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Eli the Good

by Silas House

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Dear Reader,

Whenever I write a book, I always set out to answer some questions for myself. If, by the end of the book, I haven't come to a better understanding about something, then I know the book isn't working. When I finished *Eli the Good* I knew that I had learned more from it than any other book I had ever written. I think the reason writing this novel was such a learning process for me was because the main character, Eli Book, rose up off the page and did his own thing. He became a completely real character to me, and he had complete control of the book. Although he started out being based on me as a child, by the time the book was finished I found myself wishing that I had been even half as smart and good as he had been. Eli taught me that kids know something we tend to forget: that the two main things we need to do in this life are to love and to be loved. Sounds simple, but it's really huge and complicated, and Eli knew that, too.

I started writing this book because I am the son of a Vietnam vet. With the advent of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, I began to think about the way Vietnam still lived in me although my father left that war five years before I was born. I thought about the way these wars would live on in the children of its veterans. I also began to see the similarities between 1976 and the present, both times when people were struggling to understand war and its reverberating effects. And I also began to see how families are just microcosms of everything, but particularly the act of war. So I decided that I would put a Vietnam vet in the same house with a famous war protestor, plopping a child in the middle of all this so he could report on the battles that would ensue. I didn't want it to be a political book, necessarily, but I did want it to be a book that made the reader think about the complexities of things like war and patriotism. Too often, I believe, these two issues have been simplified, and they're not black and white.

And I thought about different ways I could show warfare: the little wars that happen among families (Eli's father and aunt), and between friends (Eli and his best friend), and among natural enemies, too (Eli and the neighborhood bullies) and the war that always goes on with ourselves (Eli's hesitation to accept his own weirdness). And I believe ELI holds important lessons about all those fundamental things: family, friendship, and accepting one's own self.

So, *Eli the Good* is about five very important things: the power of friendship, the joy of accepting your own weirdness, how people can get through struggles if they have hope and the love of others, the way war lives on in people long after it's over, and most important, it's about the fact that we don't always have to agree with the people we love. The book is set during the summer of 1976, but it's really about *right now*, because all of those things are just as important now . . . maybe even more so. I love this book because Eli became very real to me, and what I like most about him is that he's trying so hard to be a good person, which is what most of us are doing all the time, especially when we're kids.

-- Silas House, April 2009



About the author:

Silas House is the author of three novels: *Clay's Quilt* (2001), *A Parchment of Leaves* (2003), *The Coal Tattoo* (2004), a play, *The Hurting Part* (2005), and a nonfiction book, *Something's Rising* (2009). He also served as one of the editors of *Coal Country* (2009), a companion book to the film. A new play, *Long Time Traveling*, will premiere in April 2009 at Actors Guild of Lexington.

House serves as Writer-in-Residence at Lincoln Memorial University, where he also directs the Mountain Heritage Literary Festival. He is a contributing editor for *No Depression* magazine, where he has done long features on such artists as Lucinda Williams, Nickel Creek, Buddy Miller, Carlene Carter and many others. He is also one of Nashville's most in-demand press kit writers, having written the press kit bios for such artists as Kris Kristofferson, Kathy Mattea, Leann Womack, and many others.

House is a two-time finalist for the Southern Book Critics Circle Prize, a two-time winner of the Kentucky Novel of the Year, the Appalachian Book of the Year, the Chaffin Prize for Literature, the Award for Special Achievement from the Fellowship of Southern Writers, and many other honors. House was personally selected by the subject to write the foreword for the biography of Earl Hamner, creator of *The Waltons*. In 2005 he also wrote the introduction for the new HarperCollins edition of Gregory of Nyssa's *Life of Moses*.

House's work can be found in *Newsday*, *Oxford American*, *Bayou*, *The Southeast Review*, *The Louisville Review*, *The Beloit Fiction Journal*, *Wind*, *Night Train*, and others, as well as in the anthologies *New Stories From the South 2004: The Year's Best*, *Motif*, *Christmas in the South*, *Of Woods and Water*, *Shouts and Whispers*, *High Horse*, *The Alumni Grill*, *Stories From the Blue Moon Café I* and *II*, and many others.

For his environmental activism House received the 2008 Helen Lewis Community Award from the Appalachian Studies Association.

House is currently working on his fifth novel, *Evona Darling*. He lives in Eastern Kentucky with his two daughters and two dogs.



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