



William Kowalski

The Good Neighbor
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This is not a book about ghosts, but there are connections to the dead and their influence on the living. Do you want readers to believe the spirits are real, or let them take from it what they will?

The Good Neighbor is certainly not intended to be a ghost story in the sense that the ghosts take center stage. But I do want readers to feel the presence of these spirits, in much the same way that I believe spirits are felt in our daily lives—subtly, in the background, without being ostentatious. In many

cultures, this question wouldn't even bear asking; it's taken for granted that the spirits of our departed ancestors are still a part of our lives.

The mysterious river at the center of your story is unnamed. Is it because the town itself is fictional, or did you want to add to its mystique?

At the point where the river is nearest the house, it's really more of a large stream—even though I refer to it as a "river". I think this might be because I lived in the West for so many years, where any trickle of water larger than your thumb is referred to as a river. But I think "mystique" is the right word, because I envisioned the setting of this story as being isolated enough that the river, in this particular place at least, never had a name to begin with. This helped establish the contrast between the Harts' life in Manhattan and their new country home.

Do you see a happily-ever-after for any of the characters?

I don't believe in happily-ever-after. But I see Francie as having removed her blinders, or perhaps sidestepping whatever was blocking her, depending on which metaphor one prefers. And I see Colt as having learned some valuable lessons about how no man is an island, and that there are more important things in life than earning lots of money. If they were real people, one could imagine that they might fare better in the years ahead, or at least find a greater degree of contentment.

Why do your stories often trace the effects of the past on the present?

Because this is the very issue I seek to understand, both in my writing and in my life. Or perhaps I should say that I seek to bring a greater awareness of this to my readers, since I feel like I have one foot in the present and the other in some distant time before any of us were here. I feel that in the modern world, we don't pay enough attention to subtleties—the presence of spirits, the importance of our own past. The appreciation of history is not a dynamic activity. It doesn't bring any material reward, so it gets overlooked. This is partly because we Americans scarcely have any past to speak of as a nation, and to contemplate the true history of this country—the peoples who once lived here, and the genocide committed upon them—is too much for most of us to grasp, so we just don't talk about it. But we do have much to gain from studying how present circumstances are an effect of past actions—not just as individuals, but as a culture.

We can understand why Francie falls for Colt; she needs to feel protected. But what draws Colt to Francie?

Colt is simply one of those men who need to be a protector. Some men derive a great deal of satisfaction from this. On the up-side, it can provide a safe environment for the ones they love. On the down-side, it can lead to possessiveness and an overemphasis on accumulating wealth, under the guise of being a good provider. Men need to find a balance in their lives between wealth-building and spending time with family; some men even use work as an excuse to avoid the complications of relationships. Success in business can often lead to failure at home. Humans are only capable of so much. Francie is really a symptom of Colt's problem, just as he is a symptom of hers.