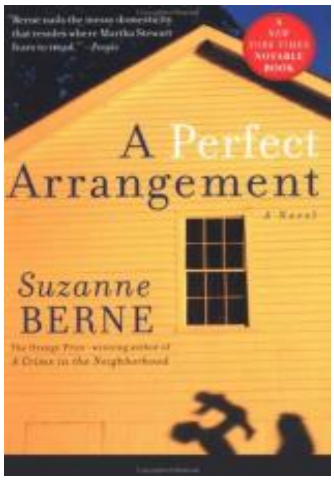
A Perfect Arrangement

by Suzanne Berne



About the Book

Mirella and Howard Cook-Goldman have it all?two beautiful children, the home of their dreams, successful careers, even a golden retriever. The only thing they lack is reliable childcare. After weeks of searching and interviewing, they are sent Randi Gill by a respected child-care placement agency and all their problems are solved. Randi is the nanny they always wanted. She sews, cooks, cleans, and quickly bonds with the children. In fact, she?s almost too perfect. As Randi?s attachment to the children grows, Mirella and Howard begin to have misgivings about her and tension builds in their once happy home.

Suddenly Mirella and Howard?s marriage begins to unravel as each is forced to reveal secrets they have been keeping hidden. Randi?s situation becomes more and more precarious and, sensing her place beginning to slip, she works harder to bond with the children, placing herself in a powerful position within the fragile household. As a result, Mirella and Howard face the greatest doubts and fears that haunt working parents as they struggle to balance family and professional life.

Discussion Guide

1. Discuss the Robert Louis Stevenson poem at the beginning of the book. What do you think Berne is saying by introducing this story with this particular poem? What purpose does it serve? Do you think it is effective?

2. When Howard first thinks of his time with Nadine he thinks "it was hardly an affair; they'd slept together only a few times." In what other ways does Howard justify the affair? Why do you think he has the affair to begin with? Discuss the ways this affair comes back to haunt him.

3. Compare Jacob and Pearl. They are very different children, but what about them is the same? What about Jacob appeals to Howard? Jacob's needs are addressed often, but Pearl's seem to come second. What kinds of problems is she

dealing with and why do they seem less urgent to the family than Jacob's issues?

4. "Jacob had been Howard's favorite figure in the Bible, canny and quick, so determined." Discuss this statement in relation to how Jacob actually is. Do you think Howard is disappointed or accepting of Jacob?

5. When did you first suspect that Randi might not be so wonderful after all? Why does she lie about the death of her parents? What is she trying to get from the Cook-Goldman family? Despite her initial lie, did you see her necessarily as a sinister character? How did your opinion of her change throughout the novel?

6. Why does Mirella keep her pregnancy a secret for so long? What is she really afraid of? How do you see her keeping the secret as a symptom of larger problems in the Cook-Goldman's relationship? What are their other problems and to what lengths do they go to on order to ignore them?

7. There are many mother-daughter relationships represented in this book. Mirella is working to get along with Pearl as well as her own mother. Vivvy's relationship with her mother and then, later, her daughter is also described. Compare these relationships. How do they change throughout the course of the story? Which grown stronger and which weaker?

8. In what ways is Randi a savior to the Cook-Goldman family? What voids does she fill for Mirella? For Howard? For the children?

9. Why does Mirella tell Randi she is pregnant before she tells Howard? How does this confiding in Randi change the power dynamic in the household? How does it change again when Howard's affair is revealed?

10. What about Jacob is attractive to Randi? Why does she favor him over Pearl? Do you think that, given the chance, Randi would have run off with Jacob?

11. The Guptas who live across the street appear in almost every chapter, and their role grows as the narrative progresses. Why are they so important to the story? How do you compare them to the Cook-Goldmans? Do they seem like a more put together family? How and why?

12. Mirella is working on the custody battle of Jerry Vassbacher throughout the course of the novel. What is the significance of this case? How does Mirella relate to it and why is it so important to her? Why is it that in her greatest moments of stress she pictures Jerry Vassbacher and his children?

13. Randi enjoys teaching Pearl and Jacob everything from how to make dolls to things about nature. What then is the significance of the birth of the baby birds and then subsequent ravaging of the nest and the deaths of the chicks? How does this relate to the death of Martha a short while later?

14. When a telephone caller asks Randi if she is the babysitter, she lies and says she is Howard's niece. Why does she do this? How does Randi compare with Howard's actual niece, Danielle, who visits with Vivvy and Richard?

15. In the end, Howard does not get to build his housing development on the old farm land and is humiliated by Nadine. What are the good and bad effects of his failure? Also, what are the good and bad effects of Mirella's troubled and, in the end, failed pregnancy?

16. In the end, Mirella and Pearl are in the garden together, sharing what is perhaps their only peaceful moment in the book. Do you think that the Goldman-Cook family has actually recovered from their stint with Randi? How has the experience changed them and their priorities? What, in the last chapter, points towards the possibility of their future happiness?

Author Bio

Suzanne Berne is the author of THE BLUE WINDOW; THE DOGS OF LITTLEFIELD; THE GHOST AT THE TABLE; A PERFECT ARRANGEMENT; A CRIME IN THE NEIGHBORHOOD, winner of Great Britain?s Orange Prize; and MISSING LUCILE: Memories of the Grandmother I Never Knew, part biography and part memoir. She has also written short fiction and essays that appear in *Vogue*, *The New York Times Magazine*, *The Guardian* and more. Berne currently teaches creative writing at Boston College and The Ranier Writing Workshop. She lives just outside of Boston with her husband and two daughters.

Critical Praise

"Berne uses familiar circumstances to explore treacheries, big and small, that invade family relationships?[She] shows enormous intelligence about expectations, and what people hide from themselves and palm off on each other."

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