STUTTGART BOOK CLUB READING GUIDE

***How to be Good* by Nick Hornby**

About This Book

Katie Carr is a good person. She recycles. She's against racism. She's a good doctor, a good mom, a good wife....well, maybe not that last one, considering she's having an affair and has just requested a divorce via cell phone. But who could blame her? For years her husband's been selfish, sarcastic, and underemployed, writing the "Angriest Man in Holloway" column for their local paper.

But now David's changed. He's become a good person, too—really good. He's found a spiritual leader. He has become kind, soft-spoken, and earnest. He's even got a homeless kid set up in the spare room. Katie isn't sure if this is a deeply-felt conversion, a brain tumor—or David's most brilliantly vicious manipulation yet. Because she's finding it more and more difficult to live with David—and with herself.

Discussion Questions

1. In what ways are the notions of what it means to be "good" explored in this novel? How do Katie and David Carr each represent—or defy—these notions? Discuss the role of "goodness" in the couple's relationship to each other, their children and their community.

2. Vocation plays a central role in the characterizations of both Katie and David. Compare his work at the outset of the novel ("The Angriest Man in Holloway" columnist) to her job (Katie Carr, GP). To what extent is each defined by what they do? How does their relationship to their work change as their marriage stumbles?

3. In what ways does economic class play into the theme of the novel? Compare the Carr family's economic status to that of DJ Good News, their neighbors, and the homeless kids. In what ways does each defy or exemplify class stereotypes? Is the meaning of "goodness" reliant upon these social and economic class distinctions?

4. The idea of guilt arises a number of times in the course of Katie's thinking about her marriage and her parenting tactics. Does the novel suggest that "good" behavior stemming from guilt is something less than true goodness? Why or why not?

5. Discuss GoodNews' position in the Carr household. Is he an example of "goodness"? Why or why not? What challenges does he offer them as someone who lives outside of the societal norms they've built their lives upon? Do you agree with his description of the "possessions game" as something that makes people "lazy and spoiled and uncaring" (p. 127)? Why or why not?

6. The private and public lives of the Carrs are considered in some detail by both of them. Katie muses, "One of the reasons I wanted to become a doctor was that I thought it would be a good—as in Good, rather than exciting...thing to do. I liked how it sounded...I thought it made me seem just right. (p.8), while David demands the right to "spin my version before you spin your version." Discuss ways in which the characters' concerns for their public personas impact their personal lives.

7. "When he's asleep, I can turn him back into the person I still love," Katie says of her husband (p.11). "I can impose my idea of what David should be, used to be, onto his sleeping form..." Contrast the Carr's marriage before and after David's 'conversion.' In what ways do both partners judge the evolution of the other? Is her desire for an opportunity to "rebuild myself from scratch" realistic, or is it illusory?

8. How do Katie's decisions—as a wife, mother, and woman—reflect her struggle to maintain her identity as the threads of her marriage begin to unravel? Identify the factors that lead to her infidelity. Is there a "kind of person" who "conducts extramarital affairs"? Who "moves out without telling her children?" Why or why not?

9. Discuss the role of spirituality in the novel. How is the family dynamic changed by David's conversion to 'goodness?' Why are the Carrs inclined to identify David's new persona with religiosity (p. 95-97)? Why does Katie approach organized religion only after David has taken on his new persona?

10. Why does the act of reading and listening to music become a matter of spiritual survival for Katie? She states, "Can I be a good person and spend that much money on overpriced consumer goods? I don't know. But I do know this: I'd be no good without them (p. 304). What does she mean by this?

Author Biography

Nick Hornby is the author of the bestselling novels High Fidelity and About a Boy, as well as the memoir Fever Pitch. He is also the editor of the short story collection Speaking with the Angel. In 1999, he was the recipient of the American Academy of Arts and Letters E. M. Forster Award. He lives in north London.

Extras

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