

# **If Life Is a Bowl of Cherries, What Am I Doing in the Pits? Study Guide**

**If Life Is a Bowl of Cherries, What Am I Doing in the Pits? by Erma Bombeck**

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## Plot Summary

Erma Bombeck tells the reader that she is a professional worrier and that she can worry about many things that other people might not consider, such as whether her daughter might marry an Eskimo who would set her adrift when she is old. She then tells the story of a lab rat named Lionel who survives all kinds of experiments but dies when he goes for a ride in the car with a teenager. Bombeck says these stories set up the rest of the book which is aimed at telling the reader about survival.

That survival ranges from enduring the growing years of her children to the realization that she is taking over the care of her mother. She talks about her husband and his tendency to be late so that she has never arrived on time for anything since their marriage. She relates the story of a mother trying to remember the name of her child and the child using that to make the mother feel guilty. Bombeck talks about the decision she and her husband make to leave their children at home and get an apartment of their own though the children predict they will soon come running home with the realization that they have a good thing after all. She talks about her worry that her family could not survive with her and leaves a survival guide with information including instructions on how to change the toilet paper roll.

Bombeck explores the impact of the working mom on the American family and the frantic need for moms to juggle the work with the expectations of the family. She goes on to discuss the need to catch up on some of the latest trends, including learning to play tennis and how the game is something of a social trap in which she is not at home. She later talks fashion and says that platform heels are a problem because she hates the shoes but never throws away a pair until the soles are worn out. Bombeck hits an array of other topics, ranging from the fact that anyone can get access to a shopping cart though they are dangerous vehicles, that there are laws in several states that makes it illegal to leave a child behind while on vacation and pretend that it was an accident, and that she is excited to learn that her child is writing an essay about all she has taught him until she reads it. She talks about the fact that there should be some sort of organized place where parents and children could go when they are looking to "trade up," though she and her friends—after discussing the faults of their own children—decline to trade and feel a little better about their offspring.



# Pages 1 - 40

## Pages 1 - 40 Summary and Analysis

In the introduction, "White Socks in a Pantyhose World," Erma Bombeck, the author, says that there is no time in history that has provided more fodder for worrying, and that she is a classic worrier. She describes some of the things she worries about, ranging from one of her children marrying an Eskimo who will then set her adrift when she is too old to care for herself to Carol Channing going bald. She says that a big worry is that researchers will release information that lettuce is actually fattening, meaning she has wasted a great deal of time dieting. She then turns her attention to research and says that there was a researcher once who had a research rat named Lionel who survived massive experiments but died soon after the researcher took him home as a pet for his children, a victim of a heart attack after having ridden with a teenage son who had just earned his learner's permit. Bombeck says all that to point out the purpose of this book—survival.

In Section One, "If You Thought the Wedding Was Bad," Bombeck turns her attention to marriage. She says that one of the great differences between men and women is that women want to hang things on walls and men hate the sight of nails in walls. She says that another problem waiting to destroy marriages is snoring, and that it is important that no one thinks to ask ahead of time. She says that her husband refuses to believe that he snores and that his snores sound like "a small leak in the Goodyear blimp." She says the only "cures" that work are to move him to another bed—in another state is best—or telling him something that will keep him awake. She says the only real reason a man snores is to annoy his wife. She says the only thing more annoying is her husband's tendency to run late for everything which means she has never arrived at a movie in time to see the murder victim prior to his or her death.

Bombeck says she knows what it is that makes so many marriages fail but wonders why others survive. She suggests that some women are "too old for a paper route, too young for social security, too clumsy to steal and too tired for an affair," and that some simply do not know how to be anything other than married.

In "Mother Mystique," Bombeck relates a letter from a little girl named Cathie who says she and her friends want to know how moms know so much about what they are doing without even seeming to look. Bombeck says that it is a mother's only way of surviving. She then poses the question, "Who is I. Dunno?" Bombeck says that this kid—"I. Dunno"—is "rotten" and does things like leaving lights on and failing to return library books on time. When Bombeck asks one evening who would like liver for dinner, she is told "I. Dontcare" which she says can only mean that "I. Dunno" has a brother.

In "At What Age Is a Child Capable of Dressing Himself?" Bombeck says that she knows her children are old enough to dress themselves but not old enough to determine what qualifies as acceptable attire. She says that when her own three children are



looking particularly ratty and she inquires as to the reason, she learns—not to her surprise—that it is the day for school pictures.

In "Haven't I Always Loved Whatshisname Best?" Bombeck says that a mother repeats the name she plans to use for her new baby but "a few years and a few kids later" can no longer remember the name. She says this is a fact that children use to say that a mother loves another child more but Bombeck disagrees, saying that her own mother could never get her name right though she was an only child. She recounts an instance in which her mother runs through a series of names and asks if she got close to being correct. Bombeck replies that "Edna" was close and asks her mother why she chose to name her Erma, to which her mother replies that she selected that name because it was "easy to remember."

In "Why Can't We Have Our Own Apartment?" Bombeck relates a conversation she and her husband have with their children when the two adults announce that they want to get their own place and their children's predict that the adults are not prepared for the costs, including the utility bills.

In "Is There Life After Mine?" Bombeck explores some of the household tasks her family has not mastered, including replacing an empty toilet paper roll, turning on a stove (including a reminder to put the food in a pan before attempting to heat), closing doors, turning off lights and depositing clothes in a clothes hamper. She relates a conversation between family members who, mourning her imagined death, say that they would have paid attention and learned to change the toilet paper roll if they had only known her death was imminent. Bombeck produces instructions on this and other skills, saying that the family can retain the information as a "manual" in the case of her unexpected demise.

In "Why Can't Our Average Little Family Get Their Own TV Series?" Bombeck says that, as she is watching a situational comedy on television, she realizes that her family is not funny. She then relates a conversation including a series of one-liners meant to be funny but that are actually very corny. When her mother asks for coffee, Bombeck stops the action and quips that it is a good thing there are commercials to break up the exhausting action.

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Bombeck's sense of humor is sometimes biting though those times seem every bit as funny as other stories. For example, she says that she knows her children are old enough to be responsible for dressing themselves but that they cannot choose an outfit that is acceptable. She says that, for the most part, the only accessory most outfits need would be "an empty gin bottle."

Bombeck describes her own children though in somewhat generic terms. She says that there is always one girl in any family who is insecure and fearful of being in a situation where she might be made fun of. This kid always changes clothes until there is no more time and everyone is out of patience. There is always—according to Bombeck—another



child who can never choose anything that is ready for him to wear and who needs something ironed before he can dress.

The conversation between Bombeck and her children regarding Bombeck's decision to move out is an obvious parody on the typical conversation that occurs when a child is preparing to move out. There are questions from the children about why they want to move out, what is so bad about living at home, and predictions that they will not be able to afford the bills. Bombeck recites the same arguments used by kids who want to move out on their own, including freedom, only in this conversation it is Bombeck and her husband citing the desire for freedom to do what they want and the children responding that they can make some arrangements to get the adults a car of their own. The parody is effective in communicating the idea that some parents do feel trapped and misused, especially when the children begin to age somewhat and remain overly dependent and demanding, because young parents sometimes believe they will have more freedom once the children are old enough to do some things for themselves.



## Pages 41 - 86

### Pages 41 - 86 Summary and Analysis

In "Who Killed Apple Pie?" Bombeck explores the idea that women are discovering that doing housework all day is no longer fulfilling but cannot imagine finding a way to work outside the home. She says that when she finally decides that she would do something other than care for the family all day, she begins looking for a sitter and cannot find one willing to take on her family. She relates a magazine article in which a woman is working on a construction site as an architect in one picture and is at home with her loving family pitching in to help with dinner in the next. Bombeck says that she finds herself running around the house, using the heat of her underarms to hurry the thawing of pork chops, and even assigning chores to the children does not help because they have excuses. She then turns the conversation to a list of guidelines for when the children should call a mom at work. This list includes the requirement to evaluate the amount of blood and whether it is on the sofa without Scotch Guard before declaring an emergency. She also urges children to consider whether they would like to spend the rest of their teenage years locked in their rooms for having company over while the adults are away before issuing the invitation.

In "Primer for Imaginative Children," Bombeck lists some of the things children should keep in mind when staying at home alone, such as watching the dog for signs he needs to go out, remembering that food from the refrigerator cannot put itself away and will turn the unhappy color of green if left out, and that meeting the parents at the door with a list of complaints about the other children will drive the mom of the family crazy and will make the father at risk for rupturing a neck vein. Meanwhile, Bombeck says that offices have gotten stricter about leave, that a doctor's appointment is no longer an acceptable excuse because a person well enough to go to the doctor should be well enough to go to work, and that operations are discouraged because employees are expected to retain all the parts they had when hired.

In "The Varicose Open," Bombeck says she would never have allowed her "knees to grow together." She says there are some women who put their second tennis ball into the elastic leg of their tennis panties, but that she has found that space to be fully occupied by her leg. She then offers some tips, including that concentration is not necessary, that rushing around a shot is better than trying the backhand, and that retying a shoe is an excellent way to stall.

In "Profile of a Martyress," Bombeck says that she wants to nominate a woman named Lorraine Suggs as a "Mother Martyress" because she handles her family while her husband is away most of the time. Bombeck points out that most people tell Lorraine that she is fortunate for one reason or another, ignoring the myriad of difficulties she works through, including that she is at least able to "get out of the house." She then says that she would nominate Tom Suggs as "Father and Martyr" for his dedication to his traveling job and the difficulties he endures. Again, Bombeck points out that the



people that Tom encounters always sees the good side of his life, ignoring the bad, and that his wife accuses him of ignoring his own home.

In "Have a Good Day," Bombeck describes some of the trends that have been difficult for her to endure, such as the realization that recycling is necessary in order to save the planet. When her daughter announces that there is a bill in Congress that will eliminate aerosol spray cans, Bombeck stops by the bathroom and sprays room deodorizer under her arm. She says that she becomes as bad as any woman in the neighborhood in her efforts to court the favor of the butcher when the price of meat jumps, and that she has gained good standing with him sufficiently for him to offer her a low interest rate on a particular cut of meat, though he brushes off her requests to make a house call when she has a rump roast that goes into shock. The final trend she references is a boycott on coffee which makes her recall "the Great Caffeine Drought of 1942," during which she shaved her tongue, buttered her hand and complained of the draft caused by her eyelashes.

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Bombeck talks about the fact that magazines release studies that say a woman who works at home expands her life expectancy, only to later counter that women who work outside the home do the same. Her point is taken as fact because there are constantly studies being released that counter each other. In typical Bombeck fashion, she points out that she is bound to be prolonging her life by having a job outside the home and prolonging it even more by all the work she does at home, indicating that her workload at home has not lessened because of her job. She then says that by doubling up in this manner, she will probably live to be a hundred years old, or that she will at least feel that she has lived a hundred years.

Bombeck speaks in very derisive tones about the people who play tennis though she does so because of the social attitudes of those people rather than because of their abilities or lack of. She points out that none of the members of these social sets will be caught prepping for a stock car race or exiting a bowling alley carrying a bowling bag. Her humor on this point stretches to anyone involved in the game, including her son. She says that he offers to give her tennis lessons but spends weeks teaching her to pick up the ball correctly. She makes fun of herself, pointing out the problems she has complying with his instructions and that she believes his attitude to be retaliation for her treatment of him as a child.





## Pages 87 - 128

### Pages 87 - 128 Summary and Analysis

In "Warning: Families May be Dangerous to Your Health," Bombeck says that she believes there are many things working against the American family, but says that there are some things working for the family as well. She tells of an instance in which her son says he must have a note in order to return to school. Bombeck says she cannot find a piece of paper and so tears a strip of wallpaper down and searches until she finds a nub of a pencil in a dryer lint trap. Later she finds the note still in his pocket, obviously not necessary for his return to school. She says that education is a "contradiction" just like the young person who touts the need for attention to the environment but who has the biggest pollutant in the form of their gym clothes. She says that she finds her son's clothes with a French fry dried to the strings of his gym shoes. When she finishes washing the clothes, she has nothing but a clean French fry left in the washer, the rest of the clothes having disintegrated.

Bombeck tells about the fact that her son, once he joined the ranks of the employed, believes himself to be unappreciated—as only a young person realizing the rigors of a job can. Bombeck says that her son, who has shown his true colors to the young women who attend college with him, may never marry. He does, however, move out and Bombeck initially keeps the room as something of a shrine, but then moves in some excess furniture, repaints and begins using the room as a television room. When the son returns home for a visit, he is told he can have the sleeper sofa for the term of his visit.

In "There Ought to Be a Law," Bombeck introduces the concept of "A Baby's Bill of Rights." She presents four "articles" and one "amendment," in which she says that there should be a penalty for the person who chooses to "tickle a baby's feet until he faints or throw him up in the air after a full meal." Other points include that a baby should be allowed to decide whether to eat baby food or not, and that any baby who throws baby food at the person trying to feed the child cannot take that action as "an act of war."

In "The Hernia Amendment to the National Anthem," Bombeck says that the person who wrote the Star Spangled Banner" created a melody that could cause damage to the person singing. She says there should be two tunes—one for those people who have professional singing ability and one for everyone else. In "Kissing by Mutual Ratification," Bombeck says that there should be a mutual understanding regarding the rules for kissing, and that one should be careful of earrings, pins and toothpicks. In "Search and Seizure Rights in the Laundry Room," Bombeck relates a story in which she and her youngest son have a drawn out conversation regarding the need to put clean laundry away and his counterclaim that he will then get the clean clothes mixed up with the dirty clothes, including his lucky underwear that he plans to wear again before putting them in the wash.



In "Regulation of Interstate Shopping Cart Traffic," Bombeck examines the safety issues of a shopping cart, including that there are no brakes, that anyone can drive one regardless of qualifications, and that there should always be two people—"one to drive and one to gawk." In "Truth in Fair Packing of Children," Bombeck says that she would feel a traitor to the women of the world if she did not put a tag on her son indicating the truth of his habits, including that he does not know how to wring out a washcloth and that he has a "capacity" of eight meals a day.

In "Constitutionality of Drive-in Windows," Bombeck says that the only two instances in which it is okay to drive up to a mailbox, a bank or a restaurant are in a demolition derby car or a rental car. She says that she is particularly self-conscious at banks where she knows she is being filmed and that she would like to meet the Washington bureaucrat who came up with the design for drive-up mailboxes. Bombeck concludes that her husband points out that she can always just walk in to do her business in these places, but that she would rather grow longer arms.

In "Are Family Vacations Legal," Bombeck explains seven aspects of vacation laws, including the fact that "It is illegal in forty-seven states to leave a child in a rest room and pretend it was a mistake." She says it is also legal to "summon legal aid" on an exit ramp to "dissolve a family relationship," but that the adults should be aware of the fact that, in this case, the children get the car. In "Illegal Possession of Junk Food," Bombeck says that a grade school principal banned junk food though she would have used a subtler approach, such as warning children that fresh fruits will be sold on a trial basis, though if it is discovered that too many students are choosing to buy them the practice will be discontinued. In "The Right to Declare War," Bombeck says that she remains freezing cold "from May until September," and that she once asked her husband whether they were seated in a restaurant or had stumbled into a meat locker by accident. In "Register Camera Nuts," Bombeck says there should be some law to limit who can have a camera. She cites once when her husband points a camera at her hips and clicks, laughing at her and saying that it "wasn't loaded." She says that he will someday "push me too far," and predicts that there is not a jury in the world that would convict her for whatever she does to him at that point.

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Bombeck turns her attention to the new trends for coed dormitories. She says the biggest problems with coed dormitories, in her opinion, is not the "sensuous situations" that can arise from the coed dormitories, but the potential for the young men and women to learn the unappealing habits of their counterparts. She says a young man who learns how often a young lady shaves her legs is a not conducive to furthering a relationship. The young woman who sees the toothpaste dried in the sink is not likely to be anxious for marriage to the young man who left it there.

She talks about the way a parent feels when the child is being touted as the fastest, neatest and best athlete. Bombeck says that a parent in that situation is amazed because that same child is slow, slovenly and clumsy at home. This is fairly typical of how parents feel when they come to realize that their children have lives away from

their parents. Here, as is often the case, Bombeck's stories have serious undertones that are in the hearts and minds of parents everywhere, though the humor is sometimes so strong that these undertones are somewhat overwhelmed.



## Pages 129 - 166

### Pages 129 - 166 Summary and Analysis

In "Gametime," Bombeck says that she watched several hours of game shows and was amazed at the wealth of knowledge that came from the women on these shows. Citing their ability to provide answers to questions on an array of topics that include the "fuel formula for the Russian Soyuz XI space flight," Bombeck says that she has personally "gone to pot" on the mental front. She talks about it later with some friends who say that the game shows are not good for you. She cites her decision to question her husband in the manner of a game show she calls "Break Up a Marriage." Jackie says she asks her husband what the most embarrassing moment of their wedding was and he says it was when their children showed up for the ceremony.

Bombeck then makes up a situation in a game show in which a woman is told she has won a great deal of money, only to discover that it is really Italian Lira, but that she is able to spend it in Rome, only it is not Rome Italy but Rome, New York, and that she will go on her trip wearing a mink coat, only she is disqualified from the coat because it is not her size, and that there is a Swiss bank account in the pocket of the coat but that she is disqualified from the game because she fainted. Bombeck says that she believes there will come a time when game show contestants are forced to undergo training to be certain they are fit for the action.

In "Joe Carter's Jubilation and Excitement Seminar," Bombeck runs through the five aspects of decorum during a game show. These include the ability to become hysterical when the contestant learns he or she has won a car, how to "stay on your feet" during a coronary, and how to "stagger by the IRS men carrying a bag of gold."

In "Fashions and Fads that Underwhelmed Me," Bombeck discusses the various ways fashion trends begin and then talks about some that flopped before they took off, like the "fanny sweater" and the "diaper bikini." She then talks about some that she personally did not care for, like the jumpsuit which never fits correctly because her bust, stomach and hips are all different sizes. Bombeck says that the trend toward platform shoes was particularly painful because the shoes hurt her feet horribly and she would be stuck with them for years because she never throws away shoes until the soles are worn through. On the topic of organized handbags, Bombeck says that her mother is a true zealot, and that Bombeck finds places for false eyelashes and worn-out washers in the bag given to her by her mother, though she complains that she will never again find those objects. She talks at length about some women's tendency to buy only name-brand labels. Bombeck says that she has discovered only one "designer label" on her clothing, and that it was "Inspector 56," a woman whom Bombeck suspects was in charge of sewing zippers onto awnings until she lost her eyesight. Bombeck says that among the other fads she knew were doomed were the tube dress, the Oriental look, and pierced earrings. She says she fainted when her daughter's ears were pierced and the tiny earrings were "hardly worth scrubbing up for."



In "How to Speak Child Fluently," Bombeck says that she was humbled to find her son writing a paper on "Things My Mother Taught Me." His list includes items such as, "Humor. When that lawn mower cuts off your toes, don't come running to me," and "Logic. If you fall off your bicycle and break your neck you can't go to the store with me." Bombeck writes a beautiful analogy about children and kites, saying that kids—like kites—have to be adjusted, picked up, patched up, and given more string, and that their success is bittersweet because it means that they are nearing the time when they will break free. As she finishes, her husband points out that he too thought it a good analogy and just wanted to point out that one of her kites had crashed a car into the garage door, another was arriving with a group of surfer friends, and the third needed some additional string in order to make a trip home from college.

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Bombeck's friend Jackie says she had once watched an entire day's worth of game shows and that the result was her inability to complete dinner because she could not choose between "door No. 1 (the oven), door No. 2 (the freezer) or door No. 3 the cupboard." This is obviously a reference to the popular game show of the period, "Let's Make a Deal." Some readers may not be familiar with the show or the concept of having to choose between the options offered, and will miss the humor of this reference. The same is true when Bombeck's friend Jackie makes a reference to the game show she calls "Break Up a Marriage," but which is really an obvious reference to "The Newlywed Game." The humor here is that several couples who appeared on that show seemed angry at each other after having competed and it is likely that viewers wondered whether some of those contestants wound up divorced after the disaster of their performances on the show. This prompts another reference from Jackie, this time to a made-up show title that she calls, "Trial Separation."

Bombeck talks about the possibility of having a place where parents and children can go to "trade up" if they feel they can do so to their advantage. She says that children always believe that some other parents would be better and that parents always think that some other child with habits less annoying would be better. She poses the possibility at a card game one night and her friends are discussing possible trades, each outlining the good aspects of the various children up for consideration for this trade along with the negatives. Bombeck says that at the end of the evening, they all go home without having traded, and that the exercise made them each feel better about their own children.



## Pages 167 - 213

### Pages 167 - 213 Summary and Analysis

In "Travel Is so Broadening I Bought a Maternity Dress to Wear Home," Bombeck says that she and her husband, in her decision to go on vacation where everyone has not seen her two dresses, decide to go to Europe. Her first preparation is shopping for clothes and she finds some ensembles that will transform into an array of outfits by rearranging the few pieces of clothing, going so far as to show how a halter top can be changed into a girdle. The sales lady tells Bombeck that the clothes weigh eight pounds and the necessary deodorant to keep them fresh weighs thirty-six additional pounds. Bombeck says the tour packages, which are much less expensive than traditional travel, are available because the providers save so much money on the "continental breakfasts" they offer. She says these include "hard rolls" that stick to the waist and jelly that expired forty years ago. She says that the "hard rolls" make the travelers mean after a few days and her husband carves his initials and the year, "1977," into one of the rolls. Meanwhile, Bombeck becomes addicted to gift shops and has a huge array of items by the return date. She says that on the plane as they return, they are given another hard roll with her husband's initials and the year carved into the side. Both she and her husband believe it to be mere coincidence.

In "The Trick is Knowing When to Laugh," Bombeck says that some people believe she writes humor but that she really just has a "low laughter threshold" as she questions things in life, such as why every pen in the house is empty except the one that gets dropped in the washing machine by mistake. Bombeck pledges to use any of the next several essays in a book if she can find anyone who believes them to be funny. The first is "Microphone," and Bombeck questions why microphones seem to have a mind of their own, giving out just at the point the speaker is delivering a punch line and perversely picking up a conversation meant to be private. In "No One Wins," Bombeck questions the reason sportscasters never come out and say which team won a game but use words like "assault, upsets, humiliations, squeakers and routs." In "The Unmailed Letter," Bombeck says she found a letter to her sister that she had forgotten to mail and now felt it would be easy to update it so that it is ready to mail. She crosses out the words "toiled trained" and writes in "graduating high school this month," makes some additional corrections and the letter is ready to send. She says she later gets a letter from her sister who says she is "glad the war is over," but changes that to "Christmas," prompting Bombeck to say she and her sister are both cursed with a "recessive Writer's Cramps."

In "Killing Your Mother," Bombeck says that she has spent her life trying to protect her son from his activities, including riding a bicycle, jumping on a pogo stick, riding a horse and going out for football, only to find him walking out of the house with a skateboard. She cites this as his new way of trying to kill himself and her in the process, and asks why he does not like her.



In "I'm Laughing So Hard I Can't Stop Crying," Bombeck says she was once asked if the Bombeck family is as she portrays them in print. She says they are a typical family and that the last time everyone laughed was when an oven fire forced them to eat out. She says that they yell at each other and are sometimes rude and mean. In "When Did I Become the Mother and the Mother Become the Child?" Bombeck takes a step away from the humor to provide a nostalgic look at the transferring of "power" between the mother and child. She uses the fact of a daughter who is driving and instinctively throws her arm out between her mother and the windshield as the first sign of this change. She cites the mother's lack of willingness to give up control of her own life and the daughter's lack of willingness to take on the responsibilities, but the inevitable ending that it is going to happen regardless of what either does to prevent it.

In "Mike and the Grass," Bombeck tells the story of a father who is upset that his side lawn is victim to his son's sandbox and later to the jungle gym and the inflatable swimming pool. The tiny patch of lawn that tries to grow is beaten down in later years by tennis shoes and basketballs and then by the runners on the many sleds that are dragged across the yard. Through it all, Mike's mother tells his father not to worry about the grass, that "it'll come back." When the yard is finally beautiful and covered with grass, Mike's father does not notice it because he is looking into the distance and hoping that Mike will come back.

In "My Turn," Bombeck says that mothers have waited for their turns as their children and their husbands attend school and then one day those mothers realize that they have missed their turns. Bombeck cites a number of examples of woman who achieved great things relatively late in life. She says that her own turn came when she realized that she no longer "feels fulfilled cleaning chrome faucets with a toothbrush" at the age of thirty-seven. In "Beauty," Bombeck cites her mother's beauty which she says comes in the form of the wrinkles around the lips and on the forehead, the extra skin on the chin and the shrunken finger which shows the signs of having worn a wedding ring for so many years. Bombeck says this particular brand of beauty is not the pampered kind but is the type that cannot be rushed.

In "You Never Loved Me," Bombeck lists a series of things that prove her love for her child—the same child who insists that love was never part of that parent-child relationship. The list includes waiting for the child to discover that a best friend was really a "creep," that she insisted on knowing the child's whereabouts and activities, that she allowed the child to spend Mother's Day at a theme park, and that she pushed the child to stand on his own, earning and learning independence. In "Are You Listening?" Bombeck lists a series of events that had tried her patience until she was at the airport ready to board a plane. When the woman seated next to her begins trying to talk to her, Bombeck feigns interest in a book until the woman says that her husband's body is aboard the plane and that she is accompanying the body to Chicago where their son lives. Bombeck says she relates the story in the hopes of feeling better but that it does not work. In "The Chimes," Bombeck recites the synopsis of a story in which chimes rang only when a perfect gift was placed on the altar. She says her own chimes rang when her children gave her a pair of praying hands made of construction-paper with the words, "OH COME HOLY SPIT" in crayon, or the year the children cleaned out the



garage. She says that her family will have a great Christmas, will eat, share gifts and laughter, but that she wishes she could again "hear the chimes." Bombeck includes an "Epilogue," in which she describes several days with nothing going wrong and her fears that she cannot handle the good times. Her husband is almost as worried when she says that the boys' rooms were cleaned up. As they are talking, they hear a car pull into the drive "and the sickening scrape of a fender when it meets an immovable wall." Bombeck says she and her husband are relieved.

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Bombeck talks about the tendency for people to write to her when there is something for them to gloat about. An example is her friend who always writes a letter from their annual cruise because they know she is envious of them and their trip. She says that another points out their children's accomplishments, such as the fact that their son got a scholarship to Harvard for "being" there and their daughter is going to the Olympics in the baton event. Bombeck seems often to talk about the accomplishments of other children as compared to her own but it is interesting that Bombeck also subtly talks about the positive points of her own sometimes. As she puts it herself, she is not so much searching for humorous things to write about as she is willing to see the humor in all situations.

Bombeck's statements about her son's tendency toward the dangerous sports, including riding his first bicycle, jumping on a pogo stick and riding a horse, result in her getting hurt. She presents it to the reader as a mother trying to protect her child, but what really comes across is an adult getting in the way. She says her son is jumping in the house on a pogo stick and that she winds up between him and the floor.

In "Beauty," Bombeck portrays her impression of her mother's beauty which, according to Bombeck, comes in the form of how her body has responded to the years and rigors of her life. She is again nostalgic in this essay, telling of her mother's life and the difficulties she has faced, raising children, having a husband gone away to war and working outside the home. However, Bombeck's humor is not completely at bay in this essay. She ends it by saying that she had noticed all these things about her mother recently and that she had taken the time to tell her mother how pretty she looked. Her mother snaps back that she "works at it," a direct contradiction to what Bombeck had described.





# Characters

## Erma Bombeck

Author of the book, Bombeck is a woman who believes fully in her need to see the humor in life but is also willing to see the sadness and despair, saying that it makes her more able to appreciate the rest. Bombeck is married and has three children, and she freely admits that there came a point in her life when she was no longer fulfilled and happy spending her days caring for a home. When that time came, Bombeck set out to find a fuller life and says that it was "my turn." With a tendency toward making light of most situations, she also writes several essays that are nostalgic and it is in these that another aspect of her nature shows through. Here, Bombeck admits to longing for a pause in time so that she does not have to take over as the caregiver for her mother or to watch as her children break free and become independent. Her humor is such that many mothers will identify with the stories and her slant on the various aspects of everyday life. She takes those everyday moments—the discovery of her son's gym clothes that have not been washed for ages—and adds a mother's perspective—that the clothes walked into the laundry room on their own, figuratively begging for her help. It is noted at the front of this book that Bombeck is author of a series of similar books and that the essays that make up the majority of this book were written over the course of several years of Bombeck's journalism career.

## Tom Suggs

The man Bombeck says should be nominated as "Father Martyr" because he spends so much time away from home in his quest to provide for his family. She notes that like his wife Lorraine, Tom is told all the good points of his life though he also is criticized by his wife for his time away from home.

## Bombeck's Husband

Though never named, he has some specific traits that Erma Bombeck finds very annoying. For example, she says that her husband hates the thought of having a nail driven into a wall, snores loudly for the sole purpose of keeping her awake, and is always late for everything, including his birth though she admits that she cannot prove that. Her husband seems to have a similar outlook on life, though there are some major differences, including an essay in which he tries to explain to Bombeck the terminology used by sportscasters and why they can never just say that a certain team won.

## Jackie

A friend of Bombeck's, the two are playing cards when Bombeck brings up the notion that she has allowed herself to become mentally run down because she has seen some



women answer difficult questions on game shows. It is Jackie who warns Bombeck not to watch these shows because they are dangerous and then tells the story of watching an entire day of game shows. At the end of that day, she is confused and causes problems in her own marriage by questioning her husband as she had seen done in one of the game shows.

## **Bombeck's Daughter**

Though never named, Bombeck mentions her in several essays. In one, she tells about her daughter's desire to get her ears pierced and Bombeck admits to passing out during the procedure, which takes place at a department store. When she comes to, she finds a small pair of earrings in her daughter's ears, which Bombeck says were hardly worth all the trouble.

## **Brucie**

One of Bombeck's children, this son tells her that he has to have a note for his teacher or he will not be allowed back in school. When Bombeck writes that he was ill with stomach cramps, Brucie objects, saying that he wants his mother to write that he was too sick to watch television. She says that the note writing is a major endeavor at her house, and that she later finds that very note, still sealed and unread, obviously meaning it was also unnecessary.

## **Mike**

Though not identified as one of Bombeck's children, Mike is the topic of an essay in which he asks for various things that will be a detriment to the lawn and his father continues to bemoan the yard that is never green because of the sandbox and, in later years, basketball games and sleds. However, Mike eventually leaves home and his father is no longer interested in the grass, which by now has turned green, because he is worried whether Mike will come home.

## **Lorraine Suggs**

The woman Bombeck says she wants to nominate for recognition as "Mother Martyress." Lorraine fulfills the necessary duties without her husband, who is often away as part of his job. Bombeck points out that most people overlook the negative points of Lorraine's life and point out only the positive.

## Cathie

The girl who writes to Erma Bombeck with questions about why mothers have the ability to see what goes on behind them and why they can hear things that they are not expected to hear. Bombeck responds that it is the only way a mother has of surviving.



# Objects/Places

## I. Dunno

The imaginary child who makes Bombeck crazy by committing all kinds of errors. The "I. Dunno" who lives at Bombeck's has failed to return library books on time and left lights on. She says that this imaginary child has a little brother, "I dontcare."

## Lionel

The research rat described by the author as having survived a myriad of testing experiments until he dies of a heart attack upon having gone for a ride with a teenager of the house.

## Europe

Where Bombeck and her husband go on vacation as the one place her husband believes they can go where no one has seen either of her two dresses.

## Their Son's Room

The room Bombeck initially keeps as a shrine of sorts after her son leaves home but that eventually becomes a television room where odd pieces of furniture are kept.

## The Gym Clothes

The clothing Bombeck says are the biggest pollutants of all and are owned by her children who cite the need for ecological awareness.

## Things My Mother Taught Me

The essay written by Bombeck's son as part of an assignment.

## Hard Rolls

The main part of the continental breakfasts served during the Bombeck's tour of Europe.



## **The Side Yard**

Where Mike's father wants to grow good grass though the yard is trampled by the children's activities.

## **Coed Dorms**

The dorms in which boys and girls live together and that Bombeck says is not a good idea because the young people will learn too much unappealing information about the members of the opposite sex.

## **The Primer for Imaginative Children**

The list of items Bombeck provides for children who are staying at home alone while parents are at work, the "primer" includes tips such as stopping to think about the fact that the dog might need to go out.



# Themes

## The Importance of Humor

Bombeck outright cites the importance of taking a humorous look at life in order to survive the times when there are problems and heartaches. She presents this in an interesting way in the epilogue, one of several parodies used in the book. In this section, Bombeck describes at length a series of days in which nothing goes wrong—the children do not need anything ironed at the last minute, she does not miss a bus, gets the word from the dentist that she has no cavities, and balances her bank book. After several days, Bombeck is crying and her husband seeks to comfort her. It is while they are talking about the fact that this cannot continue and that it is a good thing to have some good times in order to fully appreciate the bad times that one of the children drives the car into the garage wall. This is typical of Bombeck's sense of humor. In another essay, Bombeck talks about the need for humor and she writes a very poignant essay about seeing the beauty in the weathered face and body of her mother. Bombeck talks at length about her mother's body, saying that the wrinkles were earned and that the rigors of her life caused the body to be what it is. She ends that essay by saying that she compliments her mother, telling her that she looks particularly pretty on this particular day, to which her mom responds that she should look good because she works at it.

## The Importance of Family

Bombeck talks about several of her family members, including her three children and her husband. On the topics of the children, Bombeck talks about the negative aspects of her children's personalities, including their slovenliness, the fact that they never appreciate their parents, and their lack of initiative. She says that it would be a good idea to create something of a swap meet, an organized place where parents and children could go if they feel they might be able to "trade up." She poses this idea to a group of friends during a card game one night and the others believe she has a good idea. There is an immediate touting of positives and negatives as the mothers in attendance talk about the possibilities of a trade. While it is obvious that none of them would actually have traded children with someone else, the point is driven home by Bombeck who says that all of them left that night with their own children, and that all of them felt better about their children after having heard the other women tout the faults of their children. Bombeck's dedication to her family is often subtle because of her outward show of humor, but the discerning reader will likely finish any of Bombeck's books with the feeling that Bombeck is very dedicated to her family.



## Coming of Age

In some ways this is a typical "coming of age" book though the theme is less traditional than is seen in some other stories. Bombeck, as the author and the main character, does experience some coming of age moments. For example, she talks about her mother and the fact that the roles of Bombeck and her mother are changing as both come to realize that the "power" of the relationship is being transferred from mother to daughter. Bombeck says that neither wants it to happen and that she pushes her mother to retain her independence despite the fact that she realizes that the situation and its outcome is inevitable. The theme is less traditional in this book because there is no real story line in this series of personal essays. However, the theme becomes more of a traditional theme when the reader learns that Bombeck comes to an immediate realization of the emerging situation on the day she is driving and slams on her brake, instinctively throwing her arm up between her mother and the windshield. That moment results in both mother and daughter understanding the fact of the change of roles. In a similar situation, Bombeck says her own daughter is driving and, when forced to stop suddenly, throws up her arm between Bombeck and the windshield. Bombeck says she cannot imagine that the situation is changing again so quickly, but the coming of age continues as Bombeck realizes that she will pass this power eventually on to her daughter.

# Style

## Perspective

The book is written in first person from a limited point of view though the writer does take some liberties. Bombeck writes from a very personal perspective, aiming to entertain the reader with the humor and her own perception of particular activities and events. This is effective in that the book is written—and meant to read—as a series of personal essays. For the majority of the book, Bombeck is writing as mother and wife. When Bombeck turns her perspective to that of the daughter of an aging mother and as a mother of children who are quickly finding their own ways in the world, she grows more introspective. From this perspective, Bombeck becomes less of a humor writer and more of a student of human nature. In both cases, the writing remains first person and is limited only to what Bombeck wishes to share. There are several instances in which the reader may have unanswered questions because of the point of view. For example, Bombeck talks about taking a job in the workplace and mentions that she has a boss, but does not elaborate and the reader is not privy to the nature of this job. As a rule, these facts are secondary to the purpose of the book—entertainment for the reader.

## Tone

The book is filled with humor, some of it dry to the point that some readers may miss the subtleties but most of it obvious to almost any reader. The book is a series of personal essays that are presented only as a method of entertainment. It should be noted that the copyright lists a series of years which indicate that these essays could have been presented as personal columns during Bombeck's years as a journalist. Taken in this way, it is easy to see each section as a separate and independent story. This makes the book somewhat disjointed and the reader searching for a story line is bound to be somewhat disappointed. While there is no real plot, the essays are tied together by the common thread of the author and the characters which consist mainly of her family. In addition, Bombeck's humor shows through the majority of these essays as Bombeck examines relationships, life and how to survive the difficulties. It should be noted that the story is billed as non-fiction but that Bombeck takes some journalistic license with the stories. For example, she describes a set of gym clothes that had not been washed for years, a situation that is unlikely but that makes the story more humorous by the stretching of the truth.

## Structure

The book is divided into fourteen "sections" that are numbered and titled, but there are several titled chapters that are not included in the numbered chapters. This becomes somewhat confusing because the first chapter is not included in any section. For





example, the first chapter is titled "A Pair of White Socks in a Pantyhose World," and is six pages long. However, the next page is the beginning to "If You Thought the Wedding Was Bad" and this chapter is also numbered. The next chapter is "The Mother Mystique." This chapter is numbered "2" and it is four pages in length. The next is "Who is I. Dunno?" and it is not numbered. The titled and numbered sections begin with a full-page black and white ink outline drawing. These drawings are somewhat humorous in and of themselves. The majority of these chapters are written as independent essays that were likely published as columns. For this reason, not all have the same format. "A Baby's Bill of Rights" is written as something of a parody of the Bill of Rights adopted by the United States. It is effective, especially when she talks about the right of a baby to spit baby food back in the face of the person feeding him without that action being interpreted as "a declaration of war." There is also an essay, reportedly written by her son.

The book is copyrighted 1971-1978. The dates are because some of the stories here were likely originally published as columns for which Bombeck was famous. It should be noted that the book has several instances that could be typographical errors. For example, in "Have a Good Day," Bombeck talks about the "Great Caffeine Drought" of 1942. As she relates this story and her mother's reaction to a lack of caffeine, she is talking to her neighbor, "Lois." But a few paragraphs later, she says that "Carol comforted" her. It seems possible that this could be an instance of Bombeck's more subtle humor, indicating that she cannot remember the name of her neighbor because she has been without caffeine, but it could also be a mistake. It is left to the reader to decide.



## Quotes

"I worry about getting into the 'Guinness World Book of Records' under 'Pregnancy: Oldest Recorded Birth.' I worry what the dog thinks when he sees me coming out of the shower, that one of my children will marry an Eskimo who will set me adrift when I can no longer feed myself."—A Pair of White Socks in a Pantyhose World, p. 3.

"There are no records to prove it, mind you, but I have every reason to believe my husband was an eleven-month baby. And he's been running two months late ever since."—If You Thought the Wedding Was Bad, p. 15.

"A woman starts thinking of a name for her baby from the minute she knows she is carrying one. She will write it out, say it aloud, try it out on her friends, and embroider it on little shirts. When the baby is born she will whisper the name softly in its ear, write it on dozens of announcements, and file it in the courthouse records. A few years and a few kids later, she can't remember who you are."—Haven't I Always Loved Whatshisname Best?, p. 33.

"Once I made up my mind, I interviewed sitters for six months. It's depressing when you realize no one wants to be paid for what you've been doing for years for nothing. I talked with one who could only work until the children came home from school."—Who Killed Apple Pie, p. 46.

"Now there are few things in this world more satisfying than having your son teach you how to play tennis. One is having a semitruck run over your foot."—The Vericose Open, p. 61.

"Before the new math, I had a mysterious aura about me. I never said anything, but my children were convinced I had invented fire."—Warning: Families May be Dangerous to Your Health, p. 90.

"Few will argue that the inspirational words of Francis Scott Key are stirring enough to make Jane Fonda enlist in the Coast Guard. But something has got to be done about the melody of our national anthem before someone hurts himself."—The Hernia Amendment to the National Anthem, p. 109.

"A grade school principal in the East became so upset about the lack of nutrition in the lunches the children were eating that he declared an edict banning junk food from the cafeteria. I have a feeling the kids jammed the edict between two potato chips and two squares of Hershey chocolate and had it for lunch."—Illegal Possession of Junk Food, p. 123.

"I had no intention of giving her my vital statistics. 'Let me put it this way,' I said. 'According to my girth, I should be a ninety-foot redwood.'"—Fashions and Fads that Underwhelmed Me, p. 145.



"I found a letter to my sister the other day that I had forgotten to mail. It just needed a little updating to send. After 'The baby is ...' I crossed out 'toilet trained' and wrote in 'graduating high school this month.'"—The Unmailed Letter, p. 182.

"There is a thin line that separates laughter and pain, comedy and tragedy, humor and hurt. And how do you know laughter if there is no pain to compare it with?"—I'm Laughing So Hard I Can't Stop Crying, p. 190.

"I used to hear chimes. I heard them the year one of my sons gave me a tattered piece of construction paper on which he had crayoned two hands folded in prayer and a moving message, 'OH COME HOLY SPIT.'"—The Chimes, p. 206.



## Topics for Discussion

Describe Bombeck's attitudes about humor, family and life in general. How do these compare with your own?

Who are the members of Bombeck's family as described in this book? What facts can be deduced about these family members from what Bombeck says?

Describe Bombeck's brush with game shows. What is it about the people who can answer the difficult questions on these shows that attracts Bombeck's attention? What is the advice of her friend Jackie with regard to game shows?

Describe Bombeck's brush with various trends, including sports and fashion.

Bombeck dramatically shifts gears from outright humor to a more serious look at life and relationships near the end of the book. What could be the cause for this?

Describe three situations in which Bombeck finds the humor where there might not otherwise be any humor. Bombeck compares the humor and the sadness, saying that you have to have one in order to recognize the other. Is this true? Why or why not?

What is the most important story related by Bombeck in this book? Support your answer.