

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY



Jacquelyn Mitchard is the *New York Times* bestselling author of 22 novels for adults and teenagers, and the recipient of Great Britain's Talkabout prize, The Bram Stoker and Shirley Jackson awards, and named to the short list for the Women's Prize for Fiction. Her first novel, *The Deep End of the Ocean*, was the inaugural selection of the Oprah Winfrey Book Club, with more than 3 million copies in print in 34 languages. It was later adapted into a major feature film starring Michelle Pfeiffer. Her novel *Still Summer* has also been adapted for a film still in production. She has also an essay collection, *The Rest of Us: Dispatches from the Mother Ship*, drawn from her newspaper column syndicated by Tribune Media. Mitchard's essays also have been published in magazines worldwide, widely anthologized, and incorporated into school curricula. She served on the Fiction jury for the 2003 National Book Awards, and was editor-in-chief of Merit Press, a Young Adult imprint under the aegis of Simon and Schuster.

A Chicago native, Mitchard grew up the daughter of a plumber and a hardware store clerk who met as rodeo riders. She is a Distinguished Fellow at the Ragdale Foundation and a DeWitt Clinton Readers Digest Fellow at the Macdowell Colony. She has taught in MFA program for Creative Writing at Vermont College of Fine Arts, Miami University of Ohio and Western New England University and was speechwriter for Secretary of Health and Human Services Donna E. Shalala during the first days of the Clinton administration and at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. An avid Italian cook, she lives on Cape Cod with her husband and their nine children. Her newest novel, *The Good Son*, a story about two women, one whose son was convicted of murdering the other's daughter, is out from Mira/HarperCollins.

Author's Website.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. The crux of the conflict in this story, as Stefan and his parents understand it, is whether or not he can make a life for himself after his crime and his imprisonment. As Stefan's father Jep says, it was easier somehow when Stefan was in prison – evident proof that he was “paying” for his role in Belinda's death. Now, when Stefan is again in the community, the struggle between their love and their shame is sharpened. How do the actions of a son or daughter inexorably reflect on their parents?
2. Thea never gives up searching for what she thinks of as the “missing piece” in understanding her son. Is it true, however, that what Thea is looking for turns out to be different from what she believes she's looking for? If Thea had been less questioning – at least once Stefan is out of prison -- how would this story have turned out differently?
3. We'd planted an apple tree in the yard when Stefan was born.” (37) In what way is a family a tree?
4. Stefan tells his mother that he wishes he were not their “only,” that he wishes they had a “backup child,” a better brother. What does this story say about the nature of family, and how each of us sometimes must depend on the family we were given, for better or worse?
5. Thea is an intrinsically hopeful person. But even she falters under the weight of the turn her life has taken because of Stefan's crime. How do you feel about Thea's anger toward Stefan for affecting her own life with the choices he made?
6. It may not be fair that one event defines an individual's whole life, particularly if that one event takes place when the person is young. We like to think of ourselves as believing in rehabilitation, redemption, the chance that a person could really change. But do we really live those ideals?
7. “But even when I would hear his low voice coming from his room late at night, the sound of his crying, I let myself bless those noises, too. Even grief is feeling, I thought. And feeling outflanks numbness.” (104) Have there been times in your own life when you simply could not make it better for someone you loved? Are Thea's emotions in this situation authentic to what you felt?
8. Stefan's Healing Project is the manifestation of his own longing to be allowed to prove his contrition and his worth. He wants to offer that chance to others who have done wrong. Is it really the case, as Thea thinks in her despair, that nothing can truly repair the damage done, because it's impossible to turn back time? Does that mean Stefan is foolish to try?
9. Some readers say that Julie, Thea's best friend, is one of their favorite characters in the novel. If we are lucky enough to have a Julie in our lives, what is it about that friendship that makes it so precious?
10. What Thea experiences is, in a sense, survivor's guilt. If you were Thea, given what you knew, would you be able to love your son and get past the enormity of his crime? For a moment, at a few places in the story, Thea is even frightened of Stefan. Can you see this being something a mother might truly experience in such an

anguished circumstance?

11. Throughout the novel, Thea seems desperate to find another story to explain Belinda's death, even as she seems to stoically accept what Stefan did. Why does she continue to cling to such a possibility?
12. Experts on grief say that there are recognizable steps to the acceptance of the finality of tragedy. Admittedly, Thea would like to skip some of those steps and go directly to Sort-of-Happily-Ever-After. Do you see around you a similar impatience with the process of healing or grieving? Have you felt this yourself?
13. *The Good Son* is a mother-and-child story, but Thea's husband, Stefan's father Jep, is also an important character. How does Jep change throughout the course of the narrative?
14. Rebecca is a minor character in the story, but someone who has a great deal of influence. What did Rebecca have to teach to Thea and to Stefan?
15. The character of Jill McCormack is complex and many-layered. A minister's daughter, an accomplished athlete, she seems to have led a life based on living up to a standard of goodness, even turning her tremendous loss of Belinda into a cause to prevent dating violence against young women? But is there a darker side to Jill as well? If so, what does that look like?

Bookclubbish.com.

BOOK REVIEWS

Booklist

Mitchard (*Two If by Sea*, 2016) seizes upon a timely and sensitive topic in her latest outing. Thea Demetriou's 21-year-old son, Stefan, has just been released from prison after being sentenced as a minor for the narcotic-spiked murder of his high-school sweetheart, a crime he cannot remember committing. All Thea wants is for Stefan to be able to move on with his life, but their family is pursued by a menacing figure in a hoodie and sunglasses, and Thea keeps receiving texts from a young woman named Esme. Stefan's first attempt at employment at his uncle's lumberyard devolves into violence, prompting him to turn his efforts to creating the Healing Project, which helps perpetrators try to find ways to make amends to their victims. Readers seeking a truly conflicted, thought-provoking exploration of penance and attempts at redemption might have to look elsewhere. Mitchard devotes more time to the mystery of Esme and Thea's over-protectiveness of her son than she does to exploring guilt and punishment, but this is a compassionate tale with a gripping, ripped-from-the-headlines premise. HIGH-DEMAND BACKSTORY: Best-selling Mitchard takes on a hot-button subject and offers just the sort of plot twist fans of popular and crime fiction crave.

Publisher's Weekly

The disappointing latest from Mitchard (*The Deep End of the Ocean*) begins with an irresistible dilemma and morphs into a long-winded, unconvincing melodrama. The setup: comfortable middle-class Wisconsin English professor Thea Demetriou must face her beloved 20-year-old son Stefan, who has just spent two years and change in prison for killing his girlfriend Belinda McCormack in a drug-induced frenzy. Formerly, Thea was friends with

Belinda's mother, Jill, who now dedicates her time to leading protests outside Thea's house over Stefan's lax punishment. Mitchard sensitively details Stefan's painful reintroduction to society, the horrified response of the liberal community to Stefan's attempts at rehabilitation, and Thea's attempts to reconcile her love for her son with his crime. But Mitchard swerves disarmingly from psychological study to would-be thriller, as Thea receives mysterious calls from a young woman who says she knows what actually happened on the day of the killing, and starts to notice the presence of an unsettling hooded figure. Readers will likely figure out what's going on long before Thea does, and the plot undercuts any emotional or ethical tension the book might have had. Those hoping for an exploration of the conflict between maternal love and moral responsibility will be frustrated. Agent: Jeff Kleinman, Folio Literary Management. (Jan.)

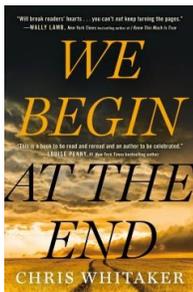
Library Journal

Best-seller Mitchard (*The Deep End of the Ocean*, the inaugural pick for Oprah's book club) sets the tone for her suspenseful new novel with its opening line: "I was picking my son up at the prison gates when I spotted the mother of the girl he had murdered." Thea tells the story, past and present, of her son Stefan and how he killed his beloved girlfriend Belinda. Belinda's mother, Jill, had been a close friend of Thea's, until the murder shattered multiple lives. As Stefan and Thea try to move forward, they're hassled by violent protestors and viciously stalked. The novel takes on a tinge of mystery when Thea starts getting strange phone calls from a young woman who "knows everything" about the night of the murder and says to tell Stefan "I'm sorry." Who is this caller, and what does she know? And what happened that awful night? Mitchard's emotional yet precise writing sets readers firmly in the story, amid the Wisconsin weather and the characters, from Thea's calm football coach husband to her not-so-sympathetic colleagues at the university where she teaches. VERDICT An engaging journey through redemption, forgiveness, and a mother's devotion.--Beth Gibbs, Davidson, NC

Kirkus Reviews

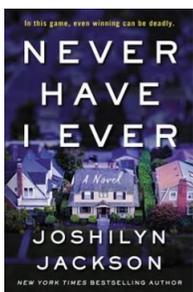
The end of her son's prison sentence is the beginning of a new nightmare for the mother of a murderer. "Before Belinda died, not much in my life had prepared me for anything except moderate good fortune." A college professor married to a popular football coach with a large network of loving family and friends, Thea Demetriou was living a good life until her luck ran out in a dramatic way three years ago, when her 17-year-old son, Stefan, a boy who had barely swatted a fly, murdered his longtime girlfriend, Belinda, in a drug-induced episode of psychosis. He remembers nothing about it, but he was the only one present, and his fingerprints were on the murder weapon. The scene Stefan comes home to is far from welcoming--picketers from an activist group founded by Belinda's mother, Jill, have already been gathering outside their house regularly to protest his release, and the harassment of the family by individuals and the media now escalates to the point that Thea is forced to take a sabbatical from her job. (Her academic focus is obsessed women in fiction, a detail with oddly unexplored potential.) If Stefan was just a regular guy before he went to prison, his tortuous experiences have made him into a near saint; he now conceives and undertakes a major project of good works in an attempt to give his ruined life meaning. Meanwhile, Thea begins receiving calls from someone who claims to have more information about the murder, but this plotline unfolds so slowly that it leaks rather than increases tension. Mitchard is an old pro at domestic fiction--the characters, the dialogue, the insights are all as strong as you'd expect--but most readers will figure out who the stalker is a hundred pages before Thea does. And as heavily overdetermined as it is, the final reveal could have been better set up. An emotionally intense drama of guilt, forgiveness, and motherhood marred by an unfortunate pacing problem. Copyright (c) Kirkus Reviews, used with permission.

READALIKES



***We Begin at the End* by Chris Whitaker**

Life is lived somewhere in between. Duchess Day Radley is a thirteen-year-old self-proclaimed outlaw. Rules are for other people. She is the fierce protector of her five-year-old brother, Robin, and the parent to her mother, Star, a single mom incapable of taking care of herself, let alone her two kids. Walk has never left the coastal California town where he and Star grew up. He may have become the chief of police, but he's still trying to heal the old wound of having given the testimony that sent his best friend, Vincent King, to prison decades before. And he's in overdrive protecting Duchess and her brother. Now, thirty years later, Vincent is being released. And Duchess and Walk must face the trouble that comes with his return. *We Begin at the End* is an extraordinary novel about two kinds of families--the ones we are born into and the ones we create.



***Never Have I Ever* by Joshilyn Jackson**

In this game, even winning can be deadly...

Amy Whey is proud of her ordinary life and the simple pleasures that come with it--teaching diving lessons, baking cookies for new neighbors, helping her best friend, Charlotte, run their local book club. Her greatest joy is her family: her devoted professor husband, her spirited fifteen-year-old stepdaughter, her adorable infant son. And, of course, the steadfast and supportive Charlotte. But Amy's sweet, uncomplicated life begins to unravel when the mysterious and alluring Angelica Roux arrives on her doorstep one book club night.



***Inside Passage* by Burt Weissbourd**

Corey Logan was set up. She knows Nick Season's terrible secret. Coming home from prison, all Corey wants is to be with her son. To get him back, she needs to make a good impression on the psychiatrist evaluating her. But Dr. Abe Stein doesn't believe she was framed -- until his well-heeled mother falls for the charming state attorney general candidate, Nick Season. As the dogs of war are unleashed, Corey and her son run for their lives, taking her boat up the Pacific Northwest's remote Inside Passage. *Inside Passage* is the first in Weissbourd's haunting, heart-stirring Corey Logan trilogy.