



Sandra Newman

The Only Good Thing Anyone Has Ever Done
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The structure of your book must have made some parts of the novel easier to write than others. Would you talk about the various surprises and difficulties in creating such an unusual narrative?

All parts of the novel were impossible to write, I seem to remember. If there was a main surprise, it must have been that it worked. I don't think it was any more difficult than a conventional narrative: in fact for me "experimentalism" arises when it seems like the shortest distance between two points — that is, it's easier than writing something in what would seem like the normal way.

The way in which the story is told allows readers to experience events similarly to *Chrysalis* — with a gentle striving to make bizarre events digestible. Was this your intent? What feelings did you hope to evoke and why?

I think all events are bizarre and indigestible, and as soon as we experience them we turn them into something else — my numbered lists are just one way of representing this. I liked that way of showing the interface between human and world because, I guess, it made everything seem very simple and important and clean. I was trying not to evoke any feelings at all, just understandings, but of course the feelings get evoked willy-nilly. If one feeling was more welcome than others in my choice of narrative form, I would say it was a feeling of safety.

In the *New York Times*, Mayla Goldberg described Eddie's voice as a "deadly amalgam of a Mamet salesman and one of David Foster Wallace's *Incandenzas*." Would you describe Mamet or Wallace as writers who have influence you? What contemporary writers do you admire the most?

Wallace has actually, I blush to admit, influenced me, and in fact I was reading *Infinite Jest* at a certain point during the writing of the book. Mamet I never really felt one way or the other about, so I don't read/see much of his work. I don't particularly admire any writers, contemporary or otherwise. Since I am a writer, I am aware that writing well is not that mystical, and reserve my admiration for people who do things I do not understand, where at least there is some slim chance that their ability rests upon real merit.

A strong appreciation and respect of the absurd runs throughout this book, which evokes humor in readers but not at the cost of emotional attachment to the characters. What is the role of comedy in your work? Is it intentional or does it just happen?

Generally the comedy just happens, although I was conscious in writing Eddie's dialogue that he had to make jokes continuously. So you sit for twenty minutes crafting some wisecrack the character is supposed to be making in real time. It takes an hour to write five lines of dialogue. Then the phone rings and I shoot off a series of wisecracks without thinking twice. I think if there is a special role of comedy in my work, it is simply that I find everything is actually humorous if it is seen with deep understanding.

What is your next project?

My next project is a book written in an apparently more conventional form. While I think of *The Only Good Thing...* as being about goodness, the next book is about evil, i.e. the question, What does it mean to be evil (if anything)? It's also about murder, on a more superficial level, and specifically how we live with the information that a loved one is a murderer, that a loved one has been murdered, or, least welcome of all, that I have murdered. It also explores the relationship between evil and insanity — if we say that evil is actually a kind of insanity, I mean, that is not the same as saying evil does not exist. But then I'm not saying that, so it's a bit of a red herring. My narrator also ends up in an actual *menage a trois*, which I think is sufficient reason all by itself to buy and read the book.