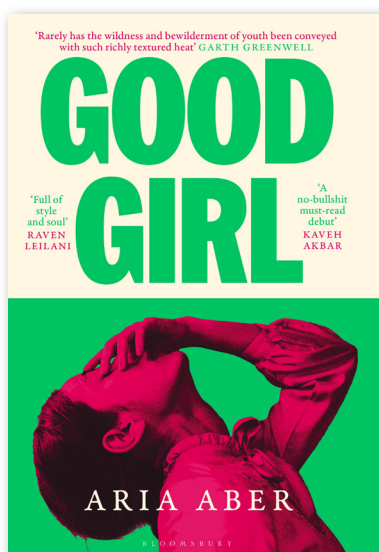


# Good Girl

by Aria Aber



## SHORT PLOT SUMMARY

In Berlin's artistic underground, where techno and drugs fill warehouses still pockmarked from the wars of the twentieth century, nineteen-year-old Nila finds her tribe.

Born in Germany to Afghan parents, raised in public housing graffitied with swastikas, drawn to philosophy, photography and sex, Nila has spent her adolescence disappointing her family while searching for her voice.

Then in the haze of the city's legendary nightlife, Nila meets Marlowe, an American writer whose fading literary celebrity opens her eyes to a life of personal and artistic freedom. But as Nila finds herself pulled further into Marlowe's controlling orbit, ugly, barely submerged racial tensions begin to roil in Germany – and Nila's family and community. After a year of running from her future, Nila stops to ask herself the most important question: who does she want to be?

A story of love and family, raves and Kafka, staying up all night and surviving the mistakes of youth, *Good Girl* is the virtuosic debut novel by a major new voice in fiction.

## WHAT TO LOOK OUT FOR

In *Good Girl*, Aber references a web of cultural influences that Nila uses as touchstones, inspirations and aspirations for her own burgeoning identity. Inspired by artists such as Cindy Sherman, Nan Goldin, Andy Warhol and Diane Arbus, Nila develops her skill as a photographer. Yet, these references aren't just examples of technique that she wants to emulate: there is a freedom in the female models depicted in the photos that Nila yearns for. It is as much Warhol's model – Edie Sedgwick – that Nila aspires to be, as well as the wild freedom of 'the Czech girls gorging on cakes in Vera Chytilova's *Daisies*,' and Evan Rachel Wood in *Thirteen*.



Shortlist  
2025

“Set against the backdrop of the Berlin techno scene, with a tempo that mirrors its locations, this is a story of self-discovery, self-loathing, escape and ultimately, acceptance.”

AMELIA WARNER,  
2025 JUDGE



Shortlist  
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Nila's love of Kafka also provides a filter through which she can understand her world. She says of Kafka's *Metamorphosis*:

'On a molecular level... I comprehended what he wrote, even why he turned Gregor into a giant bug. Who would understand the perils of a man trapped in his childhood room in unhuman form more than an Afghan girl trying to live?'

Aber's meta-textual representation of the world of art and artists – a world that Nila desperately yearns to be a part of – provides a way for her, like many young people, to map the world and understand it. Yet, Aber also shows us the reality of the art world in Berlin as privileged, exclusive and ignorant: unwelcoming to a young Afghan girl, and very different to the bohemian utopia that Nila has idealised from her favourite artists and writers.

In this way, Aber uses the context of art and the art world to highlight Nila's journey to authenticity. Slowly, Nila becomes less enamoured with Marlowe, who she once thought was so impressive because of his minor literary success: as Nila matures, she comes to see that it is her own truth, her real name and that matters, and not the art "scene" that she has been so desperately trying to belong to.

### DISCUSSION POINTS

Being 'good' and a 'good girl' is a theme of Nila's story, as well as the title of the book. Nila describes the expectations of her family and the wider Afghan culture for girls:

'You had to be a *dokhatre khob*, a good girl, in order not to turn into a *dokhtare kharab*, a broken, bad, ruined girl. No boyfriends, no foul language, no sybaritic lifestyle'.

Nila is envious of the freedom that young men are allowed in the same culture: 'I wanted what my male cousins had, which was the privilege to be unbounded by an ancient idea of honour and purity,' noting that the purity and honour of girls is seen as constantly under threat rather than untouchable. Yet, Nila is a girl who needs to express her natural wildness, desire and adventurousness: 'Desire can't be girdled, especially not the lavish, life-altering catastrophic kind that girls feel'.

Nila herself prays to be 'good' and have her heart washed clean – the pressure to fit in and behave within culturally approved norms for her gender is strong, and brings with it an approval that part of her craves.

Discuss the notion of a 'good girl'. Why and where has this concept come from? How and where can we see the resurgence of this idea in popular culture and why do you think it is so pervasive? What, in your opinion, should a 'good' girl be? Is Nila good? Should she be concerned with being 'good' at all?

If you enjoyed this book try some of our recommended reads on the next page.

## QUESTIONS

Marlowe points at people in the street and says 'They don't know what life is.' Do you think Marlowe knows what life is?

What did the scene at the fundraiser for dogs in Afghanistan show you about class and privilege?

Aber describes the Bunker as the underworld. Do Nila's trips to the underworld transform her? If the Bunker is the underworld, who is Marlowe?

Do you think that Nila's experience of physical violence in her family makes her think that Marlowe's violence towards her is acceptable?

## NEXT STEPS

Nila says 'To take a picture was a way to control the narrative, to frame only what you wanted to see'. Using *Good Girl* as inspiration, take some candid portraits of friends and family. Can you create shots that reveal a truth about your models in some way? Try posing them and then deliberately not posing them. Which do you like more? Can you find some photos by artists that you like and try and replicate them?

Alternatively, write a letter to your nineteen-year-old self. What were your hobbies? Where did you go? Who were your friends? Are you still friends with any of them now? What did you wear? If you can find any pictures of yourself at that age, get it out and use it as a focus when you are writing. What advice would you give your younger self?

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Aria Aber** was born and raised in Germany. Her debut poetry collection *Hard Damage* won the Prairie Schooner Book Prize in Poetry and a 2020 Whiting Award, and her work has appeared in the *New Yorker* and *New Republic*. She holds awards and fellowships from Kundiman, the Wisconsin Institute of Creative Writing, and the Wallace Stegner Fellowship at Stanford University. *Good Girl* is her first novel.



# If you enjoyed this book...

## RECOMMENDED READS

In her book of poetry *Hard Damage*, Aria Aber explores the historical and personal implications of Afghan American relations, the pain of family and the shame of selfhood.

In *Luster*, Raven Leilani tells the story of Evie, a young black woman making questionable choices in her love life, who becomes embroiled in an open relationship with a middle-aged white couple.

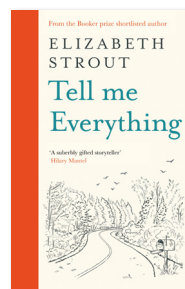
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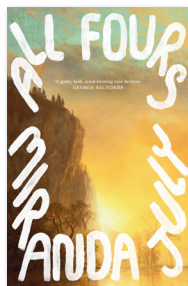
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**Good Girl**  
by Aria Aber



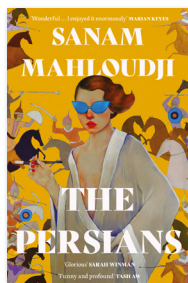
**Tell Me Everything**  
by Elizabeth Strout



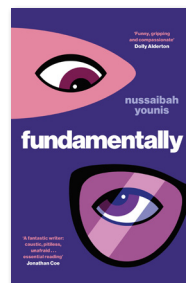
**All Fours**  
by Miranda July



**The Safekeep**  
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