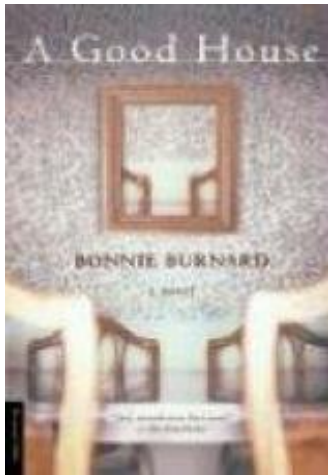


A Good House: A Novel

by Bonnie Burnard



About the Book

This widely acclaimed debut novel, so gorgeously yet simply told, depicts no fewer than fifty years in the life of—and in the many familiar lives of—the Chambers family of Stonebrook, Ontario. As Louisa Kamps wrote in *The New York Times*: "Burnard soon proves, in this increasingly intricate and rewarding book, to have a keen appreciation for the sad, surprising, joyous, important things that happen to people whose lives, by every demographic measure, could be called normal in the extreme. . . . Her painstaking focus on seemingly mundane details makes the events that shape her characters' lives not only believable but also somehow bigger than the moment, universally true." An award-winning bestseller that first appeared in Canada in 1999, **A Good House** is extraordinarily moving, beautifully crafted, and unforgettable.

Discussion Guide

1. Given Margaret's pragmatic approach to her life, her awareness of the ways in which "a life gets built," and in particular her cool-headed decision to marry the widowed Bill Chambers, discuss the decades of love she offers to the Chambers family. How does her love show itself? Is it applied differently to different members of the family? How does it change as she gets older and more experienced in her step-motherhood?
2. Like many families of this time and place, the Chambers family, with the exception of Murray's first wife Charlotte, practices emotional restraint in the face of turmoil. Some conversations, for instance the one between Margaret and Patrick about Sylvia's skill as a softball player, begin in one decade and end several decades later. Compare this with the modern assumption that blunt honesty is best and that every ugly detail should be openly discussed.

3. Before she dies, Sylvia's discipline allows her to talk to her children honestly. She seems to be saying to them: "Yes, I am dying, but you still have lives to live, and this matters, too." Do you think Sylvia's approach is rare or common? Explain.
4. Discuss Daphne's fall from the trapeze. Could learning at such a young age that little stands between happiness and catastrophe feasibly affect the style and substance of Daphne's life? Compare Sylvia and Bill's responses to Daphne's fall.
5. Before the emotional strain of raising Meg and then, even more horrible, Paul's accidental death, Andy seems to have a natural capacity for joy. Does that quality leave her entirely-or is there evidence of her younger self later on? Compare the arc of her life with the other women in the novel. Do these women each have an 'essential self' that is tempered by time and fate or do they create new selves as they age?
6. While almost all of the characters are faced with hard individual challenges over the fifty-year span of **A Good House**, the family as a whole is most severely altered by the deaths of Sylvia and Paul and by Bill's dementia, which is a death of personality or selfhood. How does this family survive each death? In this respect, discuss the nuances of the word "survival."
7. In his young middle age, Patrick has a tendency to want to bring moral order to the life of this family. What is his motivation? Is it honorable? Why does this most careful and most judgmental character engage in an extramarital affair that could only be called superficial?
8. After Patrick's first wife, Mary, has surgery for breast cancer, Margaret insists that Patrick accompany her to the hospital to see Mary, as if she is taking a boy by the ear. Margaret alone seems to be aware of a kind of love that can forget or leap over past insult, past complexity, past heartache. Are gestures of forgiveness usually prompted by fear of something more horrid (in this case the death of the mother of Patrick's children)? Is there a connection between Margaret's insistence here and her pragmatic approach to marrying Bill years earlier? Explain your views.
9. Late in his life, Bill Chambers suffers not from Alzheimer's but from a more common, generalized dementia that alters his personality in very significant ways. Discuss the responses of his wife, children, and grandchildren to this altered state. Who among them has the hardest adjustment to make? Having known Bill Chambers when he was young-and more truly himself-how did you respond to his casual cruelty, his demands, his aggression? Compare him to the standard "evil" character in other novels while also discussing the nature of individual responsibility.
10. In the years immediately preceding the start of the story, North America suffered its most devastating depression-and then came World War II, in which Bill served. With this in mind, compare the expectations, both material and spiritual, of the novel's first generation-Bill, Sylvia, and Margaret-with the expectations of the younger characters.
11. The ending of **A Good House** features talk, laughter, music, dancing, food, gorgeous clothes, and beautiful pictures, both still and moving. Though no one at the wedding dance tries to pretend that their shared lives have been idyllic, there is nevertheless a feeling of celebration and hope. Does this situation give the novel a cliched "happy ending" quality? Explain why you do or do not think so.

Author Bio

A resident of London, Ontario, Bonnie Burnard is the author of two award-winning story collections. **A Good House** is her first novel. A number one bestseller in Canada, it received the 1999 Giller Prize, one of Canada's most prestigious literary awards; previous winners include Alice Munro and Margaret Atwood.

Critical Praise

"Wondrous. . . Burnard unrolls the tapestry of the narrative without ceremony or writerly pyrotechnics, in a deceptively simple style reminiscent of **The Bird Artist** by Howard Norman. . . All that life has to offer is served up effortlessly, with clarity, understanding, and insight."

A Good House: A Novel

by Bonnie Burnard

Publication Date: October 5, 2001

Paperback: 320 pages

Publisher: Picador

ISBN-10: 0312420323

ISBN-13: 9780312420321