

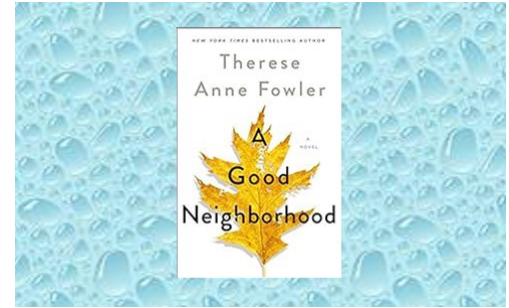
A Good Neighborhood

Therese Anne Fowler, 2020

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Summary

In Oak Knoll, a verdant, tight-knit North Carolina neighborhood, professor of forestry and ecology Valerie Alston-Holt is raising her bright and talented biracial son, Xavier, who's headed to college in the fall.

All is well until the Whitmans—a family with new money and a secretly troubled teenage daughter—raze the house and trees next door to build themselves a showplace.

With little in common except a property line, these two families quickly find themselves at odds: first, over an historic oak tree in Valerie's yard, and soon after, the blossoming romance between their two teenagers.

A Good Neighborhood asks big questions about life in America today—what does it mean to be a good neighbor? How do we live alongside each other when we don't see eye to eye?—as it explores the effects of class, race, and heartrending love in a story that's as provocative as it is powerful. (*From the publisher.*)

Book Club Questions for A Good Neighborhood

- The story is written in a Greek Tragedy style—we're told there's a funeral so we know something awful will happen to a character. What did you think about this writing style and how it gave hints of what was to come?
- Xavier, Valerie, Juniper, Brad and Julia all meet each other early on in the novel. What were your initial impressions of these characters? Did that change at all as the book went on?
- Xavier and Juniper are drawn to each other—let's talk about their connection. Do you think it will simply be teenager crushes or do you think they truly fell in love?
- Valerie sues Brad, their builder and the city for the destruction of the tree that is so significant to her. Let's talk about how everything changed after that lawsuit.
- Valerie says to Xavier: "I've had a lot of practice coexisting with people who've got nothing but disdain for who I am and what I've done with my life, the choices I've made, the issues I supported. I don't care if Brad Whitman likes me, I care about what's right." Let's discuss this more in-depth.
- Julia comes from a trailer park upbringing and now married to Brad she can have anything she wants—as far as material possessions. But she turns a blind eye to Brad's true behavior and nature. Do you think she should have sensed that he was a predator and focusing on Juniper? Or do you think Brad hid that side of him?
- How might things have been different if Juniper told her mother when Brad kissed her?

- Brad and Julia are very strict with Juniper—even making her take a purity pledge. Let’s talk about how Brad used religion to control and manipulate Juniper. Julia was strict with Juniper so she wouldn’t follow in her footsteps—let’s talk about that.
- Let’s talk about that purity portrait of Brad and Juniper—how did it represent their “relationship”?
- At one point, the narrator says that “Brad Whitman was an all-or-nothing kind of guy. In that way, he and Xavier were alike.” What do you make of that statement? Do you agree? Why or why not?
- Xavier and Juniper are interrupted by Brad when they’re having sex—Brad and Xavier fight a bit. And then Brad manipulates the situation and gets the DA to file rape charges against Xavier. This happens in lightning speed and it’s all a ploy to eventually get Valerie to drop her lawsuit. Let’s discuss this turn of events.
- What did this show about the influence of money and power? What was the bigger message the author was trying to say in regards to the treatment of African American men in the justice system?
- We’re made to believe that Xavier shoots Brad, and he considers it, but he realizes he’ll be even more vilified in the media. So instead Xavier commits suicide. Why did Xavier think this was his only choice?
- What’s next for Juniper? What did you think about the ending overall?