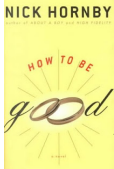


How to be good

How to be Good



As a person raised Catholic, I was drawn to the topic of this novel. Who doesn't want to be a kind, caring person? To do good works? To make the world a bit better each day? OK, maybe not serial killers, some Wall Street tycoons, mafia types, mercenaries, etc. but on the whole most people try (at least part of the time) to be good.

This 2001 Nick Hornby novel zeroes in on Dr. Katie Carr, a London wife and mother, who deals with boils and warts and patients struggling to breathe. She's a physician for Britain's National Health Service. She's married to David, a stay-at-home husband who writes an acerbic column for the local paper about all the myriad things that send him into rages, for instance, the elderly not taking their reserved seats in the front of bus and annoying other passengers by tottering when the bus suddenly stops.

David is wickedly funny but horribly mean, crusty, and exceedingly cynical. The novel opens when Kate tells him spontaneously and without planning to that she wants a divorce. Over the phone, no less. But marriages are as tricky to wrangle out of as to enter, so they don't split up that easily. And shortly after this divorce conversation, David has a kind of conversion. He visits Dr. Goodnews for his aching back, and Goodnews soon moves into their house, steering David him from his life of caustic wit to one of good works: giving their cab fare home from the theater to panhandlers, providing homes for the homeless (a plan that gives them another roommate and does the same for five of their neighbors.)

Not only does David aspire to do good works, but Kate, who is confused, perplexed, and not sure what she wants to do with her life, does the same. She's continuously questioning her values--didn't she become a doctor to be good? Isn't it enough to do merciful work? Can't her home life be peaceful and serene? Is that being selfish? Is it too much to ask to have possessions though half the world owns so very little? Must she share her own kitchen with the poor and oppressed?

It's one of those rare novels about ideas that is both funny and enjoyable. I read it straight through on the plane ride home from Vegas, actually Seattle, via Vegas. But Vegas sounds like the right city to be reading this book.

For other books on being good check out Julia Alvarez's Saving the World. For a nonfiction take on this subject, try Eckhart Tolle's, A New Earth: Awakening to Your Life's Purpose.

Posted by Dory L. on August 15, 2011

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