

# The Good Son

by Jacquelyn Mitchard

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## About the Book

**From #1 *New York Times* bestselling author Jacquelyn Mitchard comes the gripping, emotionally charged novel of a mother who must help her son after he is convicted of a devastating crime.**

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

Stefan was just 17 when he went to prison for the drug-fueled murder of his girlfriend, Belinda. 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. The media paints Stefan as a symbol of white privilege and indifferent justice. Neighbors, employers, even some members of Thea's own family turn away.

Meanwhile, Thea struggles to understand her son. At times, he is still the sweet boy he has always been; at others, he is a young man tormented by guilt and almost broken by his time in prison. But as his efforts to make amends meet escalating resistance and threats, Thea suspects more forces are at play than just community outrage. And if there is so much she never knew about her own son, what other secrets has she yet to uncover --- especially about the night Belinda died?

## Discussion Guide

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?
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?
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?

## Author Bio

*New York Times* bestseller Jacquelyn Mitchard's novels include THE DEEP END OF THE OCEAN, TWELVE TIMES BLESSED and THE BREAKDOWN LANE. She is also the author of THE REST OF US: Dispatches from the Mother Ship, a collection of her newspaper columns. She lives with her husband and six children in Madison, Wisconsin.

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