



Where We Have to Go

Lauren Kirshner

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Where We Have to Go Lauren Kirshner
Named NOW Magazine's Best Emerging Local Author

Where We Have to Go is a luminous and sassy first novel about the last days of childhood in a family coming apart at the seams. At once wryly humorous and deeply affecting, this sparkling novel follows the irresistible Lucy Bloom as she searches for her place in the world.

When we first meet Lucy, she's an imaginative eleven-year-old dreaming of a taste of freedom — and only beginning to grasp that all is not well between her parents. In the years that follow, Lucy's journey to adulthood will see her question the limits of unconditional love, grow "criminally thin" as she stops eating, and discover complicated truths about what it means to be a young woman. Through it all, the central figure in Lucy's life remains her mother, Joy, whose larger-than-life stories and boisterous voice belie a deep disappointment. As their relationship is tested again and again, Lucy comes to understand the resilience of the bonds that tie us to the ones we love.

Among the characters we meet are Lucy's father, Frank, a failed glamour photographer turned travel agent who's never been out of the country; her best friend, Erin, an artist whose outspoken iconoclasm will inspire and challenge Lucy; and Crashing Wave, Frank's lover, a former exotic dancer and the woman Lucy comes to imagine as the ideal of all that is feminine.

Set in Toronto throughout the 1990s, **Where We Have to Go** is a novel of self-discovery, family, and love. It introduces Lauren Kirshner as one of our most striking new voices, and reminds us that sometimes the most difficult journey is the one that takes us home.

Where We Have to Go Details

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From Reader Review Where We Have to Go for online ebook

Canadian Reader says

Kirshner's debut novel is the mostly sparkling coming-of-age story of Lucy Bloom, from early adolescence to young adulthood. Kirshner explores the dynamics of a secular, working-class, 1980s/90s Toronto Jewish family grappling with marital infidelity, alcoholism, and eating disorders, as well as the central character's negotiation of friendship, sexual awakening and identity. The above (dirty) laundry list of "issues" perhaps makes the book sound grim and dark, but the story is leavened by considerable humour, a lively first-person narration, and interesting three-dimensional characters. Kirshner is dextrous with language and the book is grounded in vivid sensory detail and fresh images. Overall, this is an entertaining and engrossing novel that makes the reader care about the central character, Lucy Bloom, and her family and friends.

The first 2/3 of the book are stronger than the latter third, in which Lucy's mother is ailing. I was rather confused by the section in which Lucy tells her incapacitated mother a "fictionally true" story about the brief period they spent away from Lucy's father in a run-down apartment complex. The author seems to be wanting to make a point here about the healing power of stories, but, to my mind at least, it didn't work. It would've been valuable to rethink, rework, and revise this section considerably prior to publication. An additional criticism: the farewell to the childhood home--saying goodbye to where the TV stood and the kitchen cupboards etc.--which concludes WHERE WE HAVE TO GO, is cliché, unlike the balance of the book, which--though it explored some familiar coming-of-age themes--did so with energy.

I look forward to reading Kirshner's future work and highly recommend her first offering. It is a solid book that deserves to be read by both adults and high-school-age young adults.

Thank you to Net Galley and the publisher for providing me with an ARC of this text.

Kellie Stame says

I just finished this book for my book club and very much enjoyed it. The 70s, 80s and 90s brought back a lot of my childhood memories for me. I enjoyed reading about the styles of the times. I related to the main character because I remember as a child growing up in a household where my parents fought and not knowing what I could do to stop it from happening. I felt a special bond with my dog to get me through those times. What disturbed me about the book is how often the parents dragged their one child into their adult issues. All too often this happens in real life. So sad. I liked watching her grow up and learn to be a strong woman. She was able to make long lasting friendships and repair the relationships with her parents. I recommend this book to everyone. A great read!

Lydia Laceby says

Originally reviewed at Novel Escapes

Where We Have to Go is a thoroughly enjoyable coming of age tale full of quirky characters, humour and

angst. This story shines a light on some of the darker realities of a faltering marriage from a child's perspective and the long lasting effects of such a tumultuous upbringing. This novel could have been much more grim but Kirshner handles the fine line between humour and somber so deftly that the serious issues never come across as being made light of, which is a testament to her writing and something I greatly appreciated.

Anyone who had ever felt self conscious as a child or teen, or felt themselves odd or quirky or an outsider or had ever held their hands over their ears to ease parental bickering will be able to relate to this novel. Lucy Bloom is a wonderful protagonist. She's so cute and quirky and sad that you can't help but be empathetic towards her and as I watched her life grew more complicated as she navigates her teens, I found myself cringing and wanting to scream at her and everyone around her. And then on the next page I would find myself chortling or with a grin on my face. It was so well written in this aspect that I loved the constant anticipation of what emotion I would feel next.

As an only child, Lucy is left to navigate her parent's marriage through infidelity, separation and reuniting. There is much in this novel that is heartbreaking, but I always felt undercurrents of hope. I continuously rooted for Lucy and her family all the way through this novel and wanted to shake her parents to keep their issues from her and to actually see what she was going through. I could never figure out where Lucy would end up in life and I loved that.

Having grown up through the 70's, 80's and 90's, I loved the feeling of nostalgia Where do we go From Here brought. Along with all the childhood memories were many Canadianisms and Toronto references, which is always a bonus for me with any novel.

Where We Have to Go was a fabulous debut novel and I will definitely read another by Lauren Kirshner.

Thank you to McClelland and Stewart for our review copy. All opinions are our own.

Marlene says

I don't understand why this book hasn't received more recognition in terms of book awards, etc. Perhaps there has not been enough time in the market as yet. I think it is beautiful. But not if you are wanting action, mystery, moving plot. If you like to get to know characters and if you enjoy beautiful writing you will be happy with this novel about a family just trying to get by. Like most of us. Lives of quiet desperation, my pessimistic husband used to say. I liked the metaphor that was created by the mannequins in the garden, symbols for this family. And I also liked the way the author did not get maudlin and hung up on the death of the mother.

Miz Moffatt says

Where We Have To Go sparkles in its sad revelations on the life of one young girl stuck in one dysfunctional family. **Lauren Kirshner** marks her debut with a fine-tuned novel filled with ample quirk, a touch of spunk, and a whole lot of tragic circumstances. As the novel opens, the eleven-year-old Lucy dreams of freedom in the shape of a bicycle. Her vision dissipates when she receives a pair of second-hand roller skates for her birthday, and when she becomes conscious of her parents' marital troubles. Lucy then

embarks on an odyssey toward adulthood, an adventure riddled with toxic friendships, anorexia, and anxieties connected to her changing environment. Even as she wades through her own confusion, Lucy maintains her charm and presses on.

Set in Toronto in the nineties, the novel invites young readers to re-live their past through a literary lens. **Kirshner** adds delightful touches of pop culture to her text, most notably in little Lucy's admiration of ALF. Sweet, complicated, and entirely addictive -- finish the novel in one sitting, then repeat.

Ideal for: Toronto high schoolers needing proof of literature's relevancy; Twenty-somethings needing a hit of nostalgia; Coming-of-age junkies.

Carrie Ardoin says

Lucy Bloom is 11 years old, and she loves Alf, and her cat Lulu. Her life is simple but soon gets more complicated. Her family is drifting apart before her, and there's nothing she can do to stop it.

The book continues to tell the story of Lucy throughout her teenage years. She has more than enough problems to face in a lifetime, let alone just those few precious years. As Lucy moves towards adulthood, she learns the truth is not always what it seems, and learns to look at her parents as real people--not just parents.

I didn't really enjoy this book that much. First off, literally NOTHING good ever happens in Lucy's life throughout the course of this book. Her entire teen years--not one good thing? It made for a really depressing read.

While I liked the author's style and the imagination she gave Lucy, I found most of the characters very flat, including Lucy herself. I didn't really enjoy her voice and the perspective she had on some things.

The plot was not really driven by anything. There are no real climactic events to speak of, just a series of things that Lucy happens to go through. The story definitely did not pull me in and make me want to finish it as quickly as possible.

The book got better towards the end, but I'm still not sure what I'm supposed to have taken away from it. If this was a coming-of-age story, I'm not sure what the significant events were that were supposed to have changed Lucy. She never really acted like anything affected her too significantly. I wasn't really able to view her actions and emotions as being a result of her parents' problems.

Basically, I felt the entire book was just Lucy's life going along from point A to point B. I'm sure she was somehow supposed to be shaped by the things that happened in her teenage years, but to me, there was no one important thing that stood out.

Trudi says

I thought I would be ga-ga over the moon for this book. It has all the ingredients I'm usually such a sucker

for – coming-of-age; first-person narrator; dysfunctional family; humor; the mother and daughter relationship; it's even set in Canada during a time period that should make me feel nostalgic. I really liked it, parts of it work amazingly well, but overall I'm left feeling empty and a little cheated. It's like I was promised a real, live, bloody beating heart and then after being led down the garden path a few times I was handed a cut-out of a black and white diagram from a 1960s biology textbook. Or remember this ad from a few years ago? The expression on that kid's face perfectly sums up how I'm feeling right now (a little cheated, a little mistreated).

The structure of this novel is impressive; Kirshner's control of language is enviable and she is obviously a talented writer (hence the 3 stars). But here's the thing: even though all the technical aspects of the novel are firmly in place – plotting, pacing, characterization, metaphors, analogies, foreshadowing, the works – most readers are searching for more than technical proficiency when they sit down and open a book. I don't like to feel manipulated by literary devices and tricks of the trade. I want to be swept away goddamn it, and be pulled out of my own life for awhile. I want to live and breathe a story and totally believe in the characters I'm reading about. I want to feel their pain and cheer for their success. There is just something a little too contrived and ... I don't know ... *kitschy* about the struggles in this one.

The first 1/3 of the book sort of reminded me of *Running with Scissors* – the dysfunction is such that it reaches almost the level of parody. Surely the narrator is taking liberties with memory and exaggeration. In the case of *Where We Have to Go*, I found myself struggling with the way Lucy's parents related to her and spoke with her. Things are said that left me scratching my head thinking: “would parents really talk to their 11 year old kid like that? Even an only child?” As for Lucy, her precociousness is so over-the-top, her insights so keen, I could never really buy her as “just a kid”. Her “beyond her years” wisdom is jarring and unconvincing when we also consider she's prancing around in ALF merchandise (not even realizing it's long off the air and she's watching it in syndication).

Other things that left me unsatisfied: (view spoiler)

Overall, while the novel is technically proficient and reads very strong in places, I find myself not able to recommend it.

April Forker says

I won this book on a Goodreads giveaway and was excited to add it to my "to read" shelf. I really enjoyed this book and loved that it was different than any book I have read. It tells the story of Lucy, a girl growing up in Canada in the 1990's and everything that goes on her life - her parents and their odd habits as well as their marriage struggles, her own struggles to fit in as a pre-teen and teenager, and the relationships that she has during this time with her family and few close friends. This was an easy read and I would recommend it!

Cindy says

Loved it, loved it. When I really think about it, it's kind of a typical coming of age story, but the writing and Lucy's voice is just so original and so RIGHT. I stayed up past 1am finishing it.

Also, this book has about 325 pages, not 256.

Erin says

This book is absolutely incredible! It's the debut novel from Lauren Kirshner, who was mentored by Margaret Atwood at U of T.

The voice of Lucy as a child, adolescent and young adult is so frighteningly accurate and engaging. Some of her childhood thoughts and hopes are so pure, naive and full of that beautiful hope that children have that, being an adult and knowing better, your heart breaks a little. Her young life is clumsy and imperfect and therefore, perfectly rendered.

I really appreciated the details used to complete characters and situations --- little quirks in behavior and preference that make things unique and feel so real. There is also liberal use of references to actual media and advances in technology, which add to the realism.

There were a couple of times that I had to put the book down for a day or two because I was so deeply entrenched in Lucy's world that I intensely felt everything she was feeling. That's how wonderful and engrossing and it is. I actually cried when her cat died.

Please pick up this book!

Reshad Mubtasim-fuad says

Every compelling novel has its characters experience their emotional ups and downs, humorous moments, pitfalls, and eventual resurgence. All these elements of character development come together wonderfully in Canadian author Lauren Kirshner's first ever novel, *Where We Have To Go*, making it as compelling a read as ever.

The entirety of the novel is told through the first-person perspective of Lucy Bloom, throughout her years of adolescence and young adulthood. Her parents constantly argue with each other and always talk about divorce, she frequently gets bullied by a few of her classmates at school, and goes through many hardships when it comes to boyfriends and relationships. Life for Lucy isn't easy, but she learns to persevere through her troubles even during the toughest of times. She actively supports and cares for her mother, tries to maintain her relationships with her father, does well academically in school, and even makes a couple of friends along the way. While this may seem like one of your typical "coming-of-age" stories, Lucy's charming personality, childish demeanor, and sense of awkwardness is what separates her experience from others. Even as she matures, her outlook on issues in her everyday life remain the same. She does her best to bring out the positive in people and isn't scared to voice her opinion if she thinks something is going wrong. Over her years, she tried to ignore her parents' constant bickering and the insults thrown at her in school, but soon learns that she can't just shy away from the negative and has to face her problems head on. Naturally, she goes through bouts of depression, but overcomes the feeling to eventually prevail. Her journey is an engaging one that has its unexpected twists and turns, but will keep you glued until the end.

The most likable aspect of *Where We Have To Go* is perhaps, besides Lucy's personality, the relatable

experiences that she goes through. The setting of the book is none other than Toronto, Canada (which happens to be my hometown), and many of the places that Lucy visits and talks about are places that I've been to many times and have become accustomed to. For example, Lucy mentions how every Saturday she does the groceries with her family at No-Frills and shops at Zellers, experiences that I am very familiar with especially during my childhood. She even recounts her experiences at Canadian landmarks such as the CN Tower, Skydome, and Niagara Falls. While the majority of the story takes place around the 1990s, there are still striking similarities to then and now, and surprisingly comes off as highly relatable. Author Lauren Kirshner's writing style is detailed and light-hearted, much like the rest of the book, and I feel she wrote about her very own childhood days when she writes about Lucy. The book successfully explored the theme of nostalgia and made me feel a bit giddy on the inside as well.

I do feel the book has some pacing problems and could be sped up from time-to-time, as well as not having a definite climax. The situations never get too intense, and there are sections that can come off as sort of boring. These are minor complaints however, and the majority of the book left me pleased.

I recommend *Where We Have To Go* for anyone who wants a mostly easy-going reading experience while still exploring some of the intricacies of childhood and teenage issues, or for anyone who grew up in Toronto or any city in general, and wants a nostalgic experience. In conclusion, *Where We Have To Go* is a great first novel by Lauren Kirshner and I highly recommend checking it out.

Shannon Mullen says

I loved this book!! I found Lucy's struggle to be accepted as her quirky cat-loving self so real. It is reflective of the difficulties that teenaged girls face in trying to preserve their sense of self while being encouraged to change their differences in order to fit in with the popular crowd. I highly recommend this book and think that all teenaged girls (and their mothers) would benefit from reading it!

Elvina Barclay says

When we meet Lucy Bloom she is an awkward, funny 11-year old living with her parents, her pets, and a family of mannequins in their Toronto backyard. Her realization that her happy family is slowly breaking apart as her parents fight, leads her to develop some quirky habits and when she reaches her teen years and high school turn into full blown anorexia. Even her parents reconciliation does not put her life back together. We see Lucy finally come into her own as a young adult and blossom as a university student. Lauren Kirshner's debut novel is one that will stay with me for a long time.

Laima says

This coming of age novel is told from the point of view of protagonist Lucy Bloom.

Growing up in the Canadian city of Toronto during the 1990s, Lucy ages from 11 to 17 while experiencing great changes and teenage angst. Much of the story revolves around Lucy's friends and family and how they all change along with her.

The story begins with Lucy in the eighth grade, looking forward to high school. Her world is suddenly ripped apart when she realizes her father, Frank, is having an affair with the skinny blonde from her father's AA meetings. This is a woman whom Lucy mockingly refers to as Crashing Wave. Lucy cares deeply about her mother, Joy, and does not want to upset her so she doesn't let on that something is up. Lucy loves her mother and this never wavers throughout the novel.

A lot of changes occur within Lucy's family and within Lucy herself. I'm not going to elaborate and spoil everything but I will say that she spirals downwards in a way that some teenage girls do. It is really sad and you just want to shake this girl and say don't act that way. Along with her artistic friend Erin, the nerdy Lucy transforms from child into adult while learning to deal with bullies and boyfriends.

Author Lauren Kirshner does an outstanding, rather amazing job of describing the local landscape, both physical and social. There are abundant references to places and things that anyone growing up in Southern Ontario can easily identify with. The CN Tower, the CNE, Crystal Beach, Niagara Falls, pickle flavored chips, grocery shopping at No Frills, private school uniforms, and even jos louis snacks. There is a lot of Canadiana described in these pages.

I loved this book and rate it 5+ stars.

Joanna says

This story was far too depressing...all the way through. A young girl going through the dark years of adolescence, living with dysfunctional parents, surrounded by people with very few redeeming qualities. The book was well written and it could possibly appeal to those who enjoy coming-of-age reads but it reminded me of the constant suffering in "She's Come Undone" and the no-way-out-of-hell feeling in "Revolutionary Road".
