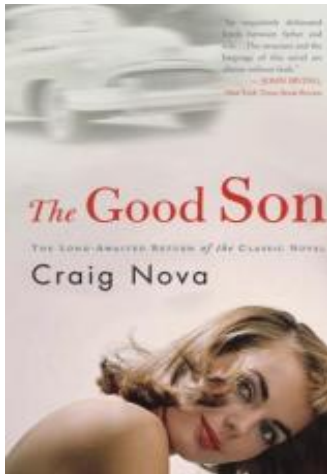


# The Good Son: A Novel

by Craig Nova

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## About the Book

"**The Good Son** is the work of an artist in full command, and those of you entering it for the first time can only be envied."

--- From the foreword by Jonathan Yardley

Chip Mackinnon returns from World War II a changed man. After being shot down over the desert and imprisoned by the enemy, the world of privilege to which he belongs seems shallow. But in the shadow of his older brother's death, the full weight of his father's expectations falls on Chip. Pop Mackinnon --- whose money is new but just as good as anyone else's --- has designs on the upper echelons of society. The polo ponies and expensive education he bought for his son weren't gifts; they were an investment in the family's future. Now it's time for Chip to pay him back by marrying a girl who can finally bring the Mackinnons into society's inner circle.

A shrewd and cunning man, Pop is used to getting his way --- until the arrival of Jean Cooper, that is. This Midwestern beauty awakens Chip's passions, and the two embark on an affair that threatens to destroy Pop's social-climbing plans. A battle of wills between father and son ensues, one that tests the boundaries of their relationship and strays into the place where love turns irrevocably to hate.

Originally published in 1982 to wide acclaim, **The Good Son** remains Craig Nova's undisputed masterpiece. This classic of contemporary American literature artfully explores the complicated web of emotions that exists between fathers and sons --- ambition, jealousy, loyalty, love --- in a tale that compels with its simple, searing honesty.

## Discussion Guide

1. When Wade defies Pop to bring supplies to Chip in the stone house, Pop wants to know why Wade is willing to take

such a risk to help Chip. Wade explains simply that Chip used to go with him to the movies, and that he "appreciated it." Why, as a child, was his friendship with Chip so important to Wade?

2. Mrs. Mackinnon, though a relatively quiet character, contributes a significant portion of the text in the novel through **Mrs. Mackinnon's Book of Animals, Reptiles, Plants, Trees, Birds, Bugs, and Flowers**. What do these sections say about her character and her role in her family? Discuss the narrative progression that takes us from her admiration of the graceful mayflies (and her admission "I am not a pretty woman") to her disgust for crows and melancholy observation of the noncommunicative bears.

3. Jean and Chip are separately faced with threats they must stare down to defeat: Jean with her taunting invitation to the men who follow her at the town picnic; Chip with his brazen stance in front of the hunters who want to do him harm. What do these experiences have in common? Are they evidence of bravery or acts of desperation? What emboldens each to act as she or he does? In their respective situations, are Jean and Chip bluffing?

4. When she accepts Chip's proposal for the second time, why does Carolyn Cooke describe herself as "damaged goods"?

5. Is there one narrator you trust more than the others? Are there any pieces of the story you would have liked to hear from a different narrator?

6. What is the meaning behind Jean's expression, "sugar"? From Jean's narration, we know that this is sometimes uttered against her will, even as she struggles to control her words and gestures and subdue the urge to scream. How much control does Jean really have? Do you think her mother's training has been effective or destructive?

7. When Mr. Moore decides to quietly champion Jean and Chip, he asks himself how much responsibility he takes in doing so?and whether he will be blamed if the worst should come to pass. How does this compare to the way other characters contemplate the consequences of their actions? What do Moore's actions themselves (arming Jean with his knife, watching Pop on his walks toward the cabin) and the risks they incur say about his feelings toward Jean and the Mackinnons?

8. Why do you think Nova chose to begin the novel as he does, interweaving Chip's reflections on prison camp with his memories of that frightening drive above the Delaware? How do these experiences inform Chip's later life and your reading of the novel? Do you think that you, as a reader, would have had a different experience with the book if it had begun in the voice of another narrator?

9. Why does Pop derive so much satisfaction from his arguments with Chip? To what extent does his pleasure depend on his own victory?

10. Pop admires the boa constrictor for its method of killing, which he explains is not by violent squeezing but by patient, controlled elimination of slack on a victim's exhalation. Do you see Pop applying this lesson in his arguments with Chip? Does this theme come into play elsewhere in the novel?

11. What attracts Jean and Chip to each other? How much would you attribute their mutual attraction simply to their respective circumstances, and how much to a deeper bond? What role does physical attraction play in their relationship?

**12.** Discuss the role of violence in Chip's life: Pop's punches after Chip commandeers the Buick; Gene Moore's gun to his chest; Jean's desire to leave physical marks on his body. Does Chip in any way invite such actions? How does he respond to them?

**13.** In many ways, Pop's life is driven by ritual, but he is also at times remarkably resilient. For instance, he seems sincerely amused to set up camp in a tent while the farm is being rebuilt. Are there other personality traits of his that surprise you as the story progresses? What are Pop's weaknesses?

**14.** Chip's romance with Jean is the first significant part of his life that is not directed by or against his father, and this new independence is infuriating to Pop and empowering to Chip. But after Jean's departure, Chip returns fairly quickly to his previous plans, falling back into line as the "good son" by renewing his attentions to Carolyn. In the end, what role has Jean played in Chip's development as a man? Is the relationship good for him?

## Author Bio

## Critical Praise

"[Nova's fiction] is so powerful, so alive, it is a wonder that turning its pages doesn't somehow burn one's hands."

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### **The Good Son: A Novel**

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