



READING GUIDE

Good to a Fault

Marina Endicott
Freehand Books

ABOUT THE BOOK

In a moment of self-absorption, Clara Purdy's life takes a sharp left turn when she crashes into a beat-up car carrying an itinerant family of six. The Gage family had been travelling to a new life in Fort McMurray, but bruises on the mother, Lorraine, prove to be late-stage cancer rather than remnants of the accident. Recognizing their need as her responsibility, Clara tries to do the right thing and moves the children, husband and horrible grandmother into her own house—then has to cope with the consequences of practical goodness.

As Lorraine walks the borders of death, Clara expands into life, finding purpose, energy and unexpected love amidst the hard, unaccustomed work of sharing her days. Relentlessly self-doubting, she questions whether she has taken on the burden of this family because it is the morally correct thing to do, from middle-class guilt—or most shamefully, if she has taken over simply because she wants a baby. The burden is not Clara's alone: Lorraine's children must cope with divided loyalties and Lorraine must live with her growing, unpayable debt to Clara - and the feeling that Clara has taken her place.

What, exactly, does it mean to be good? When is sacrifice merely selfishness? What do we owe in this life and what do we deserve? Marina Endicott looks at life and death through the compassionate lens of a born novelist: being good, being at fault, and finding some balance on the precipice.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Marina Endicott's bestselling second novel, *Good to a Fault*, was a finalist for the Scotiabank Giller Prize and one of *The Globe and Mail's* Top 100 Books of 2008. Her first novel, *Open Arms* was a finalist for the 2001 Amazon/Books in Canada First Novel Award and broadcast on CBC Radio's *Between the Covers*. Endicott's stories have been featured in *Coming Attractions* and shortlisted for the Journey Prize and the Western Magazine Awards. She was born in Golden, BC and grew up in Vancouver, Nova Scotia and Toronto. She has been an actor, director, playwright and editor, and was Dramaturge of the Saskatchewan Playwrights Centre for many years. She lives in Edmonton and teaches Creative Writing at the University of Alberta.

A CONVERSATION WITH MARINA ENDICOTT

1. “None of the words in church made sense to her. The Creed – what part of that could she say she believed? Resurrection of the body, life everlasting, not those... She thought of her mother and father falling to shreds in their graves, and then, sharply, of Lorraine.” Throughout *Good to a Fault*, there seems to be a tension between faith, or religious sensibility, and more organized institutions like church ritual and scripture. Do you think the novel moves towards reconciliation between the two, or is the relationship purposely left open-ended? Do you think faith and religion have changed in the twenty-first century?

That’s true, that tension. I’ve gone back and forth my whole life, toward and away from established religion. My father is an Anglican priest and I grew up in the church, and return to it from time to time. The people in the book range, as I have myself, from completely faithful, like Paul, to completely heathen, like Mrs. Pell, who has not one larger thought in her head—but even she can commit minor generosity. I think the relationship remains, and is maybe even at its best when, open-ended; when there is room for the varying religious sensibilities of Clary and Darwin and Trevor and Paul.

It was one of the questions I started from: does the religion our parents gave us meet our needs? I was thinking about that question as a lapsed Anglican clumsily trying to be some kind of Buddhist, writing about Clary, who is trying to be a good Anglican.

When we are in trouble we look for help. The help that we are able to obtain from prayer and from contemplation can’t be denied. Clary reads the Dalai Lama, Thich Nhat Hanh, a whole stack of good advice for self-improvement, but it’s still ridiculous to do what she does, and still hard. And she throws out the books. You can’t learn everything, or maybe anything, about Buddhism from a book. It’s the *doing* that *Good to a Fault* is about: how hard it is to get from reading Shunryu Suzuki, to sitting meditation, to being loving to your drycleaner.

I like that bit of Thomas Merton quoted by Paul: *Suddenly there is a point where religion becomes laughable. Then you decide that you are nevertheless religious.*

2. *Good to a Fault* is told from a number of very different points of view, whereas *Open Arms* is a first person narrative. Why did you choose to tell this story from a range of perspectives? Did the multiplicity of voices change your writing process?

First person narration suited the longer, almost biographical sweep of time in *Open Arms*, and the changes in perspective that Bess experiences in the three times of the book: from despising her grandmother and being hotly partisan for her mother, over the years to quite a different view. It also suited Bess’s own hyper-selfconsciousness. And part of the mystery of the book is working out when the unreliable narrator Bess is precociously perceptive and when she’s blind and self-deluding.

I had a lot of fun with the roaming point of view in *Good to a Fault*. I started with Clary, but I wanted the reader to see what it was like to be Lorraine in this situation too. Then I found myself inside Paul’s mind as Clary left their initial interview at the church office, and I liked what he had rattling around in there. As the book progressed I found that I wanted to be able to see the action from different eyes and minds, and to have other people’s views of Clary and what she was choosing or being driven to do. More than external action, I’m mostly interested in what’s going on inside people’s heads—and I didn’t want to miss out on Dolly’s cool calculation, or the rich stagnant soup of Mrs. Pell.

As for the writing process, it was a challenge, almost a game, to roam freely but still make certain that the reader would never be in any doubt whose head we were inhabiting.

3. Dolly, like Irene in *Open Arms*, is a fiercely intelligent child protagonist. What was it like writing from a child's perspective? Do we underestimate the abilities and capabilities of children?

Yes, those abilities and capabilities! My own conscious self has not changed in any way from when I was six and first knew that I was myself. It is the same me, talking inside my head, that talked then. To distinguish between child and adult seems foolish to me in many ways—part of the frustration of being a child is knowing that you are equally a person—as much a Self—as any of the adults who are directing your life and ignoring your commands. And although our knowledge of the world increases as we age, I don't really think our intelligence changes (except in some cases to fossilize). I find it very interesting to write from a child's perspective: I write as an adult but take away self-determination and the driver's license. And I remember how ferociously things matter, sometimes the tiniest of things to an outside eye, when you are in that un-free state of childhood.

In *Good to a Fault* I ought to admit that I stole many of Dolly's words straight out of my daughter's mouth, and Trevor's out of my son's. So I was lucky to have good source material! But I had to cut some of the things I stole, because although true in life, they were not true in fiction: written into the book they were too cute.

4. How did your experiences with cancer – either as patient or caregiver - shape or influence the narrative?

My mother had cancer, when I was six; my sister Azana died of non-Hodgkins lymphoma when she was 36; I was diagnosed with cancer myself, halfway through writing *Good to a Fault*, and had a hysterectomy and more exploratory surgery, which all went very well, but made the writing of the book a bit longer. One of the main things I learned through my sister's illness and death was how it changes your sense of time, and of what is important. Everyone I know who goes through cancer has experienced a mood of cutting, of amputation: can't do things the old polite way, just have to do them. Talking it out, civility, even kindness takes too much energy away from the fight to recover. I felt this myself strongly. It is often very painful for our friends and family.

When Lorraine unexpectedly recovers, Clary remains determinedly oblivious, busy with plans for taking over and ordering their lives more sensibly. In her new-found strength and certainty, Clary is overwhelming. And the burden of debt is too great, can never be paid in full—Lorraine has to cut it quick to regain their independence. She can't explain. They are escaping. The delicate, difficult reconstruction of a relationship after that rift occupies the rest of the book.

5. *Good to a Fault* is peppered with quotations – Gerard Manley Hopkins and Dylan Thomas, in particular, figure prominently. Have these poets played an important role in your life, either as literary or personal influences? How does their inclusion in the narrative affect the book?

All the poets in the book run through my head most of the time. It is probably some mild neurological problem, but I'm not going to get it looked at. I like having them there. Hopkins has influenced my thinking and my seeing; Thomas I liked better when I was younger; I'm very fond of Philip Larkin. I was unable to choose living poets simply because copyright can be such a difficulty. For Paul (and for many of us) lines of poetry become a code, I think, to encapsulate a whole raft of experience throughout the years when those lines have taken on different shades of meaning. I hope that the poetry in the book does the same thing, calls an invisible layer of response from the reader who is already familiar with the work, and touches off sparks in the mind of a reader who is new to them.

6. What bottle of wine would you recommend enjoying while discussing and/or reading *Good to a Fault*?

For its sacramental depth of flavour, combined with lower-class economy, I would recommend a good Ripasso, wine made with the second pressing of the Amarone grape. Combining young fresh wine with those darker, concentrated flavours gives a full-bodied richness, many-voiced, but still clean on the tongue. The Zenato Ripasso is a very good example of the genre.