

## Reading Group Guide

### Discussion Questions

1. Discuss the use of third person plural in the opening chapter—how did this affect your expectations at the outset? Why do you think the author chose to use this voice?
2. What role does the concept of perfection play throughout this story? How does it influence the characters' decision-making, their relationships, their day-to-day lives? How do you relate?
3. “It’s hard...The things you don’t know” (26). The author maintains a degree of mystery throughout the beginning of the novel, with characters, including Nicole, questioning what’s real and what isn’t. We learn plenty about Nicole’s neighbors but very little about Nicole. Vital information is frequently withheld. What do you wish these characters had shared with each other? How would better communication have changed the events and outcome of this story?
4. What methods, besides statements of thought, does the author use to immerse the reader in Nicole’s mind? What techniques does she use to bring Nicole’s voice to life? How does she perceive the world, her neighbors, her family?
5. How does the past influence each of the characters in this book? The story overall? Discuss the presence of the past throughout *Good Neighbors*, what Nicole describes as something “impossible to write off, even when you knew that you should” (49).
6. “When you’re happy, you have so much more to lose” (130). Do you agree or disagree with Penny’s statement? Discuss how this theory permeates the novel and its characters—how everyone seems determined to not be happy but merely satisfied with their lives, constantly putting up a front and pretending everything is fine and normal. What do they have to lose by telling the truth?
7. So much of *Good Neighbors* is about the relationship between parents and their children, “growing taller and more confusing with each passing year” (244). Did you find these relationships to be similar to your experiences as children and/or parents?
8. *Good Neighbors* is a sharp critique of many things—privilege, uniformity, perfectionism, racism, bigotry, secrecy. How do these critiques resonate with the world today? How do each of the characters embody these traits?
9. “Good neighbors. Like family.” What strikes you about the last line of the book? How do you feel it ties the story together? Discuss its impact and your reaction to it.
10. By the end of the book, how do you think Nicole has changed from the person we met at the beginning of the story? How has she remained the same? What do you think happens to Nicole and her family after we’ve turned the last page?

## Q & A with Joanne Serling

### **What initially inspired you to write *Good Neighbors*?**

I was a youngish mother when I started to write fiction and maybe because I felt like a “stranger in a strange land,” I found myself drawn to themes about motherhood, class, and the subtle dynamics of group friendships. The idea for *Good Neighbors* grew out of my own questions about fate and “good enough parenting.”

### **What was the process of writing this kind of novel?**

The novel began its life as a short story. When I brought a draft to my writing group, they embraced the story and kept asking for more, so I kept going. It took about two years to get a good working draft and then, after a fruitless agent search, another year to deepen the themes and expand some of the story lines.

### **How did you find Nicole’s voice? What do you like about her? Dislike?**

Nicole’s voice evolved with the story. At first she was more hidden, both from the reader and I think from myself. I’d conceived the original story as told by a large, third person, plural narrator (very much like the one that’s now used in the novel’s prologue and epilogue.) When I went back in to deepen the book’s themes, I understood that Nicole had to be more fully revealed and decided to switch to a first person narrator that could convey Nicole’s secretive and indecisive personality. Once I knew how to portray Nicole on the page, I found the story flowed more easily. I always felt deep compassion for Nicole, for her vulnerability and her desire to do the right thing, even when she doesn’t trust herself to do it.

### **Why did you choose the title “Good Neighbors”? Were there any other contenders?**

For a long time, the working title of the novel was *Notes on How to Behave with an Adopted Child*. I liked the inherent skepticism that this phrase conveyed, and it helped me stay focused on what was, to me, the most important thread of the story: the fate of the adopted girl, Winnie. But alas, that was not a title that could ever realistically appear on a book jacket. My agent came up with the title, *Good Neighbors*, which I think beautifully illustrates why she’s such a great agent: she can sell an idea and she’s incredibly insightful.

### **Do you think you gravitate toward certain themes as a writer? What are they, and why?**

I’m always attracted to the idea of being an outsider, both as a reader and a writer. What appealed to me about *Good Neighbors* in particular, was that both Nicole and Winnie are basically outsiders, and I could play with the way that Nicole over-identifies with her neighbor’s daughter and occasionally fails her own children as a result.

### **Which authors do you admire?**

I have so many favorite books and writers that there are too many to name (Elena Ferrante, Meghan Daum, Edith Wharton, Jane Gardam, Junot Diaz, Curtis Sittenfeld, Meg Wolitzer, Adam Haslett, and Lily King are a few that come to mind quickly.) However, I think there were certain writers and books that definitely influenced me as I was wrapping my head around the ideas in *Good Neighbors*, most notably *Mrs. Bridge* by Evan S. Connell, and everything ever written by Alice McDermott. The first time I read *Mrs. Bridge* I ran to my local library and tried to write a modern version of the book. Understandably, I got stuck around chapter four. I failed to grasp how nuanced and deeply observed his masterpiece was, and didn't yet have my own Mrs. Bridge fully developed in my mind. But I held on to the idea of short, episodic chapters about domestic life and came back to that form when I landed on this story. I had a similar reaction when I read *That Night* by Alice McDermott. I had never read a book before that slowly and beautifully unwrapped a single event, vividly revealing the characters and setting in the process. I remember ordering all of McDermott's books after that and just devouring them, trying to figure out her secret. In the end, I realized her secret is that she's a truly great writer, one that I can't hope to imitate anytime soon, but that exercise really grounded me in the idea that the ordinary can be made extraordinary with enough love and connection to the material.

### **Why did you write *Good Neighbors*?**

I wanted to explore the terms of denial that people employ to help them navigate their daily lives, both as individuals and as part of a group. I was curious to find out whether the membrane of acceptability could keep getting stretched thinner and thinner and still remain intact, or if at some point, there would be a breaking point—and a reckoning. Trying to find that outer edge between acceptable behavior and amorality was what made the writing exciting—and a little bit frightening.