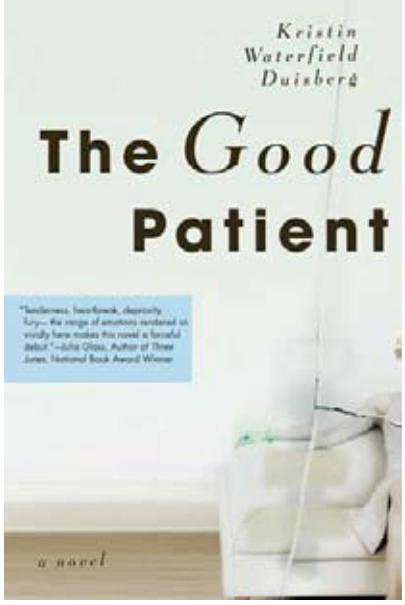
The Good Patient

by Kristin Waterfield Duisberg



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Introduction to *The Good Patient*

Brilliant, acerbic, funny, and relentless, Darien Gilbertson appears to have it all: a successful career, a husband who loves her absolutely, and all the material comforts of a New York life. But Darien is in trouble – on the run from her emotions, and from a past that resurrects itself in acts of self-mutilation she neither understands nor cares to explore. After years of good behavior, Darien is hurting herself again. And this time it's so brutal that her husband, Robert, cannot help but recognize the woman he adores is unraveling before his eyes.

Darien has a history with therapists. She knows exactly what they want – and need – to hear. She has made a game of psychotherapy, spinning outrageous fictions, exposing her doctors' vanities, knowing when to reveal just a little of the truth. When Robert brings her to Dr. Lindholm, she is ready. But in Dr. Lindholm Darien may have met her match: a caring psychiatrist with the patience and skill to see beneath her façade. At once intrigued and resistant, Darien engages Dr. Lindholm in a battle of wits, sure only her pride is at stake. When she stumbles instead upon a buried truth about herself the consequences are devastating, threatening her marriage, her identity, and what she understands about life and love.

The Good Patient is about interiors and exteriors, knowledge and perception, the treachery and triumph of memory. Written in razor-sharp, sparkling prose, it is a story that takes dead aim at a question we all fear: how well do we really know the people we love?

Reading Group Guide Questions

1. The title of the novel is The Good Patient. IS Darien a good patient? In what way?

2. Some therapists believe that transference, or the process by which a patient begins to identify with a therapist (or even want to become him or her), is essential to successful treatment. Does Darien experience transference in her relationship with Dr. Lindholm? What scenes suggest this?

3. Darien says early in the novel that pregnancy is "dangerous territory in the Gilbertson household"; she and Robert fight about her unwillingness to have a baby, and she reacts with disdain and alarm to several minor characters who are pregnant. What is it that Darien fears?

4. Early on, Darien describes Robert as "her talisman, stroke of luck," and yet later she blames him for enabling her emotional dependency. To what extent do you think Robert is at fault in the dynamics of the relationship? Is it possible for both of Darien's descriptions of Robert to be accurate?

5. At Mt. Lebanon Hospital, Darien says of her marriage to Robert, ""two strangers should never come to know one another so intimately." What does Darien believe about love? Do you think she's right?

6. The electric fence at the Gilbertson's Eastman house makes two appearances in the novel. What is the particular significance of the fence to Darien?

7. Many readers have connected with Walter – the dog – as their favorite character, and Darien's mother as their least. How do you feel about these two characters? Is there any connection between them?

8. In recalling Dayton's death, Darien mentions that her sister switched outfits, so that when her body is found she's wearing Darien's clothes. Readers have offered several theories about the meaning of this: for example, that it was really Darien who died; that Darien and Dayton had a "suicide pact" and Darien chickened out. What do you think?

9. Darien imagines a conversation with an adult Dayton. Darien is surprised by the physical differences between herself and her twin, and she hastens to assure a bartender that the two are "the same." What does this scene imply about Darien's understanding of "twinship"? Does it play a role in her progress toward healing?

10. When Darien visits Dr. Mintzer in Culver, her writes her a "prescription":

- psychotherapy
- forgive yourself
- go back home & live your life.

Is Dr. Mintzer being cruel and dismissive, or is this in fact the prescription Darien needs?

11. At the end of The Good Patient, much of Darien's past remains unexplored, and she acknowledges she will never know why her sister killed herself. Is this satisfying to you as a reader? Is it realistic?

12. If the book were to continue, what do you think would happen to Darien and Robert? Is there a deeper meaning to Darien's statement in the final paragraph, "I reach out for my husband"?

About the Author

Kristin Waterfield Duisberg is a graduate of Bowdoin College and the creative writing program at Boston University. She has worked for J.P. Morgan and Massachusetts General Hospital and currently lives in the Boston suburbs with her husband and two children. This is her first book.