

READING GROUP GUIDE

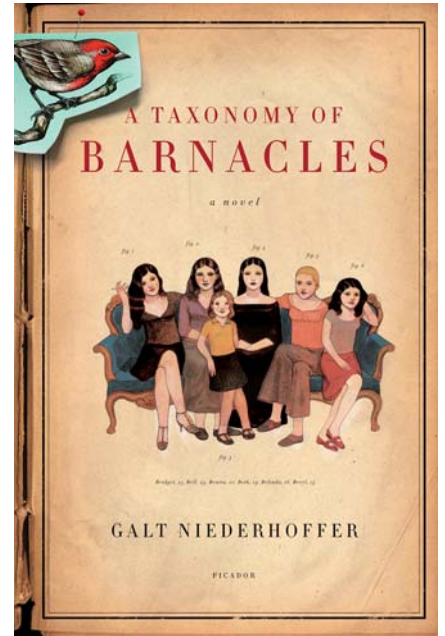
A Taxonomy of Barnacles

A Novel

by Galt Niederhoffer

ISBN-10: 0-312-42651-8

ISBN-13: 978-0-312-42651-4



About this Guide

The following author biography and list of questions about *A Taxonomy of Barnacles* are intended as resources to aid individual readers and book groups who would like to learn more about the author and this book. We hope that this guide will provide you a starting place for discussion, and suggest a variety of perspectives from which you might approach *A Taxonomy of Barnacles*.

About the Book

Set in the baronial Upper East Side apartment of Barry Barnacle, among giant aquariums, a sprawling shell collection, and a jungle room with a three-toed sloth and a macaque, this is the story of the six Barnacle daughters, aged ten to twenty-nine. As the story begins, one daughter has returned home secretly pregnant, and she and her sister are sneaking out at night to meet the Finch twins in the apartment downstairs, while Barry, the patriarch, has devised a challenge for his daughters: whoever can secure the future of the Barnacle line within the week will inherit his whole fortune.

A love story, a family chronicle, and a portrait of a city, *A Taxonomy of Barnacles* is "a confident

and witty debut that brings to mind an eccentric combination of *The Virgin Suicides* and *Little Women*" (*Kirkus Reviews*).

"Droll and sophisticated . . . a winning screwball comedy."

—*Entertainment Weekly*

"A clever, comic melodrama . . . At its funniest, *A Taxonomy of Barnacles* reminded me of the classic Hollywood screwball comedies from the '30s."

—*USA Today*

"Niederhoffer pays sparkling homage to fairy tales, *King Lear*, Austen, and Nora Ephron in this charming and sly spoofing of the concept of survival of the fittest, and the nature-versus-nurture debate."

—*Booklist*

About the Author

Galt Niederhoffer started her own film production company in her early twenties and has produced three Sundance Award-winning movies. She lives in New York City.

Discussion Questions

1. Though *Taxonomy of Barnacles* is set in the present day, many reviews referred to an old-fashioned quality in the story and the writing. Which aspects of the story struck you as old-fashioned, and how did the author achieve those effects? Is there a conflict within the story itself between old-fashioned ideas and more modern ones? Which characters most embody this opposition?
2. The relationships between the sisters in the novel are defined as much by their competition with each other as by their affection. How does that balance compare with your own experience with family members? Do you recall situations in which your competition with siblings or other relatives changed the course of your relationship?
3. In addition to Darwin's scientific writing, the author refers to works by Shakespeare and Beethoven throughout the novel. What do you know about the particular play and symphony she refers to? How does she use these allusions to hint at the larger themes of the novel?
4. Why do you think Bell ultimately decides to reject Blaine's proposal, while Bridget accepts Billy's? What has changed for the two sisters over the course of the novel to lead them to these decisions? Were you surprised by the outcome of their relationships with the twins?
5. In the end, do you think the novel suggests that nature or nurture is a greater influence? Which do you think plays a greater role in people's development generally?

6. What role do you think privilege plays in the novel? Is Barry right that his daughters have had it too easy? Is there a noticeable difference between the behavior of characters who grew up wealthy (the Barnacle daughters, the Finch twins) and those who didn't (Barry, Lattrell)?
7. "A man doesn't want to be pursued," Barry tells Bell. "It's in his evolutionary make-up to chase." Do you think this is good advice to give daughters? Has it become less true as times have changed?
8. Look at the description of Barry's state of mind on pp. 171-172. Did learning about his depression change the way you perceived his role in the family and the challenge he gives his daughters? Do you see a connection between his depression and his relationship with his family?
9. "It was a rather hallowed family game, a favorite mealtime distraction that had evolved long ago in response to Barry's mandate to question everything." Do you think Barry is right to advise his daughters to question everything? Can you see any connection between this mandate and Bell's or Bridget's behavior in the novel?
10. What is the significance of Beth's new theory about Barnacles (pg. 323) in terms of her father's ideas about nature and nurture? How does it relate to Barry's role in their family?
11. Barry Barnacle believes that competition will bring out the best in his daughters. Does his theory hold up? Do you believe that competition is the more likely to bring out the best in people—or the worst?
12. Did you find some of the Barnacle daughters more likeable than others? Which ones, and why? Which of the daughters could you most relate to?

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