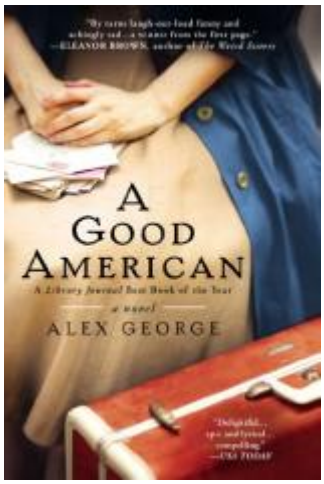
A Good American

by Alex George



About the Book

This is the story of the Meisenheimer family, told by James, a third-generation American living in Beatrice, Missouri. It's where his German grandparents --- Frederick and Jette --- found themselves after journeying across the turbulent Atlantic, fording the flood-swollen Mississippi, and being brought to a sudden halt by the broken water of the pregnant Jette.

A GOOD AMERICAN tells of Jette's dogged determination to feed a town sauerkraut and soul food; the loves and losses of her children, Joseph and Rosa; and the precocious voices of James and his brothers, sometimes raised in discord…sometimes in perfect harmony.

But above all, A GOOD AMERICAN is about the music in Frederick's heart, a song that began as an aria, was jazzed by ragtime, and became an anthem of love for his adopted country that the family still hears to this day.

Discussion Guide

1. Frederick is an uncritical lover of America, but Jette is not. What is it that Frederick loves most about America? What is it that Jette has reservations about? In what ways do you agree or disagree with each of them? Why does Frederick go off to war? Do you think it is selfish of him? Is he deserting his family?

2. One of the central paradoxes of the immigrant experience that the novel dramatizes is the desire to remain connected to the old country and yet become fully American. Do you think assimilation happens more quickly and fully in the United States than elsewhere? Do you think it is happening as rapidly with today's immigrants as it did generations ago?

3. What does being a good American mean to you? Do you think Frederick ultimately is one?

4. Why does Jette make her protest when the war ends? Is it simply a way of mourning Frederick's death?

5. Some of the citizens of Beatrice are offended by Jette's antiwar protest. Are there limits to the principle of freedom of speech, and if so, where do those limits lie? Does Jette's protest cross those limits?

6. Is Joseph's quarrel with the Reverend Kellerman justified? Why do some people turn toward religion after times of crises, while others turn away?

7. William Henry Harris and Lomax are the only two African-American characters in the book, and both are treated fairly horribly by everyone other than the Meisenheimer family. Would you describe Beatrice as a

racist town? Is it simply a product of its time?

8. The evolution of Beatrice in a way mirrors the nation's transformation during the twentieth century. What did American towns and people gain, and lose, with modernization?

9. Are there parallels between the gradual metamorphosis of the restaurant and the family's integration into American society?

10. Why does James stay in Beatrice? Do you think he really has a choice?

11. Some secrets are revealed at the end of the novel. Did you see these twists in the story coming? Does every family have secrets?

12. Why does Rosa never reveal to James their relationship?

13. The author is an Englishman who now lives in the United States. How might the book be different if it were written by an American?

14. There are many different kinds of music in the novel. Which was your favorite, and why?

Author Bio

Alex George studied law at Oxford University and worked for eight years as a corporate lawyer in London and Paris before moving from England to the United States in 2003. He now runs his own law firm in Columbia, Missouri.

Photo credit: Carole Patterson

Critical Praise

"Alex George's **A Good American** is good, old-fashioned storytelling, and his characters, both recognizable and startlingly fresh each time, linger in the mind and heart like the strains of a treasured melody. By turns funny and heartbreaking, *A Good American* lifts the reader from the first sentence and carries her all the way to the powerful end with the swiftness and confidence of the big muddy river running through the little town of Beatrice, Missouri. It was truly a joy to read."

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