

# READING GROUP GUIDE

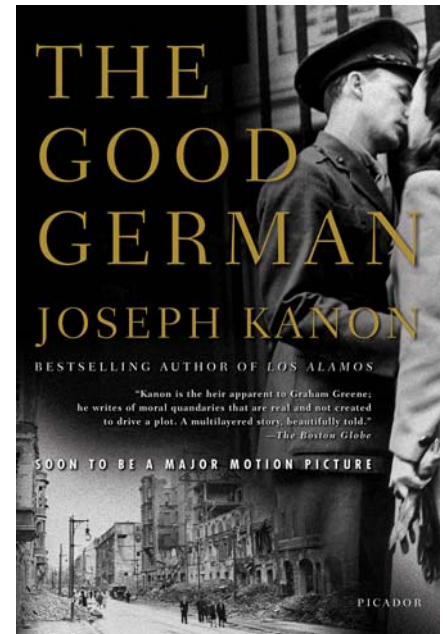
## *The Good German*

*A Novel*

*by Joseph Kanon*

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### About this Guide

The following author biography and list of questions about *The Good German* are intended as resources to aid individual readers and book groups who would like to learn more about the author and this book. We hope that this guide will provide you a starting place for discussion, and suggest a variety of perspectives from which you might approach *The Good German*.

### About the Book

*The Good German*, set in Berlin during the summer of 1945, is an equally fast-moving and thought-provoking novel of suspense, and of history, that concerns the end of one war and the beginning of another. Jake Geismar, the former Berlin correspondent for CBS, has been sent back to his old beat to write magazine pieces about the Potsdam Conference, at which America, Britain, and Russia will divide the spoils and determine the future of a recently conquered Germany, a nation of dark secrets and unfathomable atrocities. But as World War II draws to a close, has the Cold War already begun? Moreover, what Jake sees floating in a lake right outside the Potsdam Conference turns out to be (for his purposes, at least) a far more interesting story—and a more personal and more dangerous one, as well. A murder mystery, a love story, and a panoramic depiction of a wholly ravished European metropolis at a unique moment in history, Joseph Kanon's novel is, as Neil Gordon observed in *The New York Times Book Review*, a

“provocative, fully realized [work of] fiction that explores, as only fiction can, the reality of history as it is lived by individual men and women.”

“Kanon serves up a potent mix of intrigue, cynicism, and an occasional flash of idealism, which adds up to a riveting yarn.”

—*Los Angeles Times*

“Kanon is as ambitious a novelist as he is a gifted one.”

—*The Washington Post*

“The kind of book that reads so easily that it’s almost impossible to put down once you’ve started it.”

—*The Baltimore Sun*

## About the Author

Joseph Kanon is the author of four novels, including *Alibi*. Before becoming a full-time writer, he was a book publishing executive. He lives in New York City.

## Discussion Questions

1. What do we learn about Jake Geismar in the opening pages of *The Good German*? What are his personal and professional reasons for returning to Berlin, now that the war in Europe has ended? And what does he hope to find after his big discovery at the Potsdam Conference? Also, explain how Jake’s personal history—as a somewhat heroic yet exiled American, a cynical but honest journalist, a former citizen of Berlin, and so forth—influences the novel’s tone, atmosphere, narrative focus, and plot.
2. Explain the meaning of the novel’s title, giving special attention to the ironic connotations of the word “good.” How—and where, specifically—does this novel address the difficult issue of morality? Cite several passages from the book that highlight Kanon’s thematic engagement with questions of good and evil.
3. Revisit the scene in chapter 9 where Jake takes Lena to the cinema. After the feature, they see a newsreel. What is it about this newsreel that prompts Jake to whisper, “It didn’t happen that way,” to Lena? Where else in the novel do we see representatives of the press tinkering with—or else blatantly reworking—the stories they are reporting? As a group, explore *The Good German*’s ongoing suggestion that history is ultimately the product of media spin. Does this suggestion echo the old dictum that history is written by the winners? Explain why or why not.
4. The guilt of the Holocaust, the bureaucratic and moral perplexities of denazification, the shame of losing the war, the geographic and spiritual wasteland of Berlin itself—the Berliners in Kanon’s novel are depraved souls with serious problems that are personal and

political, individual and social. Identify these characters and specify the problems each of them is facing. Also, discuss how each character confronts or denies these problems. More broadly, what links can you establish between historical realities and the emotional truths depicted in *The Good German*?

5. Who is Renate? How does Jake know her? Why has she been put on trial by the Russians? And what is the outcome of this trial? How does Renate's story—her particular background and fate—typify the novel's key theme of survival?
6. In chapter 12, Jake and Lena visit Frau Hinkel, the fortune-teller. What does she tell them about their past(s) and future(s)? What does she get right, what does she misread, and how do Jake and Lena receive her pronouncements? Also, discuss the presence (or absence) of luck as a theme in this narrative—as well as that of destiny.
7. Early in chapter 17, when Sikorsky and Jake briefly discuss the imminent surrender of Japan and the coming of the war's end, Sikorsky asks, "Does it feel over to you?" What does he mean by this? And later, in chapter 18, Jake spots a newspaper item entitled, "WWIII BEGINS? WHO FIRED FIRST?" Discuss this and other events in this novel—both historical and imaginary—that might also be seen as preludes to the Cold War.
8. Late in the novel, in chapter 20, Jake confers with one of his closest investigative allies, Bernie Teitel, a former DA who works in the Army's denazification department. As they discuss the horrific enormity of the Holocaust, Bernie says, "There isn't any punishment, you know. How do you punish this?" Jake, as a friend and as a journalist, counters with: "Then why bother?" How does Bernie respond to him? As a group, try to elaborate on Bernie's answer and discuss your own responses to this issue.
9. In terms of its literary genre, *The Good German* is a thriller, a novel of intrigue meant to engage its readers by way of a plot full of questions, clues, riddles, leads, red herrings, and so forth. Identify the many separate and related mysteries that Jake confronts over the course of this narrative. Which, if any, go unsolved—and why? Were there any particular questions raised in the pages of this novel that weren't answered or addressed to your satisfaction (as a reader)? If so, explain.
10. "What Carol Reed's film, *The Third Man*, did for Vienna immediately after World War II," one reviewer (Bill Ott, *Booklist*) has laudably noted, "Kanon's thriller does for Berlin during the same period." Compare and contrast *The Good German* with any other novels or movies that take place in Europe just after World War II.

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## Author Interview

*Interviewer: In what way can fiction explore the realities of history that memoirs and nonfiction books cannot? And what role do they play in our understanding of history?*

JOSEPH KANON: It's sometimes said that fiction is a lie that reveals a deeper truth, but this may be over-reaching. I think it's more a question of focus. Life is messy and ambiguous. In a sense, it's like an endless confusing battle scene with everything going on all at once. Fiction can give a shape to this, eliminating some of the clutter around the edges so that we can see what's happening more clearly. More importantly, fiction personalizes it. History is not just a broad-strokes account of ideology and event—it's something that happens to individuals (and, in turn, is created by them). What was it like to live in 1945 Berlin? We know the facts of the military occupation, the sequence of events, but how did it work day to day? We know the scale of the bombing, the extent of the physical destruction, but what did it feel like to be covering in the cellar, wondering if the next would be a direct hit? Without personal experience, history is just an outline. Fiction is one way we fill it in.

*I: In the author's note, you mention that any story set in the past "runs the inevitable risk of error." How much liberty is the novelist allowed in terms of truth to timeline and setting?*

J. K.: Ideally, you want to get everything right. Aside from anything else, a knowledgeable reader will be stopped on the page by an error and no writer wants that. And certainly if you are trying to create a realistic picture of a time and place (as opposed to a deliberate literary distortion), you have an obligation to be accurate. On the other hand, you can't be fanatical about this. These are novels, not history lessons, and sometimes you bend to the narrative. The Allied victory parade

referred to in the author's note was accurately described (I hope) but it actually took place a few weeks after it does in the story. Does it matter? I don't think so—as long as you don't misrepresent the parade. The only reason I mentioned it at all was that otherwise I knew I'd hear from readers that I'd made a mistake. I find that people do care about getting details right. It's an odd, contemporary irony: the more we have come to accept spin in real life, the more we're demanding accuracy in our fiction.

*I: There is a suggestion throughout the novel that media spins history, especially in times of war. Do you think *The Good German* has resonated differently with readers because the United States is currently at war and a large segment of the population is skeptical of the media?*

J. K.: No, I think we've been alert to spin (and wary of it) at least since Vietnam, if not before. What may come as a surprise to readers, however, is the extent of news control during World War II. We are so accustomed to thinking of the period in romantic, even heroic, terms that we forget that total war has little tolerance for truth (if inconvenient), much less dissent. Censorship and propaganda were accepted as necessary parts of the war effort on both sides. Some of the restrictions now seem extraordinary to us who watch our wars on television. In the early years of World War II, no photographs were published of GI casualties showing dismemberment or injuries to the groin (thought to have an especially discouraging effect on recruitment). It wasn't until the later years that the full horror of the war began to be shown.

*I: You've said you start with a place when writing your novels and that researching postwar Berlin took one year. What sort of research did you do? At what point did you realize the Potsdam Conference was where the novel should begin and Jake would be a journalist?*

J. K.: American troops didn't enter Berlin until July 5, so the Potsdam Conference, two weeks later, was essentially the first event of the joint occupation, and certainly the first that drew nonmilitary personnel. For purposes of the story (his love affair with Lena), Jake had to have

lived in Berlin just before America entered the war, which meant he either had to be an embassy official or a journalist. Since so many American correspondents wrote memoirs about this period, providing me with richly detailed material about what that had been like, Jake became a journalist. And Potsdam became the device for getting him back to Berlin.

The research was almost entirely from print sources, along with photographs and films made at the time. I went to Berlin of course—I think of Berlin as a character in the book—but my German is so rudimentary that I never interviewed survivors. I find that in any case interviews are a mixed blessing—after fifty years, even authentic accounts are so often undercut by poor memory or the skewed version one has come to believe. Luckily, there is a sizable literature about this period written at the time or shortly afterward, not only by Allied soldiers but by German civilians, and much of the German material has been translated. By far the most useful for my purposes were letters, memoirs, or oral histories by Berliners, who give you the crucial details of daily life. Books by occupation officials (General Clay, for example) are about running things or dealing with the Russians, all important but not necessarily what one wants to know. How did you get milk for your children? Was medicine available? How did the GIs treat you? How did the black market work? For all this, and more, you had to turn to the Berliners.

*I: You write your novels out in longhand and then type them on the computer once you're done. How did you come to work this way and what advantages does it offer?*

J. K.: I started writing this way by pure circumstance—I was writing in a library which didn't then have ports for laptops—but found that it worked for me and have stuck to it ever since. It seems to me to force the right pace—I find I write too quickly on a computer—and there's a certain satisfaction in seeing all the inky crossouts and changes, visible evidence that you're working. I'm not a Luddite. Like just about everyone else, I find computers essential, but for whatever reason, perhaps superstition, for the first draft I still like pen and paper.

*I: You've held several editorial and executive positions in publishing, including president of Dutton and executive vice president at Houghton Mifflin. Do you think these gave you an advantage in your new career? How does it feel to be on the other side of the desk?*

J. K.: Well, I go to fewer meetings and I don't have to put on a tie anymore. It's been an easy transition. I wondered if I'd enjoy the solitary aspect of writing after almost thirty years of office life, but I found that I loved it. Doing any creative work is a gift of time—so few of us get the chance. As for advantages, none so far as the writing is concerned: you face a blank piece of paper like anyone else. But having been involved in the publishing process makes publication itself a little easier. You know what to expect, including all the things that go wrong. I wouldn't go so far as to say you become philosophical about them, but you try not to obsess. Of course, this is easier said than done. A publisher has lots of titles to worry about. You just have one. He sees a rave review. You just see the one lukewarm adjective. So you sometimes find yourself behaving just like the authors you used to publish.

*I: As a writer whose work often centers on shrouded governmental activity, do you consider yourself prone to conspiracy theories?*

J. K.: No. Conspiracies exist largely in the world of melodrama. In the real world of government, we're more likely to find the less exciting mix of incompetence, special interests, political expediency, and plain, dumb carelessness.

*I: Even early in the novel when, at a social gathering, "language divided the party into its own occupation zones," you feel the Cold War looming. Is the world destined to go from one war to another and was that something you were consciously writing about?*

J. K.: I hope we're not destined to go to another world war, given the weapons we now have, but certainly there seems to be no end to our appetite for conflict. Whether the Cold War was inevitable has been a subject of debate for years, but I think it's fair to say that in Berlin in 1945, people felt it had already begun. We and the Russians had been

uneasy wartime allies at best. The joint occupation, with its cumbersome decision-making apparatus, was an open invitation to wrangling and the Russians made the most of it. They felt Berlin was their prize, not a shared spoil, and were prepared to be aggressive and difficult about everything, which of course prompted the expected retaliatory response. Caught in the middle of all this were the Berliners, who could see even then that their city had become a battleground in a new war. All this appears in *The Good German* because it was very much on people's minds at the time. How could it be otherwise? But the more important point made in the story is that because fighting the Russians had become our new imperative, it began to affect our efforts to deal with Nazi war crimes. The whole question of postwar justice, never an easy one, became hopelessly compromised. The recruitment of Nazi scientists (and everyone did it, including the British and the French) was a scandalous example. Even a war criminal, if he was now useful to us in this new war, could become a "good German."

*I: Both The Good German and Alibi, which followed, take place in Europe immediately after World War II. What is it that draws you to that time period? Can we expect future novels set in this time and place?*

J. K.: To me, it's the hinge of the century. We all like to think we live in historic times—and in the broadest sense we do—but 1945 is truly historic, a pivotal moment. Nothing will ever be the same afterward. Decisions are made, often by ordinary people, that will affect generations. The explosion of the atomic bomb, the revelation of the Holocaust, the attempt to render justice for war crimes are issues that continue to haunt us—still difficult, still unresolved. It was the beginning of the world we now live in, where what used to be black-and-white certainties blur into shades of gray. All this is not only obviously important, but so inherently dramatic that no writer could ever exhaust it. I don't know that I want to stay there forever, but I can't leave it quite yet. So, yes, the next book will have a postwar setting.

*I: Your work has been compared to that of Graham Greene and John le Carré. What works or authors do you admire, and is there a particular writer who has been influential?*



J. K.: That comparison is, for me, the ultimate compliment because they're writers I admire enormously. They made the thriller character-driven, a genre for moral inquiry. But the question of "influence" is a tricky one. I think writers are influenced by everyone. Everything they've read, both high and low, somehow finds its way into their literary makeup. Writing is a cumulative art; it builds on what's come before. But it's not, or shouldn't be, an imitative one. I never tire of reading Evelyn Waugh, for example, but I don't write like him. Who could? Still, if you have to be "influenced" by anyone, you couldn't do better in this genre than Greene and le Carré.

*I: How important is it that mysteries answer all the questions raised in the pages? How do you decide which questions go unanswered or unsolved?*

J. K.: The book should answer all plot questions, the who-what-when-where of the crime. It's not fair to the reader to leave any of these dangling. But the really important questions in any book—of character and moral ambiguity—by their very nature can't be "answered." The point is to raise them and look at them more closely,

*I: The Good German, as well as Alibi, explore deeply personal moral quandaries. How important is it that readers see things the way you do? If they don't, can the novel still be successful?*

J. K.: Of course. Novels aren't instruction manuals or tracts—at least they shouldn't be. I think we read fiction to look at the world through different eyes. A novel's "success" depends on how effectively its fictional world is realized, how much more it makes you see. Moral quandaries by definition don't come with easy answers, or sometimes with any answers at all. What you're trying to do is to show the reader how complicated they are.

*I: What novels and movies of the postwar period do you admire?*

J. K.: The movies, surprisingly, have held up very well, even better than the novels. (I say surprisingly because they were made under difficult conditions—just getting film stock was a problem.) I'm not sure why

this is so. It may be that fiction writers needed distance or were overwhelmed by the events and left the field to memoirs and diaries. See, for instance, *A Woman in Berlin* by an anonymous journalist, which still has the immediacy of something just written down. On the German side, the absence of titles was part of the great forgetting, when the culture was so traumatized and guilt-ridden that it just wanted to ignore what had happened, could not even voice its own suffering. There's an interesting account of this in W. G. Sebald's remarkable *On the Natural History of Destruction*.

But the moviemakers were there on the spot, makeshift camera crews and all, and their work still seems fresh. Wolfgang Staudte's *The Murderers Are Among Us* was one of the first films made in postwar Berlin, and since it was shot in the streets it's an invaluable visual source now. (It also stars the young Hildegard Knef, whose later memoir, *The Gift Horse*, is one of the best about the period.) Roberto Rossellini's Italian neorealist films (*Open City*, *Paisan*) are classics, but *Germany Year Zero*, made on location in Berlin is even more harrowing. Fred Zinnemann's *The Search* is an affecting look at the postwar refugee problem. Billy Wilder's *A Foreign Affair* has the Berlin black market—and Marlene Dietrich. And *The Third Man* (Graham Greene/Carol Reed) has just about everything we've come to associate with the period: shadows flitting over the heaps of rubble, moral corruption, that zither music, and Orson Welles splashing through the sewers.

*I: Did you collaborate with Paul Attanasio on the screenplay of The Good German? Did you have conversations with Steven Soderbergh about his vision for the film?*

J. K.: No. I contributed some historical information (period details), but otherwise was not involved. I think the wisest thing a book writer can do is stay out of the way and let the director make the movie. It's an old cliché that authors always feel their books have been somehow manhandled on their way to the screen, but that's because too often they're expecting to see what had been in their heads, a kind of visual transliteration of the text. A movie is a different medium, with different storytelling requirements. What you hope for is that talented, intelligent filmmakers will find something interesting or inspiring in

the original material and use it as a basis for a good movie. I feel extraordinarily lucky. Soderbergh is not only a gifted director—he had a real interest in getting things right, even elements of the back-story that don't appear in the film itself. I visited the set while they were shooting and it was a marvel of professionalism. It was like watching a team at the top of its game. And, of course, it was a dream cast.

*I: George Clooney plays Jake Geismar in the movie adaptation of The Good German. Ever imagine Jake being named one of the sexiest men in the world?*

J. K.: No, but I bet he'd be pleased. Wouldn't you? Actually, both George Clooney and Cate Blanchett look very much the way I imagined Jake and Lena, so I was lucky in the casting too. The odd thing is that now when I think of the characters I *see* George and Cate. But that's the power of movies.