

# **The Good Neighbor Study Guide**

**The Good Neighbor by A. J. Banner**

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# Plot Summary

The following version of this book was used to create this study guide: Banner, A. J. *The Good Neighbor*. Lake Union Publishing, 2015.

*The Good Neighbor* is a psychological thriller by A. J. Banner in which Sarah Phoenix attempts to return to life as normal after a fire destroys everything certain in her life. When the novel begins, Sarah has been happily married to Johnny McDonald, a dermatologist, for three years. Sarah herself is a famous children's book author, of the *Miracle Mouse* series. Sarah and Johnny live in a lovely home on Sitka Lane, and are surrounded by good neighbors, including French immigrant Monique, her American husband, Chad, and their four-year-old daughter, Mia, next door; the Ramirezes, including their 17-year-old daughter, Jessie; the Frenkels, including their twin high school seniors, Lukas and Lenny; and the Calassises, including elderly Felix who suffers from slight Alzheimer's. One house on the block is up for sale, under real estate agent Eris Coghlan.

When Johnny is away for a conference in San Francisco, Sarah is awakened one night to see Chad and Monique's house on fire. The fire kills them, but Sarah manages to save Mia, who goes to live with her grandmother, Harriet, nearby. Sarah then realizes her own house is on fire, and is injured because of the blaze. Johnny rushes home to be by her side. They later learn from Fire Marshal Ryan Greene that the fires were both deliberately set. Sarah is stunned. She and Johnny move over to Shadow Bluff Lane, overlooking the Shadow River, and rent a cottage owned by Eris. Eris welcomes them to the neighborhood, and introduces them at dinner to the Minkowskis, including gorgeous Theresa and her husband.

Sarah, thoroughly unnerved by the fire, begins to notice strange behavior in her husband – taking calls in private, visiting Theresa's house without telling Sarah, and barely kissing her goodbye before work. When Sarah finds old photographs of Johnny with past girlfriends in the rubble of their home, she is unnerved, knowing so little about Johnny's past. When she confronts him about these things, Johnny denies an affair, and says his past is the past. He is now only committed to Sarah. Sarah later learns through Jessie – who had a crush on Chad, kissed him once, and wanted to run away with him though he did not return her feelings – that Monique and Johnny were in a sexual relationship by way of Monique's journal, which Jessie stole to find out if Chad was going to leave Monique.

Sarah confronts Johnny about Monique, but he tells her things with Monique happened long ago, and ended as things with Sarah were beginning. At the same time, Sarah attempts to talk Jessie out of an abusive relationship while babysitting Mia while Harriet is in the hospital for some tests. When Jessie has a fight with her boyfriend, Sarah asks Eris to watch Mia while she goes out to bring Jessie to safety. Back at the cottage, Sarah discovers Mia and Eris are gone. Sarah goes to Eris's house to see if they have gone there, but the house is empty. Instead, Sarah finds a room that has been turned into a shrine for Johnny, for Eris is obsessed with Johnny. Sarah manages to find Eris



down at the river, where Eris confirms she had her drug-addicted handyman set the fire, but that he first burned the wrong house before getting the right house. Eris confirms she wants to be with Johnny, then throws Mia into the river.

Sarah rushes in after Mia, and she and Mia are pulled to safety by Johnny and Ryan. Eris is arrested. Sarah and Johnny pack up and take a house on the shore, miles away from their old neighborhood. Shortly after arriving, Sarah receives a DNA test in the mail. Having doubted the parentage of Mia, Sarah learns that there is a more than 99-percent chance that Mia is Johnny's daughter. Sarah does not know how the future with Johnny will go.

# Prologue – Chapter 8

## Summary

Prologue – An unidentified narrator and another female are swept up in the current of a river in a storm. The narrator hears a voice calling out good riddance in triumph.

Chapter 1: Two Months Earlier – It is October. Children’s book writer, Sarah, author of the Miracle Mouse series (writing under her maiden name, Sarah Phoenix), has difficulty concentrating on her next story while her husband of three years, Dr. Johnny McDonald, is away from home at a conference in San Francisco. Sarah and Johnny live in the quiet town of Shadow Cove, Washington, on Sitka Lane. Sarah’s best friend, Natalie, due to leave for India with Dan, calls Sarah because she has always has a bad feeling before traveling. Johnny calls a short time later to see how Sarah is doing. As they talk on the phone, she notices a car pull into the Kimball’s house. It appears Chad (nicknamed Jim after characters in a French film called Jules and Jim that both Sarah and Monique love, with Johnny being referred to as Jules) and Monique have returned early from Hawaii. Monique confirms to Sarah that they have indeed come back early and asks to borrow charcoal for the grill.

Across the street, they notice 17-year-old Jessie Ramirez, who the Kimballs paid to clean the house while they were away, sitting with her boyfriend, Adrian. Monique worries Jessie has stolen a gold pen from her, then heads home with charcoal. Next to the Ramirezes live Felix and Maude Calassis, and beyond them is an empty house for sale being handled by realtor Eris Coghlan. To the left of the Ramirezes live the Frenkels, including father, Verne, mother, Orla, and twin high school seniors, Lukas and Lenny. Later that night, Sarah hears a car moving down the road around 11 p.m. A short time later, Sarah falls asleep, only to be awoken at 1:17 a.m. due to a loud bang. Looking outside, Sarah sees the Kimball house on fire, with the Kimball’s daughter, Mia, trapped upstairs.

Chapter 2 – Sarah calls 911 to alert them to the fire, then rushes outside. She is joined by everyone else in the neighborhood, including Don and Pedra Ramirez, the Frenkels, and the Calassises. Everyone rushes around trying to see if the Kimballs are alright, but they are still inside. Sarah notices a broken window and realizes her pants have become wet, but does not know how. A ladder is found which Sarah climbs to the second floor to Mia’s bedroom window. Sarah rushes in and pulls Mia outside. It is then that Sarah learns her own house is on fire, the master bedroom lighting up from within. A dark object hurtles at Sarah, knocking her out.

Chapter 3 – When Sarah wakes up, she is with her husband in Cove Hospital with a concussion. She learns that both Chad and Monique are dead. Mia has gone to live with her grandmother. Johnny explains their own house has been burned out. Johnny is already talking to homeowners insurance, and working on temporary housing.



Chapter 4 – As Sarah begins to recover, she has nightmare flashbacks of the fire. On the phone with Natalie, Natalie tells Sarah she feels something even worse coming on, but something which will not be as obvious. Sarah then speaks with her mother on the phone, who offers up their old house in Portland. Sarah thanks her, but says it is too far away. A card arrives for Sarah from everyone on Sitka Lane, calling her a hero. While her husband is out of the room, an unknown person calls his cell phone. Sarah answers, but the person hangs up on him. When Johnny returns, he says it has been happening a few times lately. He reassures Sarah, saying they will rebuild their lives in a new place, that he will move his practice, and that everything will be okay. He explains he has already found a temporary place through Eris Coghlan, a small and cozy cottage.

Chapter 5 – On the way to the cottage, Sarah asks Johnny to swing through Sitka Lane, which he does. The ruins of their former house startles Sarah. Johnny then brings Sarah to the dead-end Shadow Bluff Lane, to the cottage owned and rented out by Coghlan. It is nestled in among fir trees. Eris comes to see them in and give them a tour. Sarah is happy to meet her. She also meets the stunningly beautiful neighbor, Theresa Minkowski, who gestures to where she, her husband Kadin, and their son, also named Kadin, live. Eris invites Sarah and Johnny over for dinner. Johnny agrees to the invitation. It is then that the county fire marshal arrives.

Chapter 6 – Fire Marshal Ryan Greene explains they believe the fire was intentionally set. Sarah is stunned by this. Greene asks if she can remember anything more about the night of the fire. Sarah explains that the Kimballs got home early, had a barbeque out back, that she heard a car coming up the road around 11 p.m., and then fell asleep until the fire. Johnny wonders aloud if the Kimballs possibly killed themselves. Sarah believes the Kimballs would never have put their own child in danger. Greene asks about the other people in the neighborhood, saying Sarah and Johnny would be surprised by what people are capable of even if they do not seem like it. Greene is interested to learn that Jessie had been watching the Kimball house, and had a key. Green also asks about the Kimballs, but Sarah reveals they did not argue any more than any ordinary couple. He then asks if it is possible the Kimballs paid someone to torch their house. Greene reveals fraud is becoming more and more common. Greene also asks about Johnny's time in San Francisco. Johnny explains he missed one of Sarah's calls because he was in a hotel bar with a female colleague who had just lost a patient to cancer, explains he went to the conference two days before the fire, and was not due home for another two days. He explains he left early when he learned Sarah was in the hospital. Greene says he will be in touch. Sarah is unsettled by the conversation, and hopes Johnny would never lie to her.

Chapter 7 – Slowly, Sarah and Johnny begin to rebuild their lives. Among the many things the must rebuild is the cooking library Johnny had put together, all lost in the fire. He has just purchased his first new cookbook from Shadow Cove Bookstore. Johnny promises Sarah they will not stay long at Eris's house. He then brings her into the bedroom to make love. Sarah's mind wanders between the fire and Johnny's past, which is comprised of many short-term relationships Johnny is quiet about. Going through get-well cards and other such notes, Sarah comes across a card addressed to



Johnny, telling him to think of the current time as necessary for better things to come. The signature is unreadable. The card disturbs Sarah, and also disturbs Johnny. He tears it up and tells Sarah not to think on it. After a shower that evening, Sarah hears Johnny on the phone, talking about something having to take as long as it takes, and that “she” cannot know. Sarah asks Johnny about this, but he explains he was speaking of a patient’s dermabrasion treatments, and not wanting his wife to know. Johnny is not happy about being eavesdropped on.

Chapter 8 – That night, Sarah dreams that the fire was all a mistake, and that Chad and Monique are still alive. She wakes up in the middle of the night to discover Johnny is not beside her. He is nowhere in the house, and not outside. The smell of smoke is in the air. Suddenly, Johnny comes running back, saying he went to investigate the smoke – and that it is only the fireplace in a neighbor’s A-Frame house.

## Analysis

When A.J. Banner’s novel *The Good Neighbor* begins, Sarah leads a seemingly perfect life: she is a career writer, famous for her work; her husband is a wealthy dermatologist; the two live in a beautiful home, and seem to be deeply in love. Things also appear to be good with all the neighbors, which only makes Sarah’s life on Sitka Lane all the better. The quiet, staid setting of the forested neighborhood of Sitka Lane is initially a reflection of Sarah’s happiness with her quiet, staid life. There is nothing she wants for, and nothing she would change. This all changes with the fires. The fires act as catalysts for change, purging and cleansing Sarah’s life – disrupting not only the physical nature of the neighborhood, her home, and her life, but changing the very emotional and mental nature of Sarah’s life as well. Her entire world has been upheaved. Life is full of such challenges and complications, and Sarah has been confronted by a tide of such things.

It is only natural to want normalcy after tragedy, but this is not always possible, argues Banner as her novel begins in earnest following the fire. Sarah wants nothing but to return to life as it was, though she knows this can never happen after the fire. Still, she tries. Small things that mean a lot to her, such as Johnny coming home from his conference to be with her or trying to make themselves at home in the cottage, help Sarah to reconstruct a sense of normalcy in her life. The key to all of this is having Johnny, who is her rock. She is utterly devoted to Johnny, as the reader will recognize, and this means home to her. However, even the things of which she is so certain in life are about to be challenged as well.

In times of danger, anyone and anything can be suspicious, Banner contends. This clearly becomes the case with several small but unnerving events, ranging from the mystery card sender to the visit of Ryan Greene, who begins to ask probing but necessary questions. Sarah’s time with Greene truly disturbs her, for he asks questions about Johnny himself – questions that anger Sarah, but also sow seeds of doubt in her mind about Johnny. Greene’s questions are then to be seen as symbols of doubt, and harbingers of dark things to come. Greene’s questions also cause Sarah to begin



reconsidering her neighbors, wondering if any of them could be responsible for the blazes that destroyed both her house and the Kimball house. The fires have now become part of the past, and it is the past that Greene and Sarah now wish to sift through to discover the truth.

## Discussion Question 1

Why does Greene asks such probing questions of Sarah? Why does Sarah respond to Greene in the way that she does, especially with respect to questions about Johnny? Do you think Green is appropriate to ask such questions? Why or why not?

## Discussion Question 2

Describe the marriage between Sarah and Johnny. What are its strengths? What does this marriage mean to Sarah? How does this change following Greene's questions?

## Discussion Question 3

Early in the novel, Sarah's neighbors are largely presented as good people and good neighbors. What is the first change this perception. Why?

## Vocabulary

iridescent, bespectacled, morbidity, monstrosity, engulfed, disheveled, mesmerizing, charisma, masculinity, mundane, mirthless, mellifluous, resonant, normalcy, solidity, ineligible, provocatively





# Chapters 9 – 16

## Summary

Chapter 9 – Johnny worries about how fitfully Sarah has been sleeping, though she insists she is alright. Sarah asks how long Johnny was out the previous night when he smelled smoke. Johnny explains it was only for a few minutes. When Sarah drops Johnny off at work because her car is being repaired, she notices Johnny only kisses her on the cheek, not as he usually does on the lips. Sarah remembers an article Natalie once sent her with signs that a husband is cheating. Sarah reflects on the items in that article, such as making phone calls in private, changing behavior, and not getting a normal goodbye kiss. Sarah worries Johnny may be cheating on her, then does her best to reassure herself that she is overthinking.

Sarah heads back to the old house to see if there is anything she can save. Sarah has an unsettling conversation with the older and slight-Alzheimer's sufferer, Mr. Calassis, who looks at the ruins of the Kimball house, and says he always knew "that woman" was trouble, and the Sarah should be careful. Sarah thinks he might be talking about Monique. When Sarah asks for details, he only looks blankly at her. Sarah begins to dig through the rubble of the house, finding old photos of Johnny with an unknown woman on a dock next to a fishing hut on a lake in the forest. This disturbs Sarah, but she realizes the photo was from before she ever knew him. As she digs through more rubble, she finds things she cannot ever recall seeing before, such as reading glasses, a designer pen, and a silver bracelet. As she is about to leave, Pedra Ramierz comes running up to Sarah, telling her she will never believe what has happened.

Chapter 10 – Pedra and Jessie reveal they are worried about Mia, because Mia has cut off all her hair. They worry about her grandmother's ability to take proper care of Mia, because Mia's grandmother is so old and sleeps a lot. Sarah promises to check in on things, and heads over to Ferndale Glen. On the way, Sarah calls Johnny to ask about the pictures. He explains he would have to see the picture to remember since he had so many girlfriends. He tells Sarah they still have much to learn about each other, but that he will truthfully answer any questions she has. Sarah then arrives at the home of Mia's grandmother, Harriet Kimball. Harriet is saddened about Sarah's home, but grateful to Sarah for saving Mia's life. Harriet explains Mia is currently napping. With Sarah around, Harriet feels brave enough to look at photographs of her son and daughter-in-law. Harriet says nothing she could do could stop her son from falling in love with Monique. When Sarah goes to see Mia, Mia repeats the word "Mommy."

Chapter 11 – On the phone, Natalie encourages Sarah to adopt Mia. Sarah does not want to separate Mia from Harriet because Mia loves Harriet so much. Sarah relates she will be watching Mia for a few hours on Friday, as Harriet will have to go in to the hospital for some cancer remission tests. When Sarah arrives home at the cottage, a repairman named Todd Severson is waiting, saying Eris sent him. Sarah confirms this with Eris, then allows Todd in to fix a faulty window and latch. Sarah and Todd get to



talking, during which time Sarah learns that Todd's wife left him for another man. Todd then heads to fix the toilet, during which time Todd tells Sarah she should consider motion sensor lights outside. Todd also reveals he is a volunteer firefighter, and was among those who responded to the fire at Sarah's house. Eris arrives just as Todd is headed out to another job. Eris apologizes for not letting Sarah know about Todd in advance, then mentions she saw Johnny jogging that morning, during which time he stopped to talk to Theresa as though he knew her quite well. Eris reminds Sarah to be over for dinner at seven.

Chapter 12 – Sarah and Johnny arrive at Eris's house with a bottle of Chardonnay. Eris is happy to have them over, and says she is on the lookout for a new house for them. Theresa and her husband, Kadin, arrive a few moments later. Theresa is revealed as a restorationist, currently restoring a Turkish decanter. Theresa is thrilled to learn that Sarah is a writer. She and Kadin reveal their son also loves to write, but has strange patches on his arm they would like Johnny to take a look at. Eris reveals that Johnny cured her of skin cancer after other doctors gave her only six months to live. Theresa and Kadin are stunned.

During dinner, hydrangeas are accidentally delivered to Eris's house, intended for Theresa, but Eris has Theresa accept them. They remind Sarah of the hydrangeas in their old backyard, and prompt Kadin to say the flowers must be from her secret admirer, which Theresa denies she has. The wording on the card also reminds Sarah of wording Johnny uses for her. Sarah thinks about how Johnny's first present ever to her was a hydrangea, and this begins to worry her. Theresa imagines the flowers must be from Kadin, and so hugs him tightly and announces they will be expecting their second child in the spring. Johnny gives the news a toast.

Chapter 13 – On Friday, Sarah babysits Mia. Mia draws pictures for her parents, for her grandmother, for Sarah, and for her teacher. While wandering around the house, Sarah finds Mia's birth records. While Monique Beaumont is listed as the mother, no father is listed.

Chapter 14 – Sarah agrees to watch Mia when Harriet has to have more tests. Sarah heads to Eris's to borrow a spare cot bed for Mia, which Todd Severson helps her carry over. Eris explains she has purchased the spare cot for her boyfriend, who loves camping. She explains she moves fast, though she is still in the middle of a divorce, and that her boyfriend will soon be free of his own difficult entanglements. Eris later agrees to meet up with Sarah to show her the trail to the river. Alone with Todd, Sarah is told by Todd to get out of town, far away, as fast as possible. He says he would do the same thing if someone tried to burn him down. It makes Sarah wonder if Todd knows more than he is letting on.

Chapter 15 – Sarah later talks to Eris about Todd's comments as they take the trail behind the houses to the river. Eris tells Sarah that Todd is simply being protective. Sarah explains she also called the fire marshal to leave a message with him about Todd's comments. Eris explains that Todd and his wife seemed very much in love at first, but that his wife changed as the marriage got underway. Eris asks how Sarah and



Johnny met. Sarah explains they met at the annual Polar Bear Plunge. Eris explains she met her ex-husband at the county fair on the hippo ride. Eris explains she and her ex were simply not meant to be together. Sarah wonders if she and Johnny are meant to be together. Sarah comments that Johnny would love the trail. Eris explains the trail was where she saw Johnny jogging the other day after which he stopped to talk to Theresa. Eris thinks Johnny may have gotten lost, but Sarah does not think so.

Chapter 16 – When Johnny goes for his morning run, Sarah decides to follow him. She watches him type on his phone, then leave the trail for Theresa’s backyard. Theresa meets him at the back door, and the two go inside.

## Analysis

Sarah’s desperation for normalcy after the fire causes her a level of anxiety that, coupled with the formal investigation into the fire, only makes Sarah desperate for the truth. It is natural to want normalcy after a tragedy, Banner continues to argue – and Sarah’s desire for the truth is the key that will help her return to normalcy. Sarah begins to wonder if Johnny is cheating on her, for she has been noticing strange behavior from him, from taking private calls to the way he is kissing her goodbye. Sarah does not stop to consider that Johnny’s own life has been thrown off by the fire and the destruction of their home, but she does imagine that perhaps Johnny may be having an affair. All the evidence can be considered circumstantial at best – but when Sarah watches Johnny enter Theresa’s house through the back door, she is convinced Johnny must be having an affair.

People can change for the better or the worse over time, Banner argues, and this is especially true given difficult circumstances and times of personal upheaval. Sarah wonders if Johnny has changed, and whether he has or not, she recognizes she hardly knows him. This is as true of the old photos of Johnny and an old girlfriend as it is of Sarah herself. The fire, understandably, has made Sarah a more worried, more suspicious person. Her mind is jumping to conclusions without having hard evidence, for most things are still circumstantial. Even Johnny going to Theresa’s house can be considered circumstantial, as Sarah – and the reader – do not know the real reason Johnny has entered Theresa’s house at such an hour in such a manner. This is coupled with the delivery of the hydrangeas, which in turn come to symbolize suspicion and uncertainty.

Still, Sarah is determined to uncover the truth. She is now confronted by two life challenges: why did her house burn down (specifically, who did it and why); and is Johnny potentially cheating on her? These now become the core questions that will motivate her actions, thoughts, and feelings through the rest of the novel. To uncover the truth, Sarah must now uncover what has become the past. There is great symbolism in Sarah rooting through the old ashes of the home to dig up the old photos of Johnny. The photos themselves come to symbolize the past, not only because they are physically of the past, but because they depict the past – a past that Sarah did not know



about, but is now poised to uncover. Sarah does not wait around for the formal investigation, but takes the task on herself.

## Discussion Question 1

Why does Sarah decide to begin investigating things for herself, rather than just waiting for the formal investigators to handle things? What happens as a result?

## Discussion Question 2

Why is it so important to Sarah to go digging through the rubble of the old house? What does she hope to find? What does she find instead?

## Discussion Question 3

Is Sarah right to consider that Johnny is cheating on her? What evidence does she have to this effect? Does Johnny's entering Theresa's house through the back door seal the accusation, or is this something to be considered circumstantial? Why?

## Vocabulary

benevolent, benign, perfunctory, fecund, accentuated, conspiratorial, arsonists, circuitously



# Chapters 17 – 24

## Summary

Chapter 17 – Sarah is devastated by what she has seen as she heads back up the trail. She takes an unfamiliar path to Shadow River, where she watches it course by, fed by Lake Wakhiakum. She comes to a large, lake-like area of the river where she finds an old canoe, dock, and a fisherman's hut, and it reminds her of the photo she found in Johnny's office.

Chapter 18 – When Sarah returns, Johnny is in the shower, whistling. She wonders how he can act so casually, but then wonders if she herself is reading into things that are not there. He asks her to get into the shower with him, so she does. She tells him she saw him head to the Minkowski house. Johnny explains he went over to look at Kadin Junior's arm rash. Johnny denies anything else is happening, and tells her she should have come down to the house as well. She then asks Johnny about the photo she found of him and a girl from many years before in a place that looks very similar to the Shadow River. Johnny says he knows she is sensitive, but he is not lying to her. Johnny's words sting Sarah, but she knows there is truth in them. She gets out of the shower, reflecting on how her own father left their family for a much younger model in London.

Chapter 19 – On the phone with Sarah, Natalie assures Sarah that Johnny cannot be having an affair. Natalie tells Sarah that Johnny has only ever had eyes for her, and that not every man in the world is like Sarah's father. Sarah decides she and Johnny must look for another place to live. Eris begins showing homes to Sarah and Johnny, but none of them are quite right. Johnny begins avoiding the trails to go jogging. Johnny helps Sarah to babysit Mia over the weekend. Sarah brings Mia out back to the tire swing. A friendly yellow lab wanders into the yard. Behind the dog comes Eris and a man she introduces as Steve Wessler. Sarah wonders if Steve is Eris's boyfriend. Johnny does not come to join Sarah and Mia outside, but holes up in his office. Sarah begins to wonder if Johnny can be a good father. Johnny later reads a bedtime story to Mia, after which time Sarah tells him he did great.

Chapter 20 – Johnny heads into work on Saturday morning while Sarah continues to watch Mia. Jessie comes over to help Sarah take Mia shopping. Jessie begins crying, saying she and Aidan have broken up. Jessie also notes that the cottage in which Johnny and Sarah live is amazing. At the shoe store, Sarah is recognized as a writer. After buying Cinderella shoes for Mia, Sarah realizes she has locked the keys in the car. Jessie says she has an idea, then begins to pull things out of her purse, including a golden lipstick container marked with Monique Kimball's initials. Sarah immediately remembers Monique suspecting Jessie of theft.

Chapter 21 – After dropping Mia off at Harriet's, Sarah confronts Jessie about the makeup items she has marked with M.K. Jessie admits she took them without asking,



but said she was going to give them back. Jessie says among the things she has of Monique's is a journal, but that it did not tell her what she needed to know. Jessie goes on to say that, one night, Chad got home after fighting with Monique, and looked as if he had been crying. She tells Sarah that they kissed, talked a few times on the phone, and then Chad changed his number. Sarah tells Jessie it was not okay for Chad to do such a thing, but Jessie insists she wanted it, too. She admits to having a crush on Chad, and wanting to be like Monique since all the guys thought she was hot. Sarah tells Jessie she needs to tell her parents about stealing. Jessie then tells Sarah she needs to show her something.

Chapter 22 – Sarah and Jessie head to Jessie's house. In Jessie's room, Sarah cautions Jessie to be careful about being sexually active. Jessie cannot stand how controlling her parents are, and cannot wait to be 18 in a couple of days. Jessie pulls out dark blue journal with pictures of flying geese woven diagonally on the cover. Jessie explains she stole it because she hoped she might find something about Chad wanting a divorce to be with her. Instead, the journal reveals that Monique was sleeping with a man named Jules. Sarah immediately thinks of her husband because of the film she and Monique both loved, Jules and Jim, where Chad had been nicknamed Jim and Johnny had been nicknamed Jules, and where both men went after the same woman, Catherine, who Monique imagined herself to be. In the journal is a goodbye note to Jules, in which Monique says she and Jim will soon be moving away, that she truly does now love Jim and wants a break with the past, and that Harriet has always known.

Chapter 23 – Sarah goes to the house she and her family grew up in, but which now largely sits empty with her mother traveling so much. She ignores messages from Johnny, wanting to be alone and to think about what is seemingly apparent. She has left him a note at their cottage to this effect, saying she knows about Monique, and now ignores his repeated attempts to contact her. After a long, hot bath, Sarah pulls out one of her mother's old photo albums, from her wedding with Johnny. She wonders if Johnny had been sleeping with Monique even at the time of the wedding. Late that night, the doorbell rings.

Chapter 24 – Johnny is at the door. He asks to come in. Sarah lets him. She is torn between wanting to love him and kill him. Johnny admits a brief affair with Monique, saying Monique was obsessed with him, an affair which happened before his marriage to Sarah, and not long after Monique and Chad had started dating. He confirms the picture of himself and a woman on a dock was of him and Monique. He admits he was still seeing Monique when he began seeing Sarah, and that he wondered if Mia was his daughter, but Monique denied this. Johnny insists he has not betrayed Sarah, but Sarah contends omission is betrayal. Sarah now questions Johnny about his colleague at the conference, and Theresa – but Johnny denies affairs with them, though he does confirm he slept with his female colleague back in medical school. Johnny says he is not going to give up on his marriage to Sarah, that he truly loves her, has always been faithful to the marriage, and that he will move out of the cottage and into a hotel so she can go back home. He tells her it will be up to her whether the marriage remains.





## Analysis

After Sarah sees Johnny enter through the back of Theresa's house, she believes the worst. It is natural to assume the worst in such a situation, even if Sarah does not have all the details. The normalcy that Sarah has craved appears to be impossible, especially because Johnny appears to be cheating on her. In dangerous times, anyone and anything can be suspicious, and this is certainly the case with Sarah and Johnny's seeming affair. The reader should pay careful note to the fact that Sarah heads down to the Shadow River to clear her mind, but is there reminded of the past. The river itself becomes symbolic of the passage of time, and the very name of the river – Shadow River – reflects the idea that shadows of the past are all around Sarah, including a past regarding Johnny about which she knows nothing.

The fact that so many questions are arising around Johnny only mean it is natural for Sarah to want to question him. She does confront him directly about such things, but Johnny not only denies affairs, he seems to have relatively good and reasonable explanations for his suspicious activities. Ultimately, these do little to relax Sarah, especially after she learns that Johnny once had a sexual relationship with Monique – though this did not occur during the marriage – and though Johnny does not believe he is Mia's father, because Monique did not tell him this. Still, it is too much for Sarah to handle. Johnny moves out of the cottage and into a hotel so that Sarah might have space and time to consider things as they are and as they have been.

The past, Banner contends through this section of the novel, never stays buried. It is clear that Johnny has his own past – one of fast, sexual, and easy relationships with numerous women. It is something that Sarah struggles with, even though Johnny has apparently been faithful to her through their entire marriage. Sarah also struggles to understand the complex relationships and lives of her neighbors, including Jessie, who wanted a relationship with the much older and married Chad, who himself was not entirely guiltless in things. Jessie's stealing of Monique's journal in the hopes it would reveal Chad wanted a divorce to be with Jessie helps Sarah to put together pieces of Monique's past, as well as Johnny's past. The journal itself becomes symbolic of a past unknown to Sarah, a past that Johnny claims is not a betrayal but an omission.

## Discussion Question 1

Is omission betrayal? Or is Sarah simply too caught up in events to think clearly? Do you think Johnny is right for not having revealed his whole past to Sarah? Why or why not?

## Discussion Question 2

What evidence regarding Johnny does Sarah learn from Jessie? Can it be argued that to obtain evidence in such a way is immoral or a betrayal of sorts? Why or why not?



## Discussion Question 3

Why does Sarah decide to inject herself into Jessie's life, despite Jessie's clear desire to want to live her own life? Does this have anything to do with Sarah's own life and the way it is turning out? Why or why not?

## Vocabulary

staccato, clandestinely, dreariness, deceptively, discernible, peripatetic, absentmindedly, sauntered, rummaging, reminiscent, perpetually, bedraggled, omission





## Chapters 25 – 32

### Summary

Chapter 25 – Sarah returns to the cottage. True to his word, Johnny has moved out. Sarah wonders if she has ever known the real Johnny. Johnny has left the house very neat and very empty of his things, which Sarah regrets. Her mind alternates between despising and missing Johnny. She finds a receipt for Harborside Florist for the hydrangeas, dated the day before the dinner at Eris's. Jessie speaks with Sarah, having heard rumors from her parents that she and Johnny are getting a divorce. She also reveals that, because she is now 18, she is leaving with Adrian. Sarah urges Jessie not to leave with Adrian, waiting in a car. Adrian gets out of the car to demand Jessie leave with him now. Sarah tells him Jessie is not going anywhere with him. Adrian begins yanking Jessie. Eris suddenly appears on scene, waving around her cell phone.

Chapter 26 – Eris threatens to call the police, but Jessie says there is no need. Eris has quickly sized Adrian up, and says Adrian is no good for Jessie. Adrian can only laugh. Eris recognizes that Adrian must have hit Jessie in the past, and confronts her with this thought. She warns Jessie the physical abuse will only be worse in the future. She then orders Adrian off her property. Adrian angrily leaves while Jessie begins crying.

Chapter 27 – Eris drives Jessie home to her parents, then comes to see Sarah. Sarah is worried to be living alone now that Adrian knows where she lives. Sarah then confesses to Eris what is going on with her and Johnny. She explains the fire has burned down not only her house, but everything she thought she believed in. Eris then shows Jessie a listing for a house two hours away, with a tower that she can use as a writing studio. It is remote and comfortable. Eris drives Sarah up, who immediately falls in love with the place. She tells Eris she will think about it.

Chapter 28 – Orla, Pedra, and Eris bring Sarah to lunch at the Shadow Café as a show of friendship and support. Orla reveals that Lukas is a volunteer firefighter, and that new evidence suggests the arson might have set fire to the wrong house. The evidence Lukas believes he has seen is a disposable cell phone. Sarah realizes she needs to speak to Ryan Greene right away.

Chapter 29 – Sarah meets with Ryan Greene, and asks him if the arsonist set fire to the wrong house. Greene explains all possible leads are being investigated. Greene then asks Sarah if she truly believes her husband was at the conference the night of the fire. Greene reveals that Felix Calassis said someone dangerous was on the street that night, but would not say more. Green asks if perhaps Sarah has any angry readers, or Johnny has any disgruntled patients, or if their marriage is alright. Sarah tells him he is asking the wrong questions, then leaves.

Chapter 30 – Sarah heads over to Sitka Lane, where she talks with Maude Calassis. Maude explains her husband's memory is not what it used to be, and that he can get



things jumbled. Sarah asks Felix what he saw the night of the fire. He says again that “that woman” was trouble, and he saw a “he” talking to, and arguing with her. Sarah wonders if he means Jessie and Adrian, or someone else.

Chapter 31 – Sarah goes to speak with Jessie, who admits she and Adrian were outside the night of the fire, but that they had nothing to do with the fire itself. It is then that Adrian’s car pulls up, and Jessie moves to get in, saying it is her future.

Chapter 32 – Sarah has difficulty working on her next book. She alternates between missing and hating Johnny. She notices that the Minkowskis appear to be gone. Sarah gets in touch with the bartender at the hotel at which Johnny stayed, and learns Johnny was telling the truth. Sarah then heads to Shadow Cove Bookstore, where owner Mary Wells has set up a book signing for Sarah. Mia and Harriet are among those in the packed house. Johnny arrives and stands in the back. He is followed shortly after by Theresa. Sarah feels sickened. Harriet asks Sarah if Sarah can watch Mia again soon, and Sarah agrees. Johnny then comes to speak with Sarah, telling her he misses her, and telling her he has something to show her.

## Analysis

Just as things seem to be at their worst for Sarah, Eris comes to the rescue. People can change for the better or the worst, and in Eris’s case, the better. She becomes the rock on which Sarah can depend, doing everything for Sarah from taking Jessie home to trying to help Sarah find a new house from which to start her life all over again. Eris has, in effect, become the good neighbor from which the novel draws its title. However, the title – both of the novel and of Eris – are both ominous and ironic. There is nothing good about the good neighbor, as both Sarah and the reader will soon learn.

At the same time Eris becomes the good neighbor, Sarah continues to throw herself into uncovering the past and investigating the fire. Information gleaned from neighborhood friends, as well as meeting with Ryan Greene, confirms to Sarah that the Kimball household was burned by mistake, and that Sarah’s own home was the intended target. Sarah continues to be angered by Greene’s questions, insisting he is still asking the wrong kinds of questions. However, Greene is asking important questions, though not being allowed to take them far enough. Had Greene been given more information about Johnny and Monique from Sarah, he might have been able to further the investigation. Instead, Sarah leaves his office.

As Sarah explains to Eris, the fire has destroyed everything in her life, including the things in which she believed. It is only natural to want normalcy after tragedy, but this is not always possible. This much is clear when Sarah explains that she has nothing of normalcy left. Life is full of challenges and complications, and so Sarah extends her concern and worry to Jessie, who is making all the wrong choices in life. Jessie has a chance to live her life free of challenges and complications, because who Aidan is, is clearly known. However, Sarah is unable to really get through to Jessie. However, readers should note that Johnny appears poised to get through to Sarah.



## Discussion Question 1

Why does Sarah become angry with Ryan Greene for his new round of questioning? What does she argue, and why? Do you believe Greene's questions are out of line? Why or why not?

## Discussion Question 2

How does Eris become the good neighbor? Why does she become so important in Sarah's life? How does Eris make Sarah's own life possible?

## Discussion Question 3

Why is Sarah so disturbed when Johnny shows up at her book signing, and why is she almost happy to see him there? What does this reveal about Sarah's character and inner feelings? Why does this matter?

## Vocabulary

vacated, conjured, bypassed, spectrometry, accelerants, sophisticated, forensic, disgruntled, accusatory, interlude, haggard



# Chapters 33 – 41

## Summary

Chapter 33 – With the Minkowskis home, Johnny brings Sarah to their house. There, Theresa reveals she has been restoring a painting of Miracle Mouse made by Sarah's grandmother, nearly lost in the fire. Johnny reveals this is why he has been stopping at Theresa's, to see the progress on the painting. He wanted to save it as a surprise, but he and Theresa decided to reveal it to Sarah so Sarah would know the truth because Johnny did not enjoy lying about where he had been. Sarah tells Johnny there is a chance for them. Outside, Ryan Greene arrives, saying he believes he has identified the arsonist.

Chapter 34 – An article from the Shadow Cove Register identifies arsonist suspect Todd Severson, 41, dead of an apparent methamphetamine overdose in his Olalla home. Eris, like Sarah, is stunned. Sarah, however, is a little confused because Todd did not seem like a methamphetamine addict to her. Eris explains that most drug addicts usually do not. Sarah admits to wanting Johnny back, but Eris thinks she should move on. She makes smoothies for herself and Sarah, and tells Sarah she may regret wanting Johnny back later.

Chapter 35 – Mia comes to spend the night with Sarah. She wants Johnny to read to her, but Sarah explains he is teaching a class at a university. It begins to rain. Jessie calls Sarah, asking her for a ride, saying she is about two miles away, walking toward Sarah's house. Eris agrees to watch the sleeping Mia while Sarah goes to pick up Jessie. Sarah also calls Jessie's mom to let her know what is going on, but must leave a message. Sarah picks Jessie up, who does not want to go home. She pulls back her hood to reveal her beaten, swollen face, a black eye, and a split lip. Sarah is both angered and horrified. Sarah drives to Cove Hospital. Jessie explains the beating is a result of Adrian having found out about Chad. Jessie's mom is called, and meets Sarah and Jessie at the hospital. Sarah then heads back to the cottage. She finds no one there. She then heads over to Eris's house, and finds no one there. She does, however, find a room that has been entirely devoted to a shrine to Johnny.

Chapter 36 – Sarah is stunned by the room. Photos of Johnny are everywhere, along with sexy clothing, a plate of condoms, and a bed against the wall. Sarah is horrified, knowing that this Eris now has Mia somewhere.

Chapter 37 – Sarah can only imagine that Eris has taken Mia to the river. At the trail to the river, Sarah finds Mia's pink hair ribbon on a branch, as if it has deliberately been put there. At the river, Sarah confronts Eris, who is holding Mia. Eris contends that none of this would be necessary if Sarah had just died in the fire, and that Sarah knows exactly what Eris wants. Eris reveals that she paid Todd to start the fire, but that Todd was an idiot pyromaniac with a drug addiction who did not know where to stop. Eris



reveals it was she who told Adrian about Chad, and that Steve is not her boyfriend, but her divorce attorney. Eris then throws Mia into the water. Sarah goes in after her.

Chapter 38 – Sarah fights to grab hold of Mia in the current of the river, and thinks she hears Johnny's voice calling out to her.

Chapter 39 – It is Johnny who pulls Sarah to safety while Ryan Green pulls Mia to safety. Eris is arrested. Johnny and Sarah decide to move out of the cottage and into a rental across town. Greene reveals that Felix was able to explain he saw Eris and Todd arguing the night of the fire. Greene also reveals the hang-ups on Johnny's cell phone have been traced to Eris. Greene also reveals that some time before, Eris had stalked another doctor in a similar manner.

Chapter 40 – Pedra, in tears, reveals to Sarah that Jessie has packed and left home. Adrian's apartment is also empty. The police can do nothing, because Jessie is 18. Sarah hugs and holds onto Pedra.

Chapter 41 – Sarah and Johnny move into 24 Oceanview Lane. Sarah goes for a walk on the beach after receiving a letter from a DNA testing firm, which says there is a 99.9942% chance that Johnny is the father of Mia. Johnny calls Sarah back into the house, saying a storm is coming.

## Analysis

As it turns out, the good neighbor – Eris – is actually the bad neighbor who is obsessed with Johnny, is responsible for the fires, and who will stop at nothing to have Johnny. This includes throwing a child into a river, and watching gleefully as Sarah dives in after Mia. Unfortunately for Eris, Johnny and Ryan Greene arrive in the nick of time and rescue Sarah and Mia; and Eris herself is arrested and sent to jail. Eris's own past is revealed: Johnny is not the first person she has stalked, and Johnny has been the recipient of numerous items of attention, from the strange cards to the hang-up phone calls. Sarah is largely relieved because this part of the past appears to be settled. The plunge into the Shadow River – the plunge into the past – has cleansed Sarah of the past, largely. Other evidence – such as the supposed affair with Theresa turning out to be nothing more than a business arrangement to restore the Miracle Mouse painting – help to settle Sarah's mind.

It is only natural to want normalcy after tragedy, but this is not always possible because the past never stays buried. Sarah's desire to return to as normal a life as possible after Eris is confounded by Johnny's past. There is the outstanding question of Mia's parentage. Sarah suspects that Johnny may indeed be Mia's father – and DNA tests confirm this. The reader should also note that the very end of the story ends with ill-omens. Johnny tells Sarah to come inside because a storm is coming. However, the storm that Sarah and Johnny will now face has nothing to do with the weather, but everything to do with Johnny's past.



## Discussion Question 1

Why does Eris try to kill Mia by throwing her into the river? Why does Sarah dive in after Mia? What does this demonstrate about Sarah's moral character as a person?

## Discussion Question 2

Do you think Sarah was right to have the parentage of Mia tested? Why or why not? Do you think it was even necessary at this point to have the tests done, given the arrest of Eris and the possibility to begin anew? Why or why not?

## Discussion Question 3

Why does Sarah have the parentage of Mia tested? How does she react based on the results? Why? How do you think Sarah might have reacted if the test results had been returned differently?

## Vocabulary

incongruous, obsession, fixation, sordid, brusque



# Characters

## Sarah Phoenix

Sarah Phoenix is the narrator, main character, and wife of Johnny McDonald. A famed children's book writer of the Miracle Mouse series, Sarah begins the book happy with her career, her husband, and her home. Sarah, though quiet and friendly, is also prone to courageous acts out of character for her, as she is the one who saves Mia from the fire.

Sarah is devastated by the fires, and desperate for normalcy so she begins, in effect, her own investigation into things to learn the truth. In the process, she uncovers horrible and unnerving things about the past, ranging from that her husband once had a sexual relationship with Monique to the fact that Eris is to blame for everything. Still, even with Eris handled and a chance to return to normalcy, Sarah has a DNA test conducted on Mia's parentage, and finds a more than 99-percent chance that Johnny is Mia's father. Because of this, Sarah knows difficult times are still ahead for her and Johnny.

## Johnny McDonald

Johnny McDonald is the husband of Sarah. A dermatologist, Johnny was a playboy until meeting Sarah, with whom he finally settled down. The fire that destroyed their home also exposes his past to Sarah, very nearly wrecking their marriage. Johnny desperately wants the marriage to work, so he gives Sarah space to think and recover. It is ultimately Johnny who saves Sarah from the river, and by the end of the novel, the two appear to have reconciled.

## Eris Coghlan

Eris Coghlan is a divorced real estate agent who is obsessed with Johnny, and who ingratiates herself into the lives of Sarah and Johnny as the titular good neighbor, always being there to lend a helping hand when needed, but secretly plotting to find a way to steal Johnny. Eris is the one who paid Todd Severson to burn down Sarah's house, enabling Sarah and Johnny to move into the nearby cottage, and it is Eris who attempts to kill Mia in order to kill Sarah and take Johnny for herself. However, Eris is ultimately arrested for her scheming.

## Todd Severson

Todd Severson is a handyman who is routinely hired by Eris to work on her real estate properties. Eris also hires Todd to repair things in the cottage for Sarah and Johnny. A drug-addict in need of a fix, Todd agrees to burn down Sarah's house for Eris, though he



initially confuses the houses and burns down the Kimballs. Todd is later found dead of a meth overdose.

## Jessie Ramirez

Jessie Ramirez is the 17-year-old neighbor of Sarah and Johnny. Kind and gorgeous, Jessie is dating Adrian though she has a crush on Chad Kimball instead, and longs to be with him. Jessie's stealing of Monique's diary to learn if Chad and Monique plan to divorce so Chad will be with her provides evidence to Sarah of a past relationship between Johnny and Monique. By the end of the novel, without Chad and angry at her parents, Jessie runs away with the abusive Adrian. Her fate remains unknown at the end of the novel.

## Theresa Minkowski

Theresa Minkowski is an art restorationist and neighbor of Sarah and Eris. Theresa is married to a man named Kadin, and together they have a son, also named Kadin. Theresa is utterly gorgeous, warm, and kind, and this makes Sarah jealous. Sarah comes to believe that Johnny is having an affair with Theresa, but this turns out not to be the case. Theresa is only restoring Sarah's Miracle Mouse painting as a surprise.

## Monique Kimball

Monique Kimball is a gorgeous blonde French-American woman married to Chad and is the mother of Mia. Monique also once had a sexual relationship with Johnny. Monique's sexuality, warmth, and kindness are appealing to all the men around her, so it is only natural that Sarah believes Johnny slept with Monique while they were married, though this is not true. Monique is ultimately killed in the house fire meant for Sarah's house instead.

## Mia

Mia is the four-year-old daughter of Johnny and Monique, though Mia believes her parents are Chad and Monique. Mia does not understand much of what has happened with the fire or the death of her parents, but she is happy to be living with her grandmother, and is happy to spend time with Sarah, Jessie, and Johnny. Mia is nearly killed when Eris throws her into the river in an attempt to get Sarah to go in after her, and drown. Mia survives, and at the end of the novel, is living safely with her grandmother. The truth of her parentage, however, portends great struggles ahead for Sarah and Johnny.





## Ryan Greene

Ryan Greene is the Fire Marshal for the county. It is he who heads the formal investigation into the fire that burns down the houses of both Sarah and the Kimballs. His probing questions annoy Sarah, but eventually help lead him to the truth regarding Eris and Todd. It is Ryan who saves Mia's life by pulling her from the river at the end of the novel.

## Natalie

Natalie is Sarah's best friend. On a trip in India with her husband, Dan, Natalie keeps in touch with Sarah by phone. It is Natalie who attempts to reassure Sarah that Johnny is not cheating on her, but this does little to comfort Sarah.



# Symbols and Symbolism

## Charcoal

Charcoal is the novel's red herring. Early in the novel, Monique asks Sarah to borrow some charcoal for a barbecue. When the fires break out, it is naturally assumed the charcoal was used to start the fire, either intentionally or accidentally, but this turns out not to be the case.

## Greene's questions

Ryan Greene's questions are omens that symbolize both doubt and dark things to come. Greene asks Sarah and Johnny very personal and very probing questions in order to get to the truth of things. Greene's questions about Sarah's marriage, for example, Sarah shrugs off for the most part though it causes some doubt. She is able to shrug off these questions until she realizes that Johnny may have indeed cheated on her – and that any of her neighbors could be the arsonist.

## Adultery article

An adultery article symbolizes suspicion. Sarah, concerned that Johnny may be cheating on her, recalls reading an article about adultery in the past with signs wives should look for that their husbands are cheating. These range from a husband taking calls in private to kissing his wife goodbye differently than normal. Sarah compares Johnny to the list, and concludes that it is possible he may be cheating on her.

## Old photos

Old photos symbolize an uncovering of the past. Sarah finds, in the rubble of her burned-down house, an envelope of old photos of her husband and a past girlfriend. These photos depict a past that Sarah did not know about, but a past that clearly meant enough to Johnny to keep the pictures. This further erodes her faith and confidence in her husband.

## Hydrangeas

Hydrangeas symbolize suspicion and uncertainty. At Eris's dinner, Theresa receives hydrangeas –the same kind Sarah received from Johnny the first time he ever purchased a gift for her. Sarah becomes suspicious that the hydrangeas, bearing an unsigned card, are from Johnny rather than Theresa's own husband.



## Monique

Monique's journal is symbolic of a past unknown to Sarah. The journal, stolen from Monique's house by Jessie in the hopes it contained information that Chad wanted to be with her, reveals a sexual relationship between Johnny and Monique. Sarah assumes this relationship has occurred recently, and confronts Johnny about it. Johnny explains the journal entries are from before the marriage, as the relationship with Monique was winding down when the relationship between Sarah and Johnny was heating up.

## The Miracle Mouse painting

The Miracle Mouse painting is symbolic of mistakes and a new beginning. A gift to Sarah from her grandmother, the painting barely survives the fire, and is commissioned to be restored by Theresa on behalf of Johnny. Johnny stops by Theresa's to see the progress, visits that Sarah mistakes for adultery. When Sarah learns the truth, she realizes she has a chance to begin anew with Johnny.

## Felix's memories

Felix's memories are symbolic of the obscured truth. Felix has difficulty recalling the past due to mild Alzheimer's. The night of the fire, he recalls seeing a man and woman arguing out on the street, but cannot remember who they are until much later. Felix's memories of that night represent the truth of that night, obscured, until his memory kicks in and he can describe who he saw that night.

## DNA test

A DNA test is symbolic of Sarah's inability to let things be as they are, and her desire to always know the truth. Sarah has long suspected that Mia is actually Johnny's child, but Johnny denies knowing anything about this. Only a DNA test confirms for Sarah that Johnny is indeed the father of Mia, and this deeply troubles her because now she does not know what the future will bring.

## Storm

A storm serves as a symbolic omen of bad times to come. The storm approaches the beach on which Sarah and Johnny now live after Sarah has opened the DNA test results to learn the truth. Johnny calls her inside to get out of the way of the storm, but Sarah knows a new period of instability and stormy relations will occur between her and Johnny because of the test.



# Settings

## 599 Sitka Lane

599 Sitka Lane is the original home of Sarah and Johnny. It is a beautiful, warm, and comfortable house, and Sarah and Johnny both feel very at home there. It is where Sarah not only lives, but works. 599 Sitka Lane is targeted by Todd for torching at Eris's instruction, but he accidentally targets the Kimball house next door before torching the correct house. The fires not only destroy both houses, but kill Monique and Chad Kimball.

## The cottage

The cottage is a small, cozy house owned and rented out by Eris. Eris rents it out to Johnny and Sarah after their own on Sitka Lane burns down. Located in the heavily-forested neighborhood of Shadow Bluff Lane. The cottage is where Sarah and Johnny begin to rebuild their lives, then where Sarah attempts to straighten her own life out after finding out about Johnny's past. After Eris's actions and nearly drowning Mia, Sarah and Johnny both decide they will move out of the cottage.

## The trail

The trail is located behind the houses of Shadow Bluff Lane, and the trail itself branches off in various places, including a path leading to the river itself. The trail is used by locals for walking, hiking, and jogging. It is used by Johnny to visit Theresa, and it is used by Sarah to follow Johnny after which time she believes he is cheating on her. The trail is later used by Eris to gain access to the river to throw Mia in.

## Shadow River

Shadow River is located beneath the high land of Shadow Bluff Lane, beyond the trails, and serves as a symbolic location representing time and shadows (memories) of the past, as well as human evil and darkness. It is while walking along Shadow River that Sarah sees a location very similar to the ones in the photos of Johnny and his old girlfriend, which makes her realize she is seeing a part of the past of which she knows nothing. The Shadow River is also where Eris tries to drown Mia and Sarah, an act of darkness and evil. Fortunately, Sarah and Mia are rescued from the river by Johnny and Ryan Greene.



## 24 Oceanview Lane

24 Oceanview Lane is the shorefront home to which Sarah and Johnny move after leaving the cottage on Shadow Bluff Lane. Sarah hopes that she and Johnny will be happy in the new home, but circumstances may prove otherwise. As a storm approaches, Sarah takes a walk on the beach to read the results of a DNA test on Johnny and Mia. Sarah now does not know what her new life will bring on Oceanview Lane, for Johnny is the father of Mia.



## Themes and Motifs

### **It is only natural to want normalcy after tragedy, but this is not always possible**

It is only natural to want normalcy after tragedy, but this is not always possible, argues A.J. Banner in her novel *The Good Neighbor*. When disasters, tragedies, and misfortunes happen, those who have suffered wish things to get back to normal as quickly as possible – such as Sarah. However, the circumstances of the situation may mean that such a thing cannot happen.

When Sarah wakes up in the hospital, and in the time after the fire, she desperately longs for things to return to normal. She thus clings to little pieces of normalcy in her life, such as seeing her husband, making love with him, and speaking with friends. However, Sarah's burned-down house means that she cannot get back to life as it was previously. She must now find a new kind of normal, beginning with the cottage that Eris rents to her and Johnny.

In the cottage, Sarah seeks to settle into a similar daily routine, but the aftermath of the fire makes this impossible – from Ryan Greene's probing and unsettling questions to having to meet new people and make new friends with the new neighbors. Johnny's potential adultery also throws Sarah off, as he takes calls in private, begins behaving toward her differently, and visits Theresa's house through the back door. Instead of only having to contend with the fire, Sarah must now confront the possibility that Johnny is cheating on her.

If this was not bad enough, Sarah is also absorbed in three new situations: she becomes a part-time caregiver to Mia; she attempts to keep Jessie on the straight-and-narrow; and Eris attempts to kill both her and Mia in order to get to Johnny. Even once Eris is arrested, and things appear poised to begin a return to normalcy, they do not. The novel ends on a note of uncertainty, as Sarah comes to discover that Mia's real father is mostly likely Johnny.

### **In times of danger, anyone and anything can be suspicious**

In times of danger, anyone and anything can be suspicious, argues A.J. Banner in her novel *The Good Neighbor*. Fear is an understandable response to tragedy. It can lead to justifiable concern on the one hand, and it can lead to paranoia on the other. For Sarah, everyone and everything around her becomes suspicious at some point after the fire.

The fire, she explains to Eris, has destroyed not only her home, but everything she thought she knew. When she learns that the fires were set deliberately, and that the Kimballs were targeted mistakenly, Sarah can only wonder who would do such a terrible



thing. She begins to reconsider her neighbors, for each of them now become either a suspect (such as Jessie) or become the key to important clues (such as Felix and his memories). Even Johnny begins to worry Sarah based on the questions that Ryan Greene asks about him and their marriage.

Sarah's desperation for a return to normalcy amid her fear soon moves her from the realm of understandable concern to paranoia. Everything Johnny does, for example, becomes proof to Sarah that he is cheating on her – no matter how factual and reasonable his responses may be. To some degree this is understandable, as much of Johnny's past has not been revealed to Sarah. On the other hand, her suspicions are more akin to paranoia, as even taking a phone call in private becomes proof to her that she is being cheated on. Evidence that demonstrates the fire was deliberately set, but set to the wrong house initially, further worries Sarah that something is very wrong.

Ironically, the one person Sarah never suspects of having done anything wrong – either the fire or anything else – is the one person who is actually responsible for everything. The person Sarah finds she has closest at hand that she can trust – Eris – is to blame. Nothing Eris does is suspicious to Sarah until the end of the novel when Eris snaps, and discovery of Eris's true nature is unavoidable. At the same time, Sarah's own paranoid pursuit of the truth at all costs to the point of having a DNA test conducted on Mia proves that Sarah's future life may not be happy at all, as she feels she can no longer trust anyone or anything at all.

## **People can change for the better or the worse**

People can change for the better or the worse, argues A.J. Banner in her novel *The Good Neighbor*. The people of the novel change over time, often to different ends and for different reasons. Sarah sees – and in some cases thinks she sees – tremendous changes in the people around her after the fire.

Before the fire, Sarah is unshakably loyal and loving to her husband, and is good friends with everyone in the neighborhood. The fire, however, destroys everything Sarah thought she knew and believed in. Sweet and kind Jessie, for example, turns out to be a thief – not because she is cruel or angry, but because she wants to appear sexy and attractive, and wanted to be with Chad. Likewise, Sarah never thought that Chad would be having marital problems with Monique, or that Chad would kiss a girl of 17. Chad changes from a stable, confident man into one whose emotions are torn, while Jessie transforms from a sweet and kind girl into a sexually-active girl who chases the wrong kind of men.

Monique herself transforms from a warm and sexually-attractive woman into a sexually driven woman who had a sexually-based relationship with Johnny before Johnny married Sarah. Eris seems originally to be a real estate agent who becomes a good neighbor and helpful friend. She changes before Sarah's eyes from a friendly woman to a raging, obsessed psychopath who is willing to kill a defenseless child to secure the man she desires.



Perhaps the most startling change of all to Sarah, however, is the change she comes to see in Johnny. Sarah herself wonders if Johnny has changed, if she never saw the real Johnny, or if she herself is wrong. Sarah is stunned by the sexually-active past that Johnny has had, going through a quick succession of girlfriends, and his current behavior (taking calls in private, for example) make her believe Johnny is cheating on her. Johnny insists he has not changed, and urges Sarah to give him and their marriage another chance. Sarah does, but only in part – she herself has changed as well. She is now insatiably suspicious, and her latest pursuit of truth by way of a DNA test confirms Johnny is Mia's father.

## **The past never stays buried**

The past never stays buried, argues A.J. Banner in her novel *The Good Neighbor*. The past is wholly responsible for the present, and in large part can be responsible for the future. Even when the past is hidden, forgotten, or omitted, the past still flares up in the present.

Sarah herself admits early on in the novel that she does not know much about Johnny's past. Initially, this does not bother her. Only after her house is burned down and incisive questions begin to be asking does she begin to wonder about Johnny's past. Johnny's own behavior – of kissing her goodbye unusually or taking phone calls in private – leads Sarah to conclude that it can only be explained by way of adultery.

Sarah considers it a betrayal by Johnny that he has omitted so much about his past – from his sexually-charged relationship with Monique to his endless parade of sexually-based relationships with girl after girl. Johnny insists that he has only ever been faithful to Sarah in their marriage, but she cannot bring herself to believe him based on his confessions about the past, and the evidence from the past she has found by way of old photographs and things like Monique's journal entries.

The past relating to other characters also refuses to stay buried – from Jessie's pursuit of the much older Chad to the blank space for a father on Mia's birth certificate to Eris's previous stalking of another doctor. In each case, the present is influenced by the past. Jessie's loss of Chad leads her to choosing to go with Adrian in order to be loved (what she mistakenly confuses for love). Sarah risks her future with Johnny by having a DNA test done on him and Mia, seemingly without his awareness. Eris's past obsessions weighs as evidence against her, and sends her to jail. No matter what, the past catches up with people, turns up at unexpected times, and changes the present irrevocably.

## **Life is full of challenges and complications**

Life is full of challenges and complications, argues A.J. Banner in her novel *The Good Neighbor*. Such challenges and complications can range from personal, minute, and romantic, to the kind that forever change a person's life. These changes and complications continually disrupt not only Sarah's life, but the lives of those around her as well.





The fire meant for Sarah ends up killing Chad and Monique, and leaving Mia an orphan. The fire that flares up in Sarah's house results in Sarah and Johnny needing to find a new home, having to make new friends, and having to begin a new life. Even in a new house with familiar things like Johnny, Sarah's life is challenged and complicated by Johnny's past, the fact that he may be having an affair with Theresa, and may have had other affairs since being married, and having to adjust to the idea that Johnny may not be the person that she thought he was.

Mia, on the other hand, must now deal with a life without her parents in it, even though she quickly adjusts to living with her grandmother, and quickly warms to Sarah and Johnny. Jessie must deal with the loss of Chad, though Chad never returned her feelings to begin with, and so does her best to find love the only place she thinks she can find it – with Aidan. Harriet must adjust to life without her son and daughter-in-law in it, while Jessie's parents must adjust to life without her in it when she runs away with Aidan.

As Eris is put away and Sarah and Mia are saved, life at last appears to be settling down. Sarah and Johnny move to a new house on the shore, presumably to begin a life together again. However, Sarah receives the results of a DNA test in the mail which demonstrate that Johnny is probably the father of Mia. This comes in conjunction with the arrival of storm, signaling more unrest between Sarah and Johnny. Johnny's fatherhood is only the latest in a long line of life's complications and challenges that Sarah has had to face – but what she will do remains unknown to readers at the end of the novel.



# Styles

## Point of View

A.J. Banner tells her novel *The Good Neighbor* in the first-person limited-omniscient perspective from the point of view of main character and principal protagonist, Sarah Phoenix. This is done for several reasons. First, Sarah is the intended victim of the arsonist's attack, and so comes to tell her own story, especially given the duplicity, uncertainty, and lies that surround her on all sides. Second, the reader is given intimate insight into Sarah's innermost thoughts, feelings, and considerations, which matters greatly because Sarah must hide all these things from those around her because she loses her trust, faith, and belief in all those people and things (like her marriage) that she thought she could trust. The reader thus gains the exceptional position as a confidante when Sarah speaks of such things to no one else. Third, the limited-omniscient aspect comes from the fact that Sarah is relating events as they happen to her, and does not know everything going on at once, or everything coming in the future, or everything that came in the past. Fourth, the limited-omniscient perspective of Sarah – not knowing everything happening around her – adds a sense of suspense and drama, as readers themselves only know as much as Sarah, and do not know what is coming next.

## Language and Meaning

A.J. Banner tells her novel *The Good Neighbor* in language that is intelligent, reflective, and questioning. This is done for a few different reasons. First, Sarah's thoughtfulness – her reflective nature, her questioning of things, her intelligence – are themselves reflective of her work and career as a writer, in which she is very careful with words so that she may properly write. It is only natural that this same professionalism apply elsewhere in her life. Second, Sarah has been through severe trauma by way of her injury, the fire, and the potential that her husband is cheating on her. Everything she thought she knew, she tells Eris, is gone. Thus, it is only natural that Sarah be so questioning, so reflective, so considering of everything around her: she does not know who or what she can trust, and her fear from the fires makes her understandably defensive so as to need to be that questioning of everything. Consider, for example, Sarah's questioning of her husband and who he is as a person in Chapter 19: "At precisely what moment had my feelings begun to shift?... Had he changed, or had I simply become less sure of him?" (102). Here, Sarah's typical language is clear: she is reflective, questioning, discerning, and wondering, displaying an underlying intelligence in the search for the truth.

## Structure

A.J. Banner divides her novel *The Good Neighbor* into 41 consecutive, chronological chapters that span the course of two months, and are preceded by a prologue which hints at events to come two months later. The prologue acts as a hook to the novel, in which Sarah and Mia are in the river, while an unknown assailant (later revealed to be Eris) laughs and bids them good riddance from above. The chapters then return to two months before, and work their way, chapter by chapter, from one event to the next, to the time during the river confrontation, and beyond. The chapter by chapter structure of the novel is reflective of the day by day, event by event unfolding of the novel, with each being like a step that leads to a final destination – the river confrontation. This very logical progression of events is in turn reflective of Sarah’s work as a writer, in which she builds stories step-by-step. It is also reflective of her step-by-step investigation into the fire, into Johnny’s fidelity, and into Mia’s parentage.



## Quotes

Now we would have to hold on to the memories – they were all we had to keep us going.

-- Sarah (Chapter 3)

**Importance:** When Sarah is awakened to the fire at the Kimballs' house, she never imagines her own house will also catch on fire. Sarah is devastated to learn the house she shares with her husband has been ruined. She realizes everything she has now is gone, except for memories of the past.

This isn't over yet. I feel something worse coming on. Only this time it's not going to be a tree or a fire. It's going to be something less obvious, something insidious.

-- Natalie (Chapter 4)

**Importance:** Speaking with Natalie on the phone, Natalie is horrified to hear about the fire. Natalie is always predicting bad things will happen, and now predicts something even worse, though less obvious, will happen. Her warnings serve as an ill-omen for future events.

You'd be surprised.

-- Ryan Greene (Chapter 6)

**Importance:** The fire marshal, Ryan Greene, comes to talk to Sarah about the night of the fires. He asks her about the other people in the neighborhood after stating the fire that burned down Sarah and Johnny's house was intentionally set. Sarah finds it difficult to believe anyone in the neighborhood could be guilty of such a thing, but Greene tells her she would be surprised what anyone is capable of, including those who do not seem like they would do something of the sort.

Dan was faithful to Natalie, but I realized now that Johnny fit the pattern.

-- Sarah (Chapter 9)

**Importance:** As Sarah and Johnny attempt to some semblance of normalcy in their lives, Sarah comes to suspect that Johnny may be cheating on her. She suspects this because he is following the patterns of a cheating husband, ranging from taking phone calls in private to kissing her goodbye abnormally. This, in addition to unusual items Sarah finds in the wreckage of their house – items she does not recognize (such as a silver bracelet) – make her worry that Johnny is cheating on her. She does her best to ignore the worry, but she cannot.

I always knew that woman was trouble.

-- Felix Calassis (Chapter 9)

**Importance:** When speaking with the slightly Alzheimer's-suffering Mr. Calassis, Sarah is stunned to hear him warn her about "that woman." Sarah does not know who or



exactly what Mr. Calsssis means, perhaps thinking he is talking about Monique. The conversation startles Sarah, and comes to worry her greatly.

When you get a house, move as far from this town as you can.  
-- Todd Severson (Chapter 14)

**Importance:** In a private moment with Sarah, Todd tells Sarah to get as far away from town as possible. He explains if someone had tried to burn his house down, he would do the same. This startles Sarah, who imagines Todd may know more than he is letting on.

At precisely what moment had my feelings begun to shift?... Had he changed, or had I simply become less sure of him?  
-- Sarah (Chapter 19)

**Importance:** When Sarah and Johnny babysit little Mia, Sarah begins to wonder about whether or not Johnny will be a good father himself one day. She wonders if this is because she is unsure because of the entire situation, or if Johnny himself has changed. It is a very disturbing and unsettling thought for Sarah, because her life now seems much less like the life she had originally planned with Johnny.

You need to come over. I have to show you something.  
-- Jessie (Chapter 21)

**Importance:** After Jessie spends the day with Sarah and Mia, Jessie tells Sarah there is something she needs to show Sarah. She brings Sarah over to her house. It is a journal entry in which Monique appears to have had an affair with Johnny. Sarah is devastated by this.

I ached to talk to him, to ask him how long he'd been with Monique... But I could not replay every possible instance of infidelity, or I would drive myself crazy.  
-- Sarah (Chapter 23)

**Importance:** Sarah goes back to her childhood home for space and time to think. Johnny follows her, wanting to talk everything out. When he arrives at her house, Sarah is understandably torn: this is the man she loves, but now also the man she despises. Reluctantly, she lets him in to talk things out and learn the truth of what happened with Monique.

The fire burned away more than our house. It burned everything I believe in.  
-- 139 (Chapter 27)

**Importance:** Here, Sarah tells Eris that the fire that destroyed her home has also essentially destroyed her life. The fire has acted as a cleansing force in her life, exposing lies, the past, and causing her to doubt her husband. Nothing is the same anymore, and Sarah's life is in crisis.



What kind of sick obsession was this? This perfumed room made into an elaborate shrine to Johnny?

-- Sarah (Chapter 36)

**Importance:** Sarah discovers a room in Eris's house that has been devoted to Johnny like a shrine. It is full of photos, sexy clothing, condoms, and so on. Sarah is horrified by the discovery, knowing now that Eris is obsessed with Johnny. This very same Eris has now disappeared with Mia.

You should have died in the fire. Then none of this would be necessary.

-- Eris (Chapter 37)

**Importance:** When Eris kidnaps Mia and Sarah confronts her, Eris admits the truth. She wants Johnny, and will do whatever is needed to make it happen. She contends that if Mia had died in the fire, extreme measures would not have been needed. Sarah must now save Mia and make sure Eris is handled.