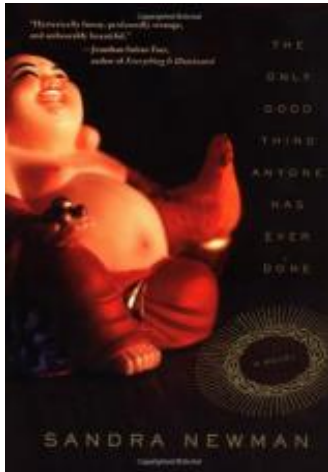


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# The Only Good Thing Anyone Has Ever Done: A Novel

by Sandra Newman

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## About the Book

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.

But something else is happening. Through Chrysalis's reunion with her brother, she begins to discover her adoptive father's secret past, causing her own identity to unravel. As Chrysalis lays down the facts of her life, she gambles her identity against the contradictions, half-truths, and fables of her past, leading her ultimately to question what it is we can truly know and whether it is fate or chance that dictates our lives.

## Discussion Guide

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...**?

## Author Bio

Sandra Newman is the author of the novels *JULIA*, *THE MEN*, *THE HEAVENS* (a *New York Times* Notable Book of the Year) and *THE COUNTRY OF ICE CREAM STAR*, longlisted for the Baileys Women's Prize for Fiction and named one of the best books of the year by the *Washington Post* and NPR, as well as several other works of fiction and nonfiction. Her writing has appeared in *Harper's* and *Granta*, among other publications. She lives in New York City.

## Critical Praise

"David Lynch and Dave Eggers aficionados will find much to admire in this edgy, strange, and dazzling first novel!"

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