



#1 *New York Times* bestselling author

Jacquelyn  
Mitchard

Exclusive  
Readers  
Guide

*The*  
Good  
Son

*a novel*

“Rich and complex, *The Good Son* is a compelling novel about the aftermath of a crime in a small, close-knit community.”

—KRISTIN HANNAH,  
*New York Times* bestselling author

# Discover an Epic Story That Speaks to Our Times



**From one of America's most acclaimed storytellers comes a powerful, emotionally-charged novel of family, redemption and a mother's love.**

What do you do when the person you love best becomes unrecognizable to you? For Thea the answer is simple and agonizing: you keep loving him somehow.

Stefan was just seventeen when he went to prison for the murder of his girlfriend, Belinda, a crime he has no memory of committing. Three years later, he's released to a world that refuses to let him move on. Belinda's mother, once Thea's good friend, galvanizes the community to rally against him to protest in her daughter's memory. Neighbors, employers, even some members of Thea's own family turn away.

Meanwhile Thea struggles to understand her son. At times Stefan is still the sweet boy he has always been; at others, he is a young man tormented by guilt and a need to atone. But as his passionate efforts to make amends meet escalating threats, Thea begins to suspect darker forces are at play. If there is so much she never knew about her own son, what other hidden secrets has she yet to uncover—especially the shocking truth about night Belinda died?



# Praise for THE GOOD SON



*"Rich and complex, THE GOOD SON is a compelling novel..."*

—**Kristin Hannah**, #1 New York Times bestselling author

*"A story that is gripping, heart-rending, and quietly devastating"*

—**Christina Baker Kline**, #1 New York Times bestselling author

*"An engrossing story about forgiveness, redemption, and unconditional love."*

—**Lisa Genova**, New York Times bestselling author of *Still Alice* and *Remember*.

*"THE GOOD SON is timely, gripping, suspenseful, and resonant. Mitchard's best yet by far."*

— **Karin Slaughter**, New York Times bestselling author

*"Propulsive, complex and deeply moving, THE GOOD SON may well be Mitchard's finest work yet. I loved this book!"*

— **Karen Dionne**, author of the #1 international bestseller *The Marsh King's Daughter*

*"THE GOOD SON is very good indeed. ... a galloping thriller. A remarkable book."*

—**Scott Turow**

*"Tender, poignant and impossible to put down... I was hooked from the very first sentence."*

—**Jean Kwok**, New York Times bestselling author of *Searching For Sylvie Lee*



# Author's Note



Dear Reader,

There is a game children play called, Would You Rather?

The choices are sometimes ridiculously harrowing: Would you rather be attacked by one six-foot-tall chicken or sixty one-foot-tall chickens?

This novel, *The Good Son*, asks that kind of question, but in a fashion that is heartbreaking: Would you rather lose the one you love most, or have the one you love most do the worst possible thing?

On the surface, the choice seems simple, conclusive, if not easy. Of course, nothing could be as bad as losing the person you love most. And yet, once you allow yourself to think your way into the darkness of the other alternative, if you're honest, you might learn things about yourself you wish you never had occasion to consider.

Years ago, I was standing in the coffee line at a hotel where I was giving a speech when the woman in front of me dropped her book. I picked it up and asked if she was at the convention, but she said, no, she came every week, to visit her son at the nearby prison where he was serving a long sentence. In a drug-induced psychosis, he'd killed the only girl he ever loved. This mom was a lovely person. He was her only child, her only relative on earth. And I wondered, could you still love the one you loved most in the world after he had done the worst thing? Then I realized, you would be the *only* one who could. How many times I thought of that woman I cannot say, but I put off writing a story so anguishing. Finally, however, it wouldn't let me alone.

At the opening of the story, Thea tells us, "I was picking my son up at the prison gates when I spotted the mother of the girl he had murdered. Two independent clauses, joined by an adverb, made up entirely of words that would once have been unimaginable to think, much less say."

# Author's Note



When I consider my decision to write *The Good Son*, I think there has to be a justification for subjecting the readers I cherish to a story that, in so many ways, might seem quite sad. After all, when my own book club chooses the next month's selection, several members always plead, something light, something funny, please! I'm right there, some of the time. And yet, the final choice often is a book that tugs at our hearts and minds in another way, that makes the reader earn the eventual grace through some hard times – a book like this one.

So even if nothing remotely like the events in this story ever happens to you, what this novel finally is meant to be about is how, whether we like it or not, our common humanity connects us all.

Yours Always,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'JR', written over a large, faint, reddish-orange feather illustration that spans diagonally across the page.

# In Conversation with Jacquelyn Mitchard



*You have said that the inspiration for this novel was something that happened almost ten years ago. Why did you decide to write this story, after all?*

I put it aside for a very long time. And when I finally proposed the idea to my agent, he said, well, all of that is very interesting, but how could you ever hope to make any of these people sympathetic to a reader? I was shocked when he said that, because Thea and Stefan, and Jill too, were already very sympathetic to me ... and that's when I realized I was ready to write the novel, because I had already taken these characters to my heart, and it was my challenge to see if I could tell their story well enough to make readers feel that way too.



*Was it difficult to write about Thea and Stefan?*

It seriously was difficult because I had to picture one of my five sons in the position Stefan was in. I didn't even want to imagine it, but that was exactly what I needed to do, beyond talking to people for whom this situation was or had been a reality. You can only imagine so far, and I wanted to get it right.

*Who is the reader you thought of when you wrote this book?*

I write the stories I want to read but haven't found anywhere else. Of course there have been other stories about the aftermath of crimes and the effect of

# In Conversation with Jacquelyn Mitchard



that aftermath on communities, but in most of those books, it's clear where responsibility lay and what the correct outcome would be – what justice looked like, in other words. In this story, none of that is clear; nothing is certain.

***When we understand how critical it is to read about families and what they do for us – and to us – we have better stories. And maybe better families.***

*Why do you contend that writing about families is a deeply subversive act?*

It's supposed to be easy for women to write about family life, and an outrageous act of creativity if a male author ventures into that same territory and manages to get things right. Families, however, are the one thing every human being has in common with every other human being – for good or ill. We're shaped emotionally, historically, politically, economically by the circumstances in which we were raised: There is no more complicated point of origin, no more textured circumstance. It isn't just writing about families that's subversive, however, it's telling the truth about families in prose. Most of the writing done about families leaves so much out, and I think that's out of a quite rightly placed sense of fear – of revealing too much or getting it wrong. When we understand how critical it is to read about families and what they do for us – and to us – we have better stories. And maybe better families.

*What is next up on the horizon?*

Oh, more mayhem, absolutely. I don't know if I could get through a day without wondering at all the shenanigans people get up to ... and exploring the limits of compassion. I should get down to it!

# Discussion Questions



1. The crux of the conflict in this story, as Stefan and his parents understand it, is whether or not he can make a life for himself after his crime and his imprisonment. As Stefan's father Jep says, it was easier somehow when Stefan was in prison – evident proof that he was “paying” for his role in Belinda's death. Now, when Stefan is again in the community, the struggle between their love and their shame is sharpened. How do the actions of a son or daughter inexorably reflect on their parents?
2. Thea never gives up searching for what she thinks of as the “missing piece” in understanding her son. Is it true, however, that what Thea is looking for turns out to be different from what she believes she's looking for? If Thea had been less questioning – at least once Stefan is out of prison -- how would this story have turned out differently?
3. We'd planted an apple tree in the yard when Stefan was born.” (37) In what way is a family a tree?
4. Stefan tells his mother that he wishes he were not their “only,” that he wishes they had a “backup child,” a better brother. What does this story say about the nature of family, and how each of us sometimes must depend on the family we were given, for better or worse?
5. Thea is an intrinsically hopeful person. But even she falters under the weight of the turn her life has taken because of Stefan's crime. How do you feel about Thea's anger toward Stefan for affecting her own life with the choices he made?



# Discussion Questions



6. It may not be fair that one event defines an individual's whole life, particularly if that one event takes place when the person is young. We like to think of ourselves as believing in rehabilitation, redemption, the chance that a person could really change. But do we really live those ideals?
7. "But even when I would hear his low voice coming from his room late at night, the sound of his crying, I let myself bless those noises, too. Even grief is feeling, I thought. And feeling outflanks numbness." (104) Have there been times in your own life when you simply could not make it better for someone you loved? Are Thea's emotions in this situation authentic to what you felt?
8. Stefan's Healing Project is the manifestation of his own longing to be allowed to prove his contrition and his worth. He wants to offer that chance to others who have done wrong. Is it really the case, as Thea thinks in her despair, that nothing can truly repair the damage done, because it's impossible to turn back time? Does that mean Stefan is foolish to try?
9. Some readers say that Julie, Thea's best friend, is one of their favorite characters in the novel. If we are lucky enough to have a Julie in our lives, what is it about that friendship that makes it so precious?
10. What Thea experiences is, in a sense, survivor's guilt. If you were Thea, given what you knew, would you be able to love your son and get past the enormity of his crime? For a moment, at a few places in the story, Thea is even frightened of Stefan. Can you see this being something a mother might truly experience in such an anguished circumstance?

# Discussion Questions



11. Throughout the novel, Thea seems desperate to find another story to explain Belinda's death, even as she seems to stoically accept what Stefan did. Why does she continue to cling to such a possibility?
12. Experts on grief say that there are recognizable steps to the acceptance of the finality of tragedy. Admittedly, Thea would like to skip some of those steps and go directly to Sort-of-Happily-Ever-After. Do you see around you a similar impatience with the process of healing or grieving? Have you felt this yourself?
13. *The Good Son* is a mother-and-child story, but Thea's husband, Stefan's father Jep, is also an important character. How does Jep change throughout the course of the narrative?
14. Rebecca is a minor character in the story, but someone who has a great deal of influence. What did Rebecca have to teach to Thea and to Stefan?
15. The character of Jill McCormack is complex and many-layered. A minister's daughter, an accomplished athlete, she seems to have led a life based on living up to a standard of goodness, even turning her tremendous loss of Belinda into a cause to prevent dating violence against young women? But is there a darker side to Jill as well? If so, what does that look like?