakout bestseller, *Where'd You Go, Bernadette* has been translated into eighteen languages, spent a year on the *New York Times* bestseller list, won the American Library Association's Alex Award, was shortlisted for the Women's Prize for Fiction, and is in development as a major motion picture by director Richard Linklater and starring Cate Blanchett. Jonathan Franzen said of the book, "The characters in *Where'd You Go, Bernadette* may be in real emotional pain, but Semple has the wit and perspective and imagination to make their story hilarious. I tore through this book with heedless pleasure."

Semple's debut novel, *This One is Mine*, is a compassionate and wickedly funny satire about our need for "more"—and the often disastrous decisions we make in the pursuit of happiness. The book was a finalist for the 2010 Pacific Northwest Booksellers Association Award.

Semple's short form work has appeared in *The New Yorker* and *The Los Angeles Times*.

Before "escaping Los Angeles" and devoting herself to fiction, Semple wrote for television including the shows *Ellen* and *Beverly Hills, 90210*. In 1997, she was nominated for a Primetime Emmy for her work on *Mad About You*. And in 2006 and 2007, she was nominated for a Writer's Guild of America award for her work on *Arrested Development*. Other TV credits include *Suddenly Susan* and *Saturday Night Live*. Semple appeared in the 2004 David O. Russell film *I Heart Huckabees*.

Semple was born in Santa Monica, California. She currently lives in Seattle, Washington, where she is active in the city's literary community. Semple is a founding member of Seattle 7 Writers, and has taught fiction writing at Richard Hugo House.

Literature, movies, and the screwball gene run in Semple's family. Her great uncle is the dramatist Philip Barry, best known for his plays *Holiday* and *The Philadelphia Story*. Her father, Lorenzo Semple, Jr., wrote the pilot for the *Batman* television series. He also penned the screenplays for many successful films, including *Papillon* and *Three Days of the Condor*.

Semple is in a relationship with George Meyer (*The Simpsons*), and they have one daughter, Poppy. In 2007, a newly discovered species of moss frogs from Sri Lanka was named *Philautus poppiae* after their child, a tribute to the couple's dedication to the Global Amphibian Assessment.

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