

A Reader's  
Guide  
to  
Andrea Barrett's  
*Servants of  
the Map*

"Gorgeous, illuminating, entrancing fiction."  
—*Kirkus Review*

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Writers & Books**

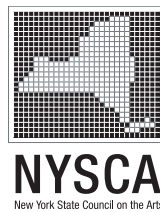
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# Reader's Guide Contents

Dear Reader ..... 4

Andrea Barrett: A Biography ..... 5

A Conversation with Andrea Barrett ..... 6

Discussion Points for Readers of *Servants of the Map* .... 20

Tips for Book Discussions ..... 29

Bibliography of Works by Andrea Barrett ..... 33

Related Books of Interest ..... 34

Become a Member of Writers & Books ..... 36

**Dear Reader,**

Writers & Books is a nationally renowned non-profit literary center located at 740 University Avenue, in the heart of Rochester's arts and cultural district. In 2001, Writers & Books initiated the "If All of Rochester Read the Same Book..." program.

The goal of "If All of Rochester Read the Same Book..." is to encourage people to connect to others in our community through reading and discussion, and through the shared experience of literature. Each year Writers & Books selects one book for our community to explore together, leading to an extended residency by the author.

Our choice for 2005, the fifth year of the program, is *Servants of the Map* by Andrea Barrett. We estimate that between 60,000 and 90,000 Rochester area readers participated in the four previous programs, which featured *A Lesson Before Dying* by Ernest J. Gaines (2001); *The Sweet Hereafter* by Russell Banks (2002); *Kindred* by Octavia Butler (2003); and *Peace Like a River* by Leif Enger (2004).

During Andrea Barrett's residency in Rochester, March 16-19, 2005, she will make a number of appearances at local libraries, schools and universities in the Rochester area to read and discuss her work and sign books. On the evening of Friday, March 18, she will talk about her research and writing process in a more formal setting at the Rochester Academy of Medicine at 1441 East Avenue.

For a complete calendar of events or to learn how to participate in this program, visit our web site at [www.wab.org](http://www.wab.org), or call us at 585-473-2590.



Joseph Flaherty  
Executive Director, Writers & Books

**ANDREA BARRETT: A BIOGRAPHY**

Andrea Barrett is the author of five novels: *Lucid Stars*, *Secret Harmonies*, *The Middle Kingdom*, *The Forms of Water* and *The Voyage of the Narwhal*, and two short story collections, the National Book Award winner *Ship Fever* and *Servants of the Map*.



Barrett grew up on Cape Cod, Massachusetts and graduated from Union College in Schenectady, New York with a Bachelor's degree in Biology. Barrett has taught in the MFA Program for Writers at Warren Wilson College in Swannanoa, North Carolina, and has been a visiting writer and lecturer at numerous institutions and writers' conferences including the Bread Loaf Writers' Conference in Vermont and the New York State Summer Writer's Institute at Skidmore College.

Barrett's awards for her writing have been numerous. She received a National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship in 1992 and a Guggenheim Fellowship in 1997. She won the National Book Award for Fiction in 1996 for her first short story collection *Ship Fever*. In 2001, Barrett was awarded a MacArthur Foundation Fellowship (also known as the "genius award") and in 2003, she received the Award in Literature from the American Academy of Arts and Letters. She has also been a fellow at the Center for Scholars and Writers at the New York Public Library.

*Servants of the Map* was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize in 2003 and its title story was selected for *Best American Stories 2001* and *Prize Stories 2001: The O. Henry Awards*. The stories "Theories of Rain," and "The Forest," both in *Servants of the Map*, were included in *Prize Stories 2000: The O. Henry Awards* and *The 1998 Pushcart Prize XXII*, respectively.

Barrett currently lives in Williamstown, Massachusetts with her husband, the biophysicist and photographer Barry Goldstein, and teaches at Williams College.

## A CONVERSATION WITH ANDREA BARRETT

**W&B:** You have an interesting educational history that includes extensive study in the sciences. Did you begin writing fiction before you were immersed in the sciences or was writing fiction perhaps a way for you to make your interest in science more personalized, more human?

**AB:** I studied science first; I was a Biology major in college, and then entered a PhD program in Zoology right afterwards. I dropped out almost immediately; a few months sufficed to teach me that I had no real gift for science at all but was, rather, interested in scientists and their stories. Still, it was only much later, after some years and many different jobs, that I began writing fiction. And then it took me a long time to realize that my early interest in science might be subject matter I could explore in my stories and novels. It seems funny to me, now, how slowly writing and science, the two things I've loved the most, came together.

**W&B:** How did you make that transition from long-time student of science to fiction writer?

**AB:** Slowly, painfully, clumsily...and with a lot of help from my friends. When I started writing fiction, in my mid-twenties, I was very slow to learn the basics of my craft. Like many writers, I worked full-time at other jobs—secretary, proofreader and copyeditor, typist for an accounting firm, and more—during the years of my apprenticeship and through my first published novels, fitting my writing into the very early morning hours before I went to work and never feeling that I had sufficient time. Feedback from other writers, when I finally found some, helped me learn a little more quickly; my first experience with that was joining a small writing group that met in the old Writers & Books storefront. In Philadelphia, where my husband and I lived from 1981 to 1984, I was briefly part of another group; then I was part of a very active and long-lasting group when we moved back to Rochester. All of those were a great help to me, as were my experiences at the Bread Loaf

Writers' Conference, which I first attended in 1984, and where I've been many times since.

**W&B:** How did you improve your craft?

**AB:** Largely through reading and re-reading the work of writers I love and admire; through writing and rewriting and rewriting again; and through sharing my work with my peers and listening attentively and openly to their comments. It's hard not to be defensive about one's work, especially early work. But the more open I've stayed to the focused and intelligent criticism of other writers I respect, the better my work has been.

**W&B:** It is somewhat unusual for a writer to work in both the genre of short stories and that of novels. What initially spurred you to begin writing short stories after publishing four novels?

**AB:** Paradoxically, the initial impulse was simply one of defeat. Each of my first four novels sold worse than the one before it; after the fourth, my editor switched publishing houses and was unable to bring me with her, given my abysmal sales figures. So there I was, with no editor, no publisher, and a fourth novel that had sold less than 2000 copies and been reviewed hardly at all. I felt rather as if I'd been fired, although I know that wasn't the intent. But I'd been writing as hard as I could for a decade, and *The Forms of Water* was the best novel I could write then; it wasn't so illogical for me to assume that, if no one liked it, maybe I wasn't cut out to write novels after all. Because I'd begun teaching by then, I was reading stories much more intently and I thought that perhaps, if I couldn't write novels, I could learn to write a story alongside my students. By great good fortune I received an NEA Fellowship just as I set myself that task—and that was what I did with it. I told myself I would do nothing that year but work as hard as I could on a couple of stories, and see what I could learn.

**W&B:** After writing the National Book Award-winning collection of stories *Ship Fever*, you returned to the novel form with *The Voyage of the Narwhal*. How do you now move between the two

genres? Does your process of writing each differ?

**AB:** I find that after I've been working on a novel for a couple of years, I start to yearn for the pleasures of writing stories; and similarly that I long for the sustained task of a novel after a year or two of the more scattered pleasures of working on stories. When I'm working on a novel, I can't usually work on anything else. With stories, I can sometimes have a couple in progress at the same time, if they're at different stages. I might have one that I'm just beginning to draft, one that I've been working on for some months, and another that may have been around for a year or even two, through ten or twelve drafts, and is starting to feel nearly done.

**W&B:** You said that it took you some time to realize that the exploration of science and science-minded characters could be focal points of your fiction work. Was it only when you began writing short work that it occurred to you to include your knowledge and love of science in your stories?

**AB:** Not exactly; there is some astronomy in *Lucid Stars*, and a fair bit of biology in *The Middle Kingdom*. But it was only with the stories that appeared in *Ship Fever* that I began to use science, and especially the history of science, in a more focused and purposeful way.

**W&B:** You have a history in the sciences but chose the life of a creative writer. Do you feel that these two endeavors are inherently similar processes, that science is also a creative endeavor?

**AB:** Yes, absolutely. There's a great deal in common, really, between working in science and working as a fiction writer. For a scientist as much as a writer, the heart of the matter isn't answering questions; it's trying to *ask* them in the most fruitful, complex, interesting way possible. A scientist who doesn't ask good questions, but simply solves problems posed by someone else, may do solid work but won't be original. The same for writers, I think.

**W&B:** So you think of both science and writing as adventures?

**AB:** Yes! If we're not having adventures doing this, what's the point?

**W&B:** I agree. It is well known that you undertake the adventure of extensive research for each piece that you write. You once referenced E. L. Doctorow's assertion that "Writing a novel is like driving a car at night. You can only see as far as your headlights, but you can make the entire journey that way." How does that concept function in your writing, especially in terms of your research process?

**AB:** That statement of Doctorow's feels almost literally true for me: I have the feeling, when I'm working well, that I'm following a beam of light into a dark and tangled forest. I can see things in the distance that intrigue me; I do enough research to approach them and investigate; often those things do indeed turn out to be interesting but now that I've gone far enough into the forest to stand next to them, turn over the leaves and look at the thorns and the flowers, I see an even more interesting bush or fern glimmering in the distance. More research projects more light, which pulls me deeper into the forest; this process repeats many times; gradually a landscape reveals itself. Never—not once, in all the stories and novels I have written—has it been the one I originally thought I was heading towards. Always, it's one far outside the original beam of the headlights, found only after the jalopy went for a long, unexpected ride.

**W&B:** Since your writings are so often based on actual geographical locales and historical figures and facts as well as extensively outlined scientific theories (at times dated theories that have since been disproved), to what extent do you feel the need to get all the details exactly correct?

**AB:** To an absurd extent, alas. I slow myself down horribly because of this. It can't be helped, apparently; we all have our particular compulsions, and that's one of mine. I often wish it were otherwise.

**W&B:** What scientific texts or journals do you read? Does this information inspire your characters or narratives?

**AB:** I read all sorts of memoirs, journals, and collections of letters by scientists of the last several centuries; and all of it inspires me to some degree or another. Less commonly I read biographies of scientists, but mainly I find these useful as general background. Often what's most exciting to me about those books are the notes and the bibliography, from which I can find my way back to the original sources.

**W&B:** How do you respond to critics and reviewers who make an issue of your focus on scientific issues and characters? Do you find their wonder at your content choices to be based on your gender?

**AB:** I'm not sure; it's always mystified me that this is a source of such wonder. Why should it be so odd for a woman, for anyone, to write about science? It's *interesting*. So are the people who do it.

**W&B:** It is interesting, and your stories exemplify this, especially in your creation of unique characters who readers become utterly taken with. But I have to ask: Have you created female characters who explore the realms of science as a natural result of your own affinity for the sciences or as a conscious attempt to counter stereotypes of women as not being as scientifically minded as men?

**AB:** Both, I suppose. At first it grew out of my own interests and then after a while I began to choose that more consciously.

**W&B:** Your stories are also strongly imagistic and emotionally rich. Do you ever begin a story or a character with a single image or emotion that you then flesh out?

**AB:** Yes, that's fairly common for me. The story "Theories of Rain" grew quite directly out of that phrase, and from an early nineteenth-century paper I read on the formation of dew. Just the sound of those words, and the sense memories of dew on a field of tall grass in the early morning, pulled the whole story from the air. Similarly "The Cure" started from my repeated sightings of houses covered with cure-porches in Saranac Lake. All those porches, all that glass, imagining people behind all that glass....

**W&B:** Your narratives and characters are so intriguingly complex and interwoven, yet the result flows so smoothly and is so accessible to readers, that it is difficult to fathom how every element comes together. You once wrote that "stories have their own logic." How do the various components fall into place in your stories?

**AB:** Slowly, painfully, clumsily....I repeat myself, I know: a joke, but also not a joke. My writing process is so slow and multi-layered, so opaque even to me, that I don't know how to explain it. I make my stories and novels by way of many drafts, some shockingly different and some quite alike, each layer revealing a fragment of meaning, a character or part of one or parts of several, a glimmer of intent. Over time, the "aboutness" of the story slowly becomes apparent, and then I can begin to disassemble some of the elaborate armature I have built to get there, and to write what will often turn out to be the central parts of the story.

**W&B:** When did you first experiment with a disjointed chronology in your narrative, with juxtaposing past and present scenes and settings in one work?

**AB:** With *The Forms of Water*, I think; the present-time action of that novel is compact and linear, but enfolded within it are layers and layers of history, and multiple time-lines. After wrestling with that, I felt more comfortable disarticulating layers of time in the stories I wrote next.

**W&B:** I assume that you carefully sequence the stories that make up a collection. The ordering of the stories in *Servants of the Map*, with narratives that move back and forth in time and space, is especially intriguing. Can you expound on the choices you made in this regard, and perhaps in what order the stories were written or conceived?

**AB:** Sequence is important to me; with *Ship Fever* as well as with *Servants of the Map*, I mean the stories to be read in the order they're assembled, and not randomly. Sequences of stories can have a rhythm that's meaningful; textures can be juxtaposed and

counterpointed; voices in different registers can be heard best next to certain neighbors, less well next to others. I wrote the stories in *Servants* in quite a different order from the way they're arranged in the book: "The Mysteries of Ubiquitin" first, I think, followed by "The Forest." Then, after a gap, I wrote the title story; I was with that a long time. "Theories of Rain" came next, followed almost immediately by "Two Rivers"—when I figured out who Lavinia was addressing, I knew I had to write a story about her brother Caleb. "The Cure" I did write last.

**W&B:** You begin *Servants of the Map* with two intriguing quotes by the philosopher George Santayana from his essay "The Philosophy of Travel" and from a poem by Rainer Maria Rilke. Do you subscribe intelligence to humans because of their mobility and their passion as Santayana does? Do you strive to create characters who are always looking outward, as Rilke references?

**AB:** What I meant, really, by juxtaposing those two, was for the reader to consider some of the prices we pay for our love of—our addiction to?—movement and change.

**W&B:** Your characters do sometimes pay a price, as you say, for following their passions, but they are all the more human because of it. Taking into account the extensive research you do and the amount of scientific and historical material that permeates your work, it is the characters, the human elements of the stories, which take center stage. Is this a difficult balancing act for you?

**AB:** Not difficult, exactly; but something I have to keep in mind every minute. During many of those drafts I mentioned earlier, the layers of research and the quantities of scientific and historical material build up and up. The later drafts are almost entirely concerned with stripping that material away, leaving only, or almost only, the characters. But ideally the characters have been infused with the aura or aroma of all that leaf-mould heaped around them during the earlier drafts.

**W&B:** Does the story or do the characters ever take over or do you

always remain in control?

**AB:** The characters come alive, if I am lucky; they surprise me, they speak words I couldn't have predicted. But it's my bus, and I'm always driving it.

**W&B:** Do you feel a particular kinship with any of your characters, especially considering a good number of them are women with an intense passion for scientific exploration, as you yourself have?

**AB:** By the time I've reached the final draft of a piece, I feel close kin to *all* of them. If I can't get there, I can't make the story or novel work. When I do approach that state, I begin to feel that I am coming towards the end.

**W&B:** Characters often recur between stories and even between your books. For example, Caleb's story in "Two Rivers" directly follows that of his sister Lavinia in "Theories of Rain," as you mentioned. Clara in the closing story of *Servants*, "The Cure," is the wife of Max Vigne from the title story (and Elizabeth and Gillian his daughters). The Marburg sisters as well as Ned and Nora Kynd from your first short story collection, *Ship Fever*, return (Ned is also the ship's cook from your novel *The Voyage of the Narwhal*) in *Servants*. Do you plan these conjunctions or do they come about as a result of the "logic" of the stories?

**AB:** They seem to evolve as the stories themselves evolve. Some I can see coming—Lavinia's story, as I mentioned, absolutely generated Caleb's story—but other connections reveal themselves slowly, over time.

**W&B:** Do you have trouble letting go of your characters? Do their stories seem at times to remain unfinished for you and therefore lead you back to them, or to stories that take place around or because of them?

**AB:** I'm not sure if I ever really *do* let go of them. I set them down, when a story or a novel is ended, but I always have a sense

that they simply continue on with their lives as they were before, but now unobserved by me. When I think of them later, and want to return to them, there's also a sense of "catching up" with what they have been doing in my absence.

**W&B:** Many of your characters have been orphaned or in other ways separated from their family members. For example, siblings Lavinia and Caleb have not seen each other since they were children. They are extremely sympathetic characters whose sense of longing for each other is palpable. As readers, we wonder if they will ever see each other again. Did you feel a need to reunite them, to rectify this loss in some way, leading you to write the story of the reunion of Nora and Ned Kynd in "The Cure"?

**AB:** That's an interesting question! I hadn't thought of that before, but I did write "The Cure" immediately following "Two Rivers," so perhaps that was part of my motivation unconsciously. That one pair, at least, should be reunited....

**W&B:** These connections provide not only delightful surprises in the ongoing narrative, but add depth to characters whose stories we thought were finished. Readers are offered a notion of the conjunction among all of our stories, resulting in a feeling of connection among and empathy for all humans throughout time and regardless of geography.

**AB:** I'm so glad you feel that way; that is indeed part of what I hope to achieve by this increasingly dense web of interconnection. I write that way, I think, because that's how I perceive the world, and the more so the older I get. Everyone truly does seem connected to everyone else, all our stories intertwined together and influencing each other—so to write fiction suggesting that is only, for me, to reflect the world as I see it.

**W&B:** As physical evidence of these connections, several of the characters in *Servants* also place great weight on items left to them by relatives or friends, from scientific equipment to books and letters to shoes. Are there any physical artifacts that were handed down

in your own family, that connect you physically to another era?

**AB:** My family is quite scattered, and my mother was a great shedder of things—so I have almost nothing left from either side of my family. Letters, clothes, portraits, photographs: gone, gone, gone. Those relics I do have I hang onto tightly; that I don't have more, and that I wish I did, probably accounts for the rather large quantity with which I have burdened my characters. Some of them have grown impatient with this—I think of Bianca, in "The Forest"—and I don't blame them.

**W&B:** You seem to extend the scientific inquiry of your characters into an inquiry of your own into the human condition, evidence of a burning desire to understand oneself, to find meaning in existence or at least in one's place in the world.

**AB:** Those two impulses seem absolutely intertwined to me. Since I was a tiny girl, I wanted so fiercely to *understand*: the world, the people in it, myself. Certainly that was what drew me to science in the first place, to writing fiction in the second. And I think it's true that a lot of my characters share that yearning—which of course is always, inevitably, frustrated.

**W&B:** Rochester has historically had a large deaf population due to the presence of the Rochester School for the Deaf and the National Technical Institute for the Deaf (NTID) at the Rochester Institute of Technology, therefore the story "Two Rivers" is of particular interest to our community. Did the time you lived in Rochester have any influence on your creation of deaf characters?

**AB:** Yes, very much so. Many times I would go to a play or a lecture and become so intrigued with the interpreter signing at the side of the stage that I would stop listening entirely. I have a friend who is a skilled interpreter, and I was fascinated by her work; and of course I went to a number of events at NTID. All those things fed my growing interest in the history of education for the deaf.

**W&B:** What research did you undertake in order to write your deaf

characters and their interactions with hearing relatives and community members?

**AB:** Partly it was a matter of opening my eyes more fully to that which was present in my home environment, but which I hadn't always paid attention to. Partly—as is usual with me—I did a ton of reading. One early and crucial book was Oliver Sacks' *Seeing Voices*, which led me to a number of other useful historical works. Sacks always provides very full bibliographies, which I appreciate. Essentially I read my way through his reading list.

**W&B:** I am inspired by your self-education. Your obvious feelings about the importance of education and the pursuit of knowledge, in many cases scientific knowledge, is intrinsic to your work. Do you believe that individuals are still willing to suffer and sacrifice as they once did for this goal, as exemplified in the actions of so many of your characters?

**AB:** Some are. Some always are. At different times and places those willing to do so appear in different classes and genders and guises but always, some exist.

**W&B:** Your books, which fall into the category of “literary fiction,” have been very popular with readers. Does this give you insight into current trends in literature in an era where some commentators argue that culture (aside from pop culture) is dying in the United States?

**AB:** You're kind to say they're “popular”; it might be more accurate to say they're popular among readers of literary fiction. But I do think that's a larger group than the doomsayers would have us believe. In every city I've visited, I've found a solid core of passionate, intelligent readers fiercely interested in literary fiction and poetry, hungry for work that isn't slick and isn't commercial and wasn't written simply in the hopes of being turned into a movie. People still want—some people want—fiction that transforms the way we look at the world, that is moving and beautiful and deepens our vision. Of course I believe this; who else would I write for? This makes me old-fashioned, perhaps.

**W&B:** Either old-fashioned or forward-looking... Speaking of readers and writers, at what point in your writing career did you begin teaching and how does your teaching work inform your own writing?

**AB:** I did my first conference teaching at the end of the 1980s, but the transforming experience for me was teaching in the MFA Program for Writers at Warren Wilson College. My first semester there was in 1993, and I think it's fair to say that everything I have written since then has been shaped by what I learned there from my students, from my fellow teachers, and from my own struggles to learn enough, fast enough, to be able to help my students. I can't imagine what my writing, or for that matter my life, would have been like without that nourishment.

**W&B:** You once wrote that good fiction, like poetry, cannot be summarized. Can you explain that comment?

**AB:** I mean that fiction isn't just a story line, or a set of characters. That, as with poetry, sound and structure and rhythm and repetition, texture and tone, pacing and the arrangement of parts contribute to build a whole that affects readers at many levels. This is one reason, I think, that very good novels often don't make good movies—what enchants us about them is a set of qualities that can't be transposed to that other medium.

**W&B:** Reading and writing have long been considered therapeutic, from the door of the library at Thebes in ancient Greece which was inscribed with the phrase, “Healing place of the soul” to early twentieth-century interest in bibliotherapy and contemporary writing therapy practice. You once told another interviewer that you keep a special shelf of books that you read repeatedly, calling it the “emergency repair shelf.” How does literature function to serve a therapeutic purpose for you, or for modern readers in general?

**AB:** Certain books are so beautiful, so whole and integrated and fully themselves, and so suggestive of a world that a person might want to inhabit, that they reel me back—I think they could reel anyone back—from all kinds of despair. Some books on my rescue

shelf are William Maxwell's *Time Will Darken It*, several novels by Virginia Woolf, *Anna Karenina*, *Howard's End*, Turgenev's *First Love*, the stories of Alistair MacLeod, Alice Munro, and Mavis Gallant, Joseph Roth's *The Radetsky March*, and Rebecca West's *The Fountain Overflows*.

**W&B:** The tradition of personal writing is one of the themes that runs through *Servants*, from the letters between Clara and Max Vigne in the title story to Lavinia's diary entries in "Theories of Rain" to Martin's attempt to write to his mother as he lays dying in "The Cure." Does this come from your own experience as a letter writer or journal-keeper?

**AB:** Strangely, no. I haven't really kept a journal since I began writing fiction seriously; that seems to soak up almost all my writing energy.

**W&B:** One story in *Servants*, "Theories of Rain," is revealed through the diary entries of the young woman Lavinia. Is the use of a first-person narrator in this story an extension of your prolific use of letters in other stories to reveal the inner thoughts of characters?

**AB:** Yes, I think that's partly how that came about. After all the letters Max Vigne writes in "Servants of the Map"—and then all he doesn't write, and those from Clara he doesn't get—that mode of writing was much on my mind as I started "Theories of Rain."

**W&B:** Not only are your characters and scientific references extremely well developed, but you are very adept at creating diverse living landscapes which your characters inhabit, ranging from the Himalaya to the Bad Lands of the Dakotas to such New York State locales as the Finger Lakes and the Adirondack Mountains. Are you an adventurer yourself?

**AB:** Only in a small way; when I was younger, my husband and I did a fair bit of hiking and camping, some of it in big mountains, and on glaciers. That's how I first became familiar with the Adirondacks and the Finger Lakes; we also did some glacier hiking in the Pyrenees and up around Lake Louise.

**W&B:** I've read that your next novel again focuses on relatives of characters we have come to know well, specifically the grandparents of Rose and Bianca Marburg, and is set in a tuberculosis sanatorium in Saranac Lake in 1916. This seems an extension of the story "The Cure," which explores the lives of the ill and their caregivers in a late nineteenth-century Adirondack town and closes *Servants*. What in particular caught your attention about the history of this area or era?

**AB:** Partly the location—the cold, the relative isolation, the beauty of the mountains. But partly also the deep sense of confinement. Not only geographical, although the tall mountains can feel like walls themselves. But the confinement imposed by illness and then, in the case of this novel, the confinement of social structures. After exploring private cure-cottages in "The Cure," I became interested in the more hidden lives of the poor, largely immigrant, largely urban patients confined to public sanatoria run by far-away civil servants.

**W&B:** In "The Cure" it is revealed that the Marburg sisters' grandmother Eudora is the granddaughter of Max Vigne. Will relationships between any other characters your readers are familiar with be divulged in this new work? Have you filled in all the branches on the family tree?

**AB:** I've filled out many, but not all. New ones are apparent in the new novel, but I never like to talk about these before readers have a chance to trace them out for themselves.

**W&B:** We as readers certainly look forward to making these discoveries ourselves in your future novels and stories.

## DISCUSSION POINTS FOR READERS OF *SERVANTS OF THE MAP*

### The Author and Her Craft

- What was Barrett's motivation in writing each of the stories included in *Servants of the Map*?
- Short story collections are usually ordered in a deliberate manner by their authors. What do you think Barrett was intending by beginning with the story "Servants of the Map" and moving through to, and ending with, "The Cure"?
- How does the author inform the reader about the landscape her characters inhabit?
- What are some of the signs and symbols used by the author throughout the book?
- The stories move back and forth in time and place, but remain interconnected. How does this enhance the reader's experience?
- Why did the author set the novel in various eras and locations? Does this create a different tone for the reader while reading each story?
- How does this collection of stories function as a whole?
- How does the frequent connection between characters (through blood or other relation) deepen the reader's experience?
- What portions or aspects of the writing were most artful and enjoyable to read?
- How does the title "Servants of the Map" function to represent more than just the first story, but all of the stories and characters in the collection?

- Most of the stories in the book are told by a narrator, except for "Theories of Rain," which consists of Lavinia's diary entries and sections of other stories such as "Servants of the Map," where letters are skillfully interwoven. How do these differing strategies of narration function to reveal the characters and their motivations?

### Characters and Motivation

#### *Servants of the Map*

- In "Servants of the Map," how does the content of the journal that Max Vigne finds with the dead man set the stage for Max's own story?
- Max's wife Clara sends him off with post-dated letters to read while he is away. How do these letters reflect Clara and Max's previous life together in England?
- Few voices beyond Max's (and Clara's, through her letters) are heard in "Servants in the Map." Why is the most substantial dialogue included in the story talk of the gruesome clashes between the British and the Indians?
- Why is Max so intrigued by Dr. Chouteau?
- "Servants of the Map" begins with a negation, specifically what Max Vigne will not write home to his wife Clara. Is this insulating and isolating strategy intended to spare his wife the worry of knowing the full extent of his tenuous existence in the Himalaya or instead to distance himself from the truth of his personal discoveries?
- What do the letters that Max "might" write to Clara reveal about the changes he is experiencing?
- How does Max's scientific and geographical journeys parallel his inner journey?

- How do Max's experience of falling into the snow crevasse affect him? Why does he make the decision to live?

- Can you identify an exact point (a specific inciting incident) during which Max makes the determination not to go home? How is this revealed, or not, in his last letter to Clara?

### *The Forest*

- In "The Forest," Bianca Marburg befriends Dr. Wojciechowiz. What leads the old scientist to confide in the young Bianca, and what inspires her to share her secret place with him?

- What is revealed in the story about the relationship between Bianca and her sister Rose?

- What is the symbolism of the bubbles that Dr. Wojciechowiz uses to explain a simple scientific theory to Bianca?

- "The Forest" moves from the point of view of the character of Bianca to that of Dr. Wojciechowiz. How does this enhance the reader's perception or understanding of each character?

- How do the two forests that mean so much to both Bianca and Dr. Wojciechowiz bring them together?

- Since each character has a forest that is important to them, that is part of their story, why isn't the story titled in the plural, as "The Forests"?

- What leads Bianca to avoid a confrontation with her sister and Constance and instead turn the van around?

- At the end of the story, Dr. Wojciechowiz is thinking about going "back" and Bianca is thinking of going "away." How do these differing attitudes reflect the characters and their attitudes toward their own current lives and histories?

### *Theories of Rain*

- How does Lavinia's isolated life with her two "aunts" and longing for the brother from whom she was separated nearly two decades before lead her to accept Frank Wells' proposal in "Theories of Rain"?

- Frank reacquaints Lavinia with her neighbor Mr. Bartram. How does this meeting affect Lavinia?

- How do "theories of rain" tie all the story's characters together?

- Lavinia's story is told through her diary entries. How does this reflect her character, especially her desires?

- What does Lavinia seem not to be divulging, even to herself?

- Lavinia's diary entries are addressed to her brother, from whom she was separated. How does the process of writing to him help her with her feelings of loss?

- How does the inclusion of sections of the *Manual of Geograph* reveal the character of the aunts or of Lavinia? How do they frame how Lavinia questions the world around her and processes her own experience?

- "If the aunts knew what I think. If the aunts knew what I dream." Lavinia writes these sentiments in her diary on more than one occasion. What would have transpired between Lavinia and her aunts if she had been forthcoming about her desires?

- How does the title of the story reflect Lavinia's personal story?

- Will Lavinia ever stop longing for her brother? Do you believe she will continue to write her diaries to him?

*Two Rivers*

- “Two Rivers” begins with a letter from Miriam to Stuart, her dead husband Caleb’s closest friend. How is this an appropriate preface to what actually becomes the story of Caleb as a boy and young man?
- How is the larger clash of scientific discoveries and biblical narratives of creation revealed through Samuel and his efforts to apply a creationist rationale to his scientific discoveries?
- How does Caleb respond to Samuel and to the scientific community’s response to him? How does this affect Caleb’s experience of science and education?
- What is the source of conflict between Miriam and Stuart?
- Caleb’s constant memories of his lost sister Lavinia underscores his story. How does this memory and feeling of loss affect his relationship with Miriam and her sister Grace?
- What are the various desires of the story’s characters?
- How does the fact that Grace is deaf impel the narrative of the story?
- How does meeting Miriam and Grace alter Caleb’s objectives as an educator?
- How are the beginnings of American deaf education portrayed?
- How do the different sections of the story work together? What does the title for each section represent?
- What is the meaning of the ending of the story, where Miriam asks Caleb, in Sign Language, if he was happy? What does it mean that she answers her own question with, “I was”?

*The Mysteries of Ubiquitin*

- How does what is already known about Rose and Bianca’s relationship as revealed in “The Forest” affect readers’ understanding of the adult Rose in “The Mysteries of Ubiquitin”?
- Rose’s scientific successes surpass those of Peter. How does this affect their romantic relationship?
- Did Rose’s girlhood crush on Peter color her adult relationships?
- Rose feels uncomfortable being waited on. How does this parallel Bianca’s insecurities being Rose’s sister in “The Forest”? How does this reflect their upbringing?
- How does the loss of their mother when they were so young affect each of the Marburg sisters?
- What is the significance of the physical nature of the protein ubiquitin in regard to Rose and Peter’s relationship?
- To what other mysteries might the title of the story refer?

*The Cure*

- Considering that “Servants of the Map” ends with a letter from Max to his wife Clara assuring her that he will return to her, is it surprising to learn (when we meet her and their girls in the Adirondacks) that he still spends the vast majority of his time living abroad?
- How do Nora’s early years caring for the wounded soldiers of the Civil War contextualize the story?
- How is Ned and Nora Kynd’s relationship made more challenging because of their long separation?

- Elizabeth, Max and Clara's daughter, feels a strong kinship with Nora. What is it that draws Elizabeth to stay and serve in the Adirondacks?
- How does the metaphor of sickness and healing function beyond the realm of the physical?
- How does the narrative of the story moving back and forth in time serve to illuminate the characters in the present, especially Nora?
- How are the functions of men and women in the story different?
- Elizabeth's husband Andrew hides magnets around the house in his own attempt to heal the sick. How does this parallel current alternative therapies that fall outside mainstream medical practice?
- What illness(es) is "the cure" of the title meant to remedy?
- Many characters or their relatives who have roles in other stories in *Servants of the Map* (as well as Barrett's other works) are intertwined in "The Cure." How does this function to make this story the appropriate ending piece for the collection?

#### Issues and Themes

- What are the major sources of conflict in each story? Are there conflicts that connect all the stories in the collection?
- How have the characters' respective experiences influenced their relationships with each other—in the past and the present?
- There are many references in the book to personal writing. What role does this kind of writing, including letters and diaries, play in the stories?
- How does the act of writing reveal the desires of the characters?

- Does first-person narration, such as that of Lavinia in her diary entries and Max in his letters, reveal more than other methods of narration can?
- *Servants of the Map* is full of many strong, intelligent female protagonists. How is this a different portrayal of women than many contemporary fictions?
- How do illness and medicine function throughout the work?
- Many of the characters in *Servants of the Map* lost their parents at a young age, from those separated as orphaned immigrant children to the Marburg sisters losing their young mother in an accident. How does desire for lost loved ones propel the various narratives?
- As a result of these and other circumstances, many related characters find themselves in geographically disparate locales. How do these sometimes great distances affect the way they communicate with one another?
- Several characters travel great distances in order to meet their physical needs or fulfill personal desires. What are some examples and are these characters fulfilled by their journeys?
- The collection includes an uncommonly realistic view of marital love and happiness. How is this evidenced in each story?
- How does scientific exploration reflect the characters' personal desires or their longings to overcome their losses?
- In many of the stories, the characters consider themselves outsiders or prefer to live solitary lives. How are various senses of isolation as experienced by the different characters portrayed?
- How is the issue of familial love addressed throughout the book, in both large and small ways?

- How are the numerous women of different “stations” in life portrayed?
- Communication (or lack thereof) is a theme that runs throughout the book. How do the different characters communicate with each other, especially over time?
- How does the final story, “The Cure,” serve to tie the entire collection together?

### Speculative Questions

- In what ways do the stories of adventurers and scientists from a century ago still have relevance today?
- How would the collection have worked if the stories had been ordered differently?
- Do the explorations or discoveries of the book’s numerous scientists of the past have any contemporary parallels?
- Which character in the book do you most relate to?
- What other story of their life might you like to see explored?
- What questions are you left with after reading *Servants of the Map*?

## TIPS FOR BOOK DISCUSSIONS

### Reading Critically

Fiction that makes an excellent choice for discussion groups has a good plot, well-drawn characters, and a polished style. Often these books present the author’s view of an important truth and send a message to the reader. Good books for discussion move the reader and stay in the mind long after the book is read and the discussion is over. These books can be read more than once, and each time we learn something new.

Reading for a book discussion—whether you are the leader or simply a participant—differs from reading purely for pleasure. As you read a book chosen for a discussion, ask questions and mark down important pages you might want to refer back to. Make notes like, “Is this significant?” or “Why does the author include this?” or “How does this relate to previous elements of the plot?” Making notes as you go slows down your reading but gives you a better sense of what the book is really about and saves you the time of searching out important passages later.

Obviously, asking questions as you go means you don’t know the answers yet, and often you never do discover the answers. But during discussion of your questions, others may provide insight for you. Don’t be afraid to ask hard questions because often the author is presenting difficult issues for that very purpose.

As with any skill, good literary consciousness grows with practice. You can never relax your vigilance because a good author uses every word to reveal something. Try to be aware of what the author is revealing about themselves and wants you to learn about life from their perspective. Appreciate the artistic presentation and the entertainment value, but also reap the benefits of the experience the author is sharing.

As you read *Servants of the Map*, consider the questions and topics

raised in “Discussion Points.” Why does Barrett reveal what she does? Why does she let other information be revealed over time? How do the stories work together? How do the characters in *Servants of the Map* relate to one another and their own secrets? What timeless topics does Barrett raise? How are some of these issues addressed in the individual stories and in the book as a whole? How do these issues relate to your own life? These are the kinds of questions that lead to in-depth conversations with your group and make the book meaningful and of lasting value.

Another way to analyze the important themes of a book is to consider what premise the author started with. You can imagine an author mulling over the beginnings of the story, asking herself, “What if...” questions. In *Servants of the Map*, one of the author’s “what if” questions is, “What if Max Vigne found something to keep him from returning home?” Others might be, “What if Elizabeth Vigne met Nora Kynd?” or “What if Rose and Bianca Marburg grew apart as they grew up?” Think about which “what ifs” prompted each story and the collection.

When you meet the characters in the book, place yourself at the scene. Think of them as you do the people around you. Think about their faults and their motives. What would it be like to interact with them? Listen to the tone and style of their dialogue for authenticity. Read portions aloud to get to know the characters and the author’s style.

Sometimes an author uses the structure of the book to illustrate an important concept or to create a mood. Notice how the author structured the book. Are the stories or chapters prefaced by quotes or titles? How do they apply to the content of the chapters? How many narrators tell the story? Who are they? How does the sequence of events unfold to create the mood of the story? Does it make sense?

Compare the book to others by the same author or to books by different authors that have a similar message or style. Often, themes run through an author’s works that are more fully realized by comparison. Comparing one author’s work with another’s can help you

solidify your opinions, as well as define for you qualities you may otherwise miss.

The very best books are those that insinuate themselves into your experience: They reveal an important truth or provide a profound sense of kinship between the reader and the writer. Searching for, identifying and discussing these truths often make the book more important and more significant.

Asking questions, reading carefully, imagining yourself in the story, analyzing style and structure, and searching for personal meaning in a work of literature all enhance the work’s value and the discussion potential for your group.

### The Discussion

Come prepared with 10 to 15 open-ended questions. Questions that can be answered “yes” or “no” tend to cut off discussion.

Questions should be used to guide the discussion and keep it on track, but be ready to let the discussion flow naturally. You’ll often find that the questions you’ve prepared will come up naturally as part of the discussion.

Remind participants that there are not necessarily any right answers to the questions posed.

Don’t be afraid to criticize a book, but try to get the group to go beyond the “It just didn’t appeal to me” statement. What was it about the book that made it unappealing? The style? The pacing? The characters? Has the author written other books that were better? Did it remind you of a book that you liked/disliked? Many times the best discussions are about books that the majority of the group disliked.

Try to keep a balance in the discussion between personal revelations and reactions and a response to the book itself. Every reader responds to a book in ways that are intimately tied to his/her background, upbringing and world view. A book about a senseless mur-

der will naturally strike some sort of chord in a reader whose mother was murdered. That's interesting, but what's more interesting is how the author chose to present the murder, or the author's attitude toward the murderer and victim. It is often too easy to let a group drown in reminiscences.

### Some Suggestions for Participants

A good discussion depends partly on the skills we develop as participants. Here are some suggestions (based on the New York Public Library's book discussion program):

**SPEAK UP!** Group discussion is like a conversation; everyone takes part in it. Each speaker responds to what the person before him said. Nobody prepares speeches; there should be a spontaneous exchange of ideas and opinions. The discussion is your chance to say what you think.

**LISTEN!** Try to understand the other person's point of view; see what experience and thinking it developed from. Don't accept ideas that don't have a sound basis. Remember, there are several points of view possible on every question.

**BE BRIEF!** Share the discussion with others. Speak for only a few minutes at a time. Make your point in as few words as possible—it's more effective in a group discussion. Be ready to let someone else speak. A good discussion keeps everyone in the conversation.

**SHARE YOUR VIEWPOINT AND EXPERIENCE!** Don't expect to be called on to speak; enter into the discussion with your comment of agreement or disagreement. When you find yourself disagreeing with other people's interpretations or opinions, say so and tell why, in a friendly way. Considering all points of view is important to group discussions.

**COME WITH YOUR OWN QUESTIONS IN MIND!** As you read the selection, make note of the points on which you'd like to hear the comments of group members.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY OF WORKS BY ANDREA BARRETT

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## RELATED BOOKS OF INTEREST

### Fiction

*Brick Lane*  
by Monica Ali

*Enemy Women*  
by Paulette Jiles

*English Passengers*  
by Matthew Kneale

*The Glass Palace*  
by Amitav Ghosh

*In the Heart of the Sea*  
by Nat Philbrick

*Mendel's Dwarf*  
by Simon Mawer

*Mountain Shadows: An Adirondack Novel of Courage,  
Danger, and Love*  
by Patricia Reiss Brooks

*Mr. Darwin's Shooter*  
by Roger McDonald

*The News from Paraguay*  
by Lily Tuck

*Out of Africa*  
by Isak Dinesen

*A Passage to India*  
by E. M. Forster

*The Tree of Life*  
by Hugh Nissenson and Margo Jefferson

*A Very Long Engagement*  
by Sebastien Japrisot

*You Are Not a Stranger Here*  
by Adam Haslett

### Nonfiction

*Erin's Daughters in America: Irish Immigrant Women in the  
Nineteenth Century*  
by Hasia R. Diner

*Journey of Hope: The Story of Irish Immigration to America*  
by Kerby A. Miller, et al

*The Origin of Species*  
by Charles Darwin

*The Rings of Saturn*  
by W.G. Sebald

*The Voyage of the Beagle*  
by Charles Darwin

*This Cold Heaven: Seven Seasons in Greenland*  
by Gretel Ehrlich

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