

Women's
Prize for
Fiction
2020

25

1999 WINNER

A CRIME IN THE NEIGHBOURHOOD BY SUZANNE BERNE

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Born in Virginia in 1961 and then moving to Washington, DC, when she was ten, Suzanne Berne worked as a journalist before completing an MFA in creative writing at University of Iowa's Writers' Workshop.

A series of short-lived jobs in California followed ranging from hostess at a San Francisco restaurant to proofreader for the *Hollywood Reporter*, before returning to the East Coast to teach at Harvard University. Suzanne Berne's books include *Ghost at the Table*, *A Perfect Arrangement*, *A Crime in the Neighborhood*, which won the Women's Prize for Fiction, and most recently *Dogs of Littlefield*. Her short fiction and essays have appeared in a number of magazines. She currently teaches creative writing at Boston College.

PLOT SUMMARY

In the long, hot summer of 1972 in a small, close-knit American town, three events shatter the serenity of ten-year-old Marsha's life: her father runs away with her glamorous, mysterious aunt; a young boy, Boyd Ellison, is raped and murdered; and Watergate makes the headlines. Living in a world no longer safe or familiar, Marsha diligently records everything she observes in her 'book of evidence' – especially the comings and goings of the neighbours, and shy Mr Green next door. Yet as Marsha's dislike of Mr Green intensifies, her 'facts' become confused with her friend Luann's fantasies and end up spreading real damage in the neighbourhood.

WHAT TO LOOK OUT FOR

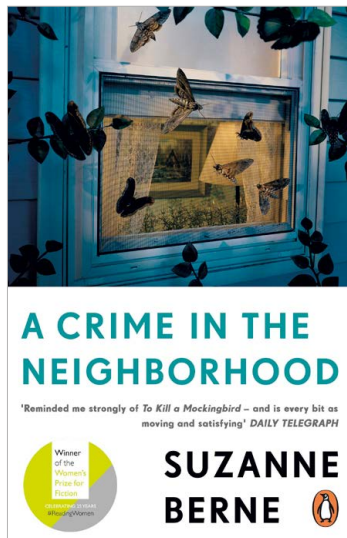
Though Marsha narrates this novel, she tells the story as an adult, looking back at the events, which gives the reader a sense of distance and a more adult context with which to understand Boyd Ellison's murder and Marsha's own accusation of Mr Green.

By telling the story retrospectively, Berne gives us access to Marsha's memories and feelings as a child, yet can also identify the possible motivations for her father leaving the family and her mother's likely feelings as a separated single mother in suburban 1970s America. Adult Marsha also intimates that she has done a lot of atonement for her part in Mr Green's accusation.

In the first few pages of the book, we learn that Boyd Ellison has (or, in 'real reading time', soon will be) been murdered, and that, somewhat surprisingly, Marsha doesn't consider the murder the real event of the story. More, Marsha

sees the events of 1972 as a combination of things that destroyed her innocence: Ellison's murder is a horrifying part of that, but so is the realisation that parents are fallible. In the wider world, politicians, the ones who are supposed to be in charge, are also corrupt.

A Crime in the Neighborhood is also a crime novel which, close to the end, subverts the crime genre by denying the reader the unmasking of the killer: the novel is, therefore, a whodunit which denies the reader the usual satisfaction of tying up loose ends. Instead, more like life, the case remains unsolved, and Mr Green, who seemed the likely perpetrator, has an alibi.



DISCUSSION POINTS

Marsha's mother in *A Crime in the Neighborhood* is a complex character about whom our feelings change over the course of the book, most notably around her relationship with Mr Green. Berne shows us how Lois' status in the community changes from wife to separated single mother, and the reactions of the men and women around her. Lois becomes a working mother as a result of her separation, and Berne acknowledges – though doesn't sympathise with – the view that, when mothers work, their children are less protected.

In many ways, *A Crime in the Neighborhood* is a book that asks whether Lois is a good mother. It presents the reader with many of the usual assumptions levelled at mothers: whether it is somehow Lois' fault that her husband leaves her, whether she is allowed to look for other male companionship, and the possible threat that poses to her children, and what effect, if any, her working has on her children. Berne doesn't give us definite answers, but shows us that Lois' parenting is no different to any of the other mothers in the neighbourhood, that she is diligent about her work and that she is as upset about her separation as anyone might expect.

How do you feel about Lois? In the part of the story where readers think that Mr Green is the murderer and rapist, how did you feel about Lois' flirting with him? And how does your opinion of Lois change after you learnt that Mr Green couldn't have been the murderer? Did your feelings about Lois change?



Was it appropriate for a mother to continue an acquaintance with a man that her daughter has expressed misgivings about? Or did she treat Marsha's feelings fairly? Do you empathise with her?

QUESTIONS

What did you think about Luann as a character? Where do you think she has learnt the language she uses while playing with her dolls?

Marsha imagines her mother and aunts as exotic characters. When Fran and Claire come to visit, how is this image of the fancy-free, glamorous Mayhew Girls confirmed or challenged?

What picture does Berne paint of Nixon-era suburban America? Is there a naivete among people in Spring Hill that perhaps no longer exists?

Who do you think killed Boyd Ellison?

NEXT STEPS

Imagine you are a newspaper reporter and write a story based on the news that Marsha has accused Mr Green of being the murderer and rapist of Boyd

Ellison. Will you be sympathetic to Marsha, or cynical about her 'evidence'? Will you make assumptions about Lois' mothering skills (or Marsha's parents being separated) as somehow relevant to the piece? Will you choose to comment on the fact that Boyd was not particularly well liked in the community? Will you choose to write a sensitive and well-researched piece or a splashy tabloid take?

Alternatively, is there a way to work out who killed Boyd Ellison? Go back through the book and make a diagram, if you need to, using all the available information. Who could have done it? Who is the most likely suspect in a child murder?

BOOK RECOMMENDATIONS

THE GHOST AT THE TABLE BY SUZANNE BERNE
TO KILL A MOCKINGBIRD BY HARPER LEE