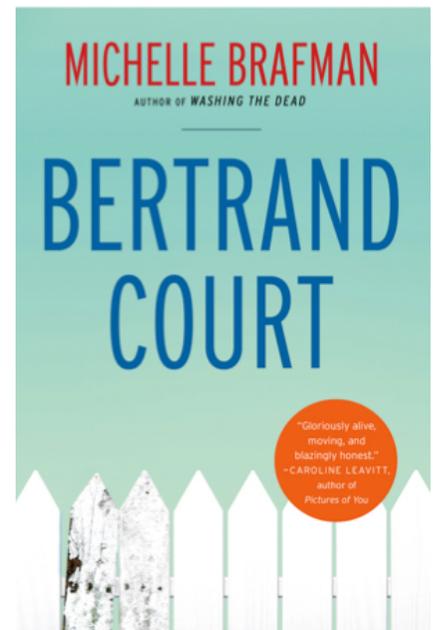


Readers Group Guide
Bertrand Court
By Michelle Brafman



15 Conversation Starters

1. Why did the author select the name of a cul-de-sac for a title? How does the setting shape these characters and in turn their stories? How can the random assignment of neighbors affect our lives? How does Bertrand Court serve as a character in this book? Discuss the tension between suburban and city life, particularly for Amy Solonsky.
2. While all the characters link to Bertrand Court, other places also play important roles in the book. For example, each scene in “What Hannah Never Knew” is set in Goldie’s apartment. What do we learn about Goldie and Sylvia from their connection to the objects in Goldie’s home? What role does Minocqua play in this pivotal moment in Timmy Carver and Becca Coopersmith’s relationship? How might any of the stories in *Bertrand Court* change if they were set in different locales?
3. Amy Solonsky poses one of the central questions of the book: “How well do you know anyone until you’ve watched them grieve?” She’s really asking, “How well can you know anyone at all?” The characters in *Bertrand Court* roam in and out of each other’s lives, rotating between narrator and bystander, revealing the gaps between their public and private selves. For example, in “Georgia and Phil,” Phil Scott is portrayed as a lothario, yet he exposes his longing for intimacy in “Ripe” and an emotional sturdiness in “Molly Flanders.” What are examples of inconsistencies within other characters? What are the contradictions that exist within our loved ones? Ourselves? How do we reconcile them?
4. Rosie Gold says, “People always want to label me ‘tard’ or PDD or high-functioning this or that, but I’m just Rosie.” Nikki Chamberlain labels Georgia Dumfries as someone who has successfully inoculated herself against any depth of emotion. Yet Rosie proves to be as strong, if not stronger than, her brother Marcus, and in a moment of passion, Georgia swipes her lover’s cat. What does this say about the labels we assign the people in our lives? The labels assigned to us? How can these tags stunt us? Can we break free?
5. The characters in *Bertrand Court* steal from one another regularly. For example, Hannah Solonsky swipes a sterling silver baby spoon from her dead aunt, and Becca endeavors to steal a moment with an old lover, even though he’s dead. What other tangible and intangible things are stolen? How is this pilfering an expression of the characters’ longings? Have you ever desired something that seems to have its own timeline? What was it like to finally obtain (or not) that dream?
6. Molly Flanders envies Becca’s life. Why? How do their respective searches for meaning differ? How are they similar? How do other characters explore their spirituality?

7. The first segment of the book explores early pregnancy loss, often an isolating grief. How does secrecy affect Danny and Sylvia's ability to cope with their losses? Do you see Danny and Sylvia's small rebellions against Hannah and Goldie, respectively, as betrayals? How do Hannah, Danny, Baby #5, and Sylvia offer different vantage points on the pain of miscarriage? What is the significance of the biblical Hannah's story?
8. Goldie won't talk about her pregnancy for fear of inviting the evil eye, and Hannah's tiniest decisions are ruled by superstition while she is trying to conceive. Have you surprised yourself with your actions or superstitions during moments of despair? How? What insights does Baby #5 provide about intuition? Faith?
9. Several sibling pairs are featured in this book. Does Hannah and Amy's relationship mirror Goldie and Sylvia's? Compare and contrast other sibling relationships. Which ones remind you most of yours with your brothers or sisters?
10. Cultural and religious differences serve as a source of tension between Eric and Maggie and Timmy and Becca. Are their different backgrounds also a source of attraction? Why or why not? What does Maggie's commitment to her job as a diversity trainer reveal about her character?
11. Most marriages in this book face a serious challenge or two. What are they? Which marriages might break? Which ones will endure?
12. What are some of the threads the author uses to weave these tales together? For example, the trampoline and the spoon appear in several stories. What other objects, characters, or ideas recur throughout the book?
13. The keeping and revealing of secrets engines "Two Truths and a Lie" and other stories as well. What is the cost of keeping secrets? Of telling them?
14. The power balance between Nikki, Tad, and Georgia shifts seismically throughout the book. How does the power balance shift in other relationships? What factors contribute to these changes?
15. The narrative arc of *Bertrand Court* is expressed via the portrayal of life's passages. The book opens with a story narrated by a fetus and proceeds to explore: a couple's burning desire to conceive, a bris and a five-year old's birthday party gone bad, the stresses of the sandwich generation, midlife torpidity/loss of power and money, search for meaning, and in the final chapter, Adam Kornfeld subconsciously risks his marriage because he is terrified about his mortality and wants to dismantle life's blessings on his own terms. Which of these emotional flashpoints resonated most with you? If you were going to write a book like this, which moments would you have picked to portray? Why has the author chosen to portray the volatility of family celebrations?

Advance Praise for *Bertrand Court*

“Michelle Brafman’s gorgeous linked narratives focus on a group of astonishing characters, all grappling with power, lust, love, sex, and how best to be alive in a complicated world, all set against the backdrop of a Washington D.C. suburb. Gloriously alive, moving, and blazingly honest—*Bertrand Court* is brilliant.”

— Caroline Leavitt, *New York Times*—bestselling author of *Is This Tomorrow* and *Pictures of You*

“Michelle Brafman eavesdrops on the human heart and reports back to us in *Bertrand Court* with honesty, compassion, and soul. This is gorgeous writing, in stories lit with grace.”

— Dylan Landis, author of *Rainey Royal* and *Normal People Don’t Live Like This*

“Like a Jewish Anne Lamott, Michelle Brafman reels you in with warmth, depth, and heart.”

— Susan Coll, author of *The Stager* and *Acceptance* and events and programs director at Politics & Prose

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