BOOK CLUB KIT

Good Neighbors
Sarah Langan

This reading group guide for Good Neighbors includes an introduction, discussion questions, ideas for enhancing your book club, and a Q&A with author Sarah Langan. The suggested questions are intended to help your reading group find new and interesting angles and topics for your discussion. We hope that these ideas will enrich your conversation and increase your enjoyment of the book.

INTRODUCTION

Welcome to Maple Street, a picture-perfect slice of suburban Long Island, its residents bound by their children, their work, and their illusion of safety in a rapidly changing world.

But menace skulks beneath the surface of this exclusive enclave, making its residents prone to outrage. When the Wilde family moves in, they trigger their neighbors' worst fears. Dad Arlo's a gruff has-been rock star with track marks. Mom Gertie's got a thick Brooklyn accent, with high heels and tube tops to match. Their weird kids cuss like sailors. They don't fit with the way Maple Street sees itself.

Though Maple Street's Queen Bee, Rhea Schroeder—a lonely college professor repressing a dark past—welcomed Gertie and her family at first, relations went south during one spritzer-fueled summer evening, when the new best friends shared too much, too soon. By the time the story opens, the Wildes are outcasts.

As tensions mount, a sinkhole opens in a nearby park, and Rhea's daughter Shelly falls inside. The search for Shelly brings a shocking accusation against the Wildes. Suddenly, it is one mom's word against the other's in a court of public opinion that can end only in blood.

A riveting and ruthless portrayal of American suburbia, *Good Neighbors* excavates the perils and betrayals of motherhood and friendships and the dangerous clash between social hierarchy, childhood trauma, and fear.

TOPICS & QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Before tragedy strikes on Maple Street, Julia and Shelly have a growing friendship. Other than the circumstance of being neighbors, what do you think bonds the girls together? Discuss what they have in common.

2. A parallel friendship is that of Julia's and Shelly's mothers, Gertie and Rhea. How does the arc of the mothers' friendship mirror that of their daughters'? How does it differ?

3. The suburban setting of *Good Neighbors* is integral to the book itself. How does Sarah Langan describe Maple Street? What are its physical characteristics? How do these characteristics influence the neighbors who live there? Do you think this novel could have been set anywhere other than a wealthy suburb?

4. Maple Street is in the middle of two environmental crises: a heatwave and a sinkhole. Why do you think the author chose to incorporate very physical emergencies into the internal emergencies the characters experience in the novel?

5. What typically suburban, idyllic summertime activities are distorted by the sinkhole and its surrounding tragedies? Would you consider *Good Neighbors* satirical?

6. Discuss the author's choice to include book excerpts and newspaper articles throughout the book. Did you feel this was an effective storytelling technique? Did any of the characters' fates surprise you?

7. What qualities make the Wildes good scapegoats for the problems on Maple Street? Why do the longtime residents of the street believe the rumors about the Wildes so readily?

8. Almost every resident of Maple Street hides a secret. What are the neighbors' attitudes about keeping or revealing secrets? What does it say about their characters?

9. Was there one character or family in the neighborhood whose story most intrigued you? How did your opinions change as you learned more about them?

10. While gossip may have fueled many of the plot's shocking events, all of the rumors and whispers stem from fear. Discuss what you think each of the main characters fears. What are the collective fears of the neighborhood? How is fear expressed on Maple Street?

11. Do you feel that Shelly receives justice by the end of the novel?

ENHANCE YOUR BOOK CLUB

1. Sarah Langan has written several horror novels, including *Audrey's Door* and *The Missing*. Choose one of Sarah's other novels to read, and compare and contrast it with *Good Neighbors*.

2. *Good Neighbors* has been compared to works by authors Celeste Ng and Shirley Jackson. Choose one of the novels or short stories by these writers and discuss what it has in common with Sarah Langan's novel.

3. With its evocative setting, plot twists, and large cast of characters, *Good Neighbors* feels perfect for a TV series or a film. Who would you cast in it? What elements of the novel do you think would be challenging to portray on screen?

When did you decide you wanted to include fictional newspaper articles and book excerpts about the "Maple Street Murders" in your novel? Why did you feel you needed to include an outside point of view among the many other points of view in the novel?

I've always liked adding texture to my stories by inventing primary and secondary sources. It gives the work a context. I wrote a whole bunch of articles for my novel *Audrey's Door*, too. In that book, I had a lot of fun writing a fake *New Yorker* article about a thinly veiled Spalding Gray. I also invented a religion and architectural philosophy that I pretended was real and blogged about. I didn't intend to trick anybody; I thought readers would think it was funny. So, on speaking engagements, I'd say, "Guys, I made it up." And sometimes readers would say, "No. It's real. I read about it on the internet."

With *Good Neighbors*, I hadn't planned on including other sources—I thought I was writing a straight horror novel like *The Missing*. But somewhere along the line, it stopped being horror, and I realized I wanted to provide a wider context for what I was doing.

What I like about citing made-up articles and books is that it allows me to provide a context for my work. It also makes my story mythic within the world it inhabits. In that way, it feels more real, like it could happen in this America, too. So, I was shooting for that. I was hoping that by mentioning Broadway and other touchstones, that the story would feel less like fiction.

What elements of suburban horror were you most excited to explore?

I tend not to think about what I'm doing most of the time, or why I'm doing it. But I think the main driver for me had less to do with suburbia than the impact of Facebook on real people. I was trying to understand how and why this weird medium had caused so much damage. And it has done real damage, not just to our political system, but to our culture and to our human relationships. We've become very polarized, not for real reasons, but for invented reasons, and those inventors are cashing in.

As I was working on this story, I was also interested in the personal blind spots we all developed in childhood, to survive. As adults, these coping mechanisms no longer work, and are, in fact, harmful. Rhea's forgetfulness, her tendency to block things out, was surely helpful while she shared a house with a blackout alcoholic. But as an adult, those same coping mechanisms are disastrous. She knows this on some level, but she's terrified of letting go of the only behavior that ever protected her. Worse, if she does let go, she'll have to confront the reason it exists in the first place—her dad was a mess. Her childhood was horrible.

There are many unsettling scenes full of bad decisions, cruelty, and fear. Did you ever feel stressed out writing them?

In supernatural horror, these scenes are easier because there's a monster driving the bad behavior. The characters who commit violent acts are not 100% responsible. Even when it's bad guys doing bad things, we can excuse them because the world has gone mad and is filled with monsters. They've lost their marbles, and this is all cartoonish allegory, anyway.

In this book, there was no monster. There were just people. I had sympathy for all of them. I knew how I wanted this book to end, and getting there was very hard. This will read as strange, but I have a very tough time believing in bad people. So I had to figure out the exact, very rare circumstances where the story you're holding could happen in a realistic way. In other words, I believe that twenty-five percent of the time, Gertie and Rhea would have stayed friends, learned from each other, and become better people and parents. Another twenty-five percent of the time, they'd have drifted apart. About twenty-four percent of the time, they'd have had an icy separation. And 1 percent of the time, some variant on the plot of *Good Neighbors* happens.

But the thing is, that rare one percent has enlarged in the age of social media.

We're all expected to voice opinions on issues we often know nothing about, and then we're expected to fight over those opinions. For reasons I cannot fathom, it's now socially acceptable to condemn each other online—to condemn strangers and friends and politicians and celebrities. To wish them dead and call them stupid. To go after their families and their jobs and their

appearances, all in the name of moral righteousness.

Regarding queasiness in my portrayals of Very Bad Things, the one character I should mention here is Shelly. Abuse is gross, and I didn't like writing about it. Along those lines, I was also concerned about depicting a false accusation of a rape, as I did not want anyone coming away from this and saying: *Look! Guys like Harvey Weinstein got a bad rap!* They did not get a bad rap. They ruined a whole lot of lives because something sick inside them was allowed to grow. As I hope we're all aware, false accusations are rare. True accusations of rape are horribly common.

What came first: The idea for the slightly supernatural sinkhole or the idea for the toxic neighbor relationships? Or were they part and parcel of the same concept?

I started with an asteroid, actually! But a novelist friend, Jon Evans, suggested it should be a sinkhole. In the early versions of this story, something supernatural comes out from the hole and starts infecting the neighbors, activating their baser natures. In that version of the book, I was skewering the way we perceive identity as defined by appearance, gender, and economics. But I could never get traction on how things ought to turn out in the end, mostly because I couldn't figure out anything new to say. It was kind of boring, having monsters attack people—the emotional stakes didn't mean as much to me.

I had known for some time that I should eliminate everything supernatural. There was a different story that wanted to be told, and it was calling to me. I had this picture of a family under too much pressure, and specifically, I saw Julia on a precipice, in danger. And Shelly, lost, falling backward. So, I cut about half my characters, and I made a human monster out of Rhea Schroeder. I made the plot about this single relationship gone wrong, and the sinkhole switched from being a pretext for horror to a kind of Geiger counter for the bonkers psychological state of Maple Street.

I keep using the word *I*, but I was not alone. My agent, Stacia Decker, read very many drafts and suggested very many excellent edits. She changed everything for me and for the work. My acquiring editor, Loan Le, also had a big hand in shaping this book. She asked all the questions I didn't want to answer. Because I didn't know the answers! So I had to go back and figure all that out.

All of your main characters have complex, rich backstories that slowly come to the surface over the course of the novel. Did one character's backstory intrigue you the most? Was there any character who you found challenging to develop?

Rhea was great fun and also great work to write. Once I decided that my story had to be human and not supernatural, I had to figure out under what circumstances regular people might be driven to violence. The false accusation of child molestation seemed pretty clearly like something that would stir up the neighbors, and maybe spur a few of them to throw a brick through a window. But even under those circumstances, riled-up neighbors would still need a ringleader to instigate more serious violence, and I couldn't figure out what kind of person that would be. Why would anyone follow someone like Rhea, and why would she want to do something so awful?

And then I stumbled across an analysis of narcissistic personality disorder. Narcissists are so fascinating! To survive childhood, they erect images of false, perfect selves. These false selves feed off praise. Often, they're very charming, and they tend to be successful in their careers. But when their false selves are threatened by some truth they'd prefer was kept hidden, they're the few types of sane people who commit murder. They're the hedge fund managers who'd rather kill their families than allow them to find out that their businesses were elaborate Ponzi schemes. They're the doctors who might hurt a patient to keep them quiet. They're the moms who murder their kids. What's different about Rhea is that most narcissists don't self-harm. They hurt other people, never themselves. But I think that's because Rhea's breaking down at the opening of this story; she's ready to change, but she doesn't know how.

So I had this idea that Rhea has this false self, and it's exhausting and not serving her and getting in the way of her real re-

lationships with people, including her children. She wants to lose it, consciously or unconsciously. So she seeks out Gertie, whom she believes is the least likely person on the block to cast judgment. But it's such a scary mission. She's terrified she'll be rejected, called out as monstrous. Still, she tries to confess what she's been doing to Shelly, knowing it's the best thing for her family—and despite everything Rhea LOVES those kids. But Gertie doesn't understand. The confession is garbled, arrows of blame pointing in every direction, most of them wrong. Rhea interprets Gertie's confusion as rejection and decides she's chosen the wrong friend—that she can never be free of this false, perfect self that is so suffocating.

Writing Gertie wasn't a challenge—I always loved her. I didn't arrive at the moment when she drives away from the crescent instead of defending her children until a very late draft. I didn't like writing it, because I knew the pain she was feeling in doing it. Even as she did it, she erased it from her memory, because the failure was so great.

But I think erasing our failures is very common and very human. I mean, I always know what my husband did wrong when we disagree, but my own questionable behavior is far hazier. I think the job of being an adult is evaluating that instinct and trying to untangle it, which is what Gertie does throughout the action of the novel, and long afterward. She's the best.

Good Neighbors has been called a blend of Celeste Ng and Shirley Jackson. Were there any writers or novels you had in mind while you were writing it?

I've read everything by Shirley Jackson, and I love her. What she does best, to me, is narrate that fugue state all new mothers go through after their children are born. It's this jarring identity slip, where once you were this person and now everyone seems to see you as a totally different person, and your job is totally different, and you're exhausted all the time. It's very disorienting, particularly because it's never acknowledged.

As I was writing *Good Neighbors*, I reread Stephen King's *Carrie*, Megan Abbott's *You Will Know Me*, and Jennifer Egan's *Invisible Circus*. These are all female-led, page-turning mystery-thrillers. I also read Kate Wilhelm's *Where Late the Sweet Birds Sang*. Like *Good Neighbors*, its themes involve parents and children and the inevitable inversion of those relationships. Stephen King's *It* probably played a role in my depiction of the kids. I read that novel young, when those scenes and moments made a deep impression. Finally, I'm a huge Claire Messud fan and read all her novels while writing *Good Neighbors*, my favorite being *The Woman Upstairs*, which is about women with different power dynamics, who become very close, until they're not.

Suburban dramas are in vogue right now. What I've noticed and am enjoying about this trend is that "women's fiction" is happily starting to lose that title. I mean, it's fiction. Men iron, cook, and rear kids, too. And these lives we're living behind closed doors, in kitchens and bedrooms and backyards, are where all the important stuff happens.

Was there an element of suburban living that you especially wanted to explore and/or skewer in the novel? What do you think it is about picturesque suburbs that continues to fascinate readers?

My worldview is naturally satiric. It's just how I tick. If I thought about what I was doing, or that a portrayal might hurt someone, I wouldn't do it. So, I guess it's good I never think about it. What I do know is that I never tell stories about things or people that I don't respect. I only tell stories about things that I love.

So, in suburbia, which is where I grew up (in a town on Long Island called Garden City, which is different from the one in this book), I had a lot of advantages. The schools were great, and I got to keep the same friends from kindergarten through college. It's a privilege to come from someplace, and I'm glad that I do.

But I was always surprised, growing up, by how much people gossiped. I mean, I couldn't remember most peoples' last names, and somehow everybody else knew what everybody's dads did for a living. This was the eighties, so nobody mentioned if the moms had jobs because they mostly didn't, and if they did, you kind of felt bad for the kid, like maybe they had to sit by

themselves and heat up Lean Cuisines and that was a tragedy.

The kids gossiped because they'd learned it from their parents, and their parents gossiped to signify status. It was a constant top-dogging, and the more alike we all tended to be, the pettier the criteria for who was on top. There's a term, narcissism of nearness, that expresses it: the more alike we are, the more we notice and rank our very tiny differences. This tendency has a terrible side effect: conformity.

I'm reminded of the *Star Trek* episode "Let That Be Your Last Battlefield," where one people are black on the left side, white on the right. The other people are white on the left side, black on the right. They're at war and wind up murdering each other to the last man. It's very important to them, this difference. They've decided that it defines them.

It's a strong argument for diversity—racial, economic, and structural. I think people are just more relaxed about their own identities in diverse places.

Did the experience of writing adult characters versus children and teenagers differ? Was one more challenging (or more fun) than the other?

The kids came very easily to me. Their hang-ups were shadows of their parents' hang-ups and not yet intrinsic to their personalities. They were clean slates. The hardest part was getting that friendship between Shelly and Julia down in a way that I felt expressed the depths of their feelings.

The adults were tough—I'd determined the outcome I wanted for this very complicated puzzle, and then I had to go back and carve pieces that fit.

Through the newspaper clippings and book excerpts, we learn the fates of many of the characters. Did you always know what would happen to them in the future, or did any of the outcomes you came up with surprise you?

I had thought Julia and Dave would get together in the end but changed my mind—Charlie felt like a better fit. The rest, I knew.

What do you think the bond between Rhea and Gertie is? What initially drew them together, and in what ways do you think they're similar (if any)?

They're meant to be best friends. It's a tragedy that the holes in their personalities align the way they do and muck up the works. Early on, Rhea chooses to confess her abuse of Shelly in a confrontational way, and Gertie can't handle confrontation, and it's all downhill from there.

They have tons in common. They both feel like imposters, and they're both trying to fit in, unaware that the act is unnecessary—other peoples' opinions aren't as important as they imagine. They both love their families and want better lives for their children but are utterly unequipped.

Where Gertie married a man who was helpful to her and invested in her emotional condition, Rhea married a man who was too limited to ever notice her, or the things she was hiding. This was an intentional choice—Fritz was nonthreatening—but also very bad for her psychological well-being. She needed to be loved and seen, and over many years, that neglect was injurious.

You explore many types of parent-child relationships: loving, abusive, indifferent, supportive…the list goes on and on! What fascinates you about the parent-child bond, and which parent-and-child pair were you most eager to explore in the novel?

Julia's relationship with her parents was pretty fascinating to me. They take her for granted and don't always have her back, but I think that's pretty normal—no upbringing is perfect. On the plus side, they respect her and trust her judgment. They both

admit their high esteem for her toward the end of the book, and that felt very important—it was something she needed to hear.

Larry goes through a different journey. Gertie blames herself for his weirdness, and Arlo does, too. They have to come around the corner on their feelings about him, and acknowledge that he's just Larry, and by the way, Larry's awesome.

The one character I want to address before closing is Shelly. *The Bonfire of the Vanities* by Tom Wolfe is a comedy of errors that serves to conceal a real tragedy. At the end of the book, we never find out if the boy hit by the car at the opening lives or dies. It's all spectacle and narcissism, and the cost is the soul of a city. Shelly's pain felt very real to me, and I very much wanted the opposite to happen at the end of *Good Neighbor*s—I wanted the real tragedy of her death to be properly acknowledged. I wanted to bring up her body and say, *This happened*.

Though the ending is grisly, I also wanted it to be a mediation on the power of honesty, and the fact that all acts of kindness are inherently brave.