



The Only Good Thing Anyone Has Ever Done

By Sandra Newman
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Introduction

When Chrysalis Moffat and her brother Eddie inherit a mansion on the coast of California, Eddie hatches a plan to fleece credulous Californians of their cash by starting the fraudulent Tibetan School of Miracles. With Ralph as the would-be guru and miracle worker, the 'school' quickly becomes more successful than anybody first imagined.

But something else is happening. As Chrysalis begins to discover her adoptive father's secret past, her own identity begins to unravel. Was it actually in Peru that she was born? What has the CIA got to do with it? Who is Denise Cadwallader? At the same time, Chrysalis is being drawn into Ralph's strange and compelling world: a realm of mind-blowing coincidence, obsessive gambling and mysterious siblings.

It is a rare that novels come as intelligent and as funny. Newman reveals a subtle understanding of human nature and our philosophical dilemmas, while at the same time charting a hilarious roller-coaster ride through the flotsam of American pop culture: from Californian Buddhist retreats to the temples of gambling, from secret agents to UFOs, and then around the corner to the parking lot of the nearest 7-11.

At its core, *The Only Good Thing Anyone Has Ever Done* is a novel about self discovery. As Chrysalis lays down the facts of her life, she gambles her identity against the contractions, half-truths and fables of her past, leading her to ultimately question what it is we can truly know, and whether it is fate or chance that dictates our lives.

Questions for Discussion

1. What does the author achieve by telling the story in such an unorthodox way, with time jumps, lists, unique punctuation, etc.?
2. Does Chrysalis's admission of mental illness affect your trust in her as a narrator? Do you believe her story, even as it becomes more unusual? Why? Chrysalis's inner world is sometimes filled with contrarian, contradictory simultaneous impulses (i.e. her response to Ralph's "We must try to stay together" at the end). Taking into account her childhood, why do you think she responds this way? How does it affect you as a reader?
3. Chrysalis often numbers (1, 1.1, 1.2, etc.) sections of her story. Why does she do this? She uses this technique more often in the beginning of her story than at the end. What does this suggest about the change in her emotional state?
4. When Chrysalis and Eddie's mother dies, Eddie turns the family mansion into a grand con artist scheme -- The Tibetan School of Miracles, complete with fake guru, Ralph. Chrysalis at first merely goes along with the sham and then actively participates. What does this reveal about their characters? About their relationships with each other and with the greater world?
5. How are the "believers" at the Tibetan School of Miracles portrayed? Do you see similarities in their behavior to real-life followers of alternative religions? Of traditional religion? How does the author keep us sympathetic to the con artists -- Ralph, Eddie, and Chrysalis -- who are taking advantage of their trusting patrons?
6. The theme of enlightenment and revelation runs throughout the book. Sometimes it is treated with skepticism (i.e. Tibetan School of Miracles) and sometimes in a matter-of-fact way (Denise is abducted by aliens). Do any of the characters achieve enlightenment or experience a genuine spiritual awakening? Discuss the significance of Chrysalis's name.
7. How do Chrysalis's memories of her father compare to those of her mother? To what degree are her feelings about her parents and her role in the family, and the world, resolved through the act of writing this book?
8. How does Ralph's mother compare to Chrysalis and Eddie's and Denise's father to John Moffat? Are these characters' parents responsible for their problems (for example, Eddie's random cruelty and grandiose selfishness, Chrysalis's mental breakdowns, Ralph's manipulation)? Discuss how these parents' secret lives become the catalysts in Chrysalis, Eddie, Ralph, and Denise's lives.
9. One of the recurring headlines in the book is "You Can't Go Home Again" or variations of it. Why? How is *The Only Good Thing...* similar to Thomas Wolfe's *You Can't Go Home Again*? How do the headlines affect your reading of each section?
10. Though the characters do not particularly seek out "truth," they seem destined to find it. What does "truth" mean in *The Only Good Thing...* and what role does it play in the narrative?
11. Chrysalis craves love, particularly from Eddie; Eddie claims Denise is the only woman he's ever loved; Denise believes loving her is ill-fated. What role does love, and the quest for love, play in their lives? Which characters find love?
12. What is the "only good thing anyone ever did?" Are there any other "good" deeds in *The Only Good Thing...*?

About the Author

Born in America, Sandra Newman has lived in Germany, Russia, Malaysia, and England. Her professions have included copyediting, gambling, and typing. A student of the late W. G. Sebald, she now devotes herself to writing full-time. Sandra Newman lives in New York.