

Very Bad Neighbor

William Terry Rutherford

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Bulla and Rudy may not be the evil next-door neighbors from hell, but they are definitely unpleasant people. If William Terry Rutherford was indeed bullied by such a pathological pair in what he claims is “a contemporary fact-based novel,” then he deserves the sympathy of anyone who, like his protagonists Thomas and Barbara, has had the misfortune of having a *Very Bad Neighbor*.

Rutherford's slim volume will resonate well with readers who have suffered through the kind of annoying and infuriating nitpicking that the unsavory Bulla and Rudy inflict upon the author's presumed alter-ego. There are some funny bits in the book, but this is no broad Hollywood or TV situation comedy; it is a cry against bullying of any type in any situation, not just that which goes on across a shared property line.

The story's hero, Thomas, was bullied as a child. As an adult he decides to stand up to his tormentors, but does not always take the high road. Though he nobly refrains from committing petty acts of revenge, Thomas becomes obsessed with his neighbors, and the battle against them becomes an all-consuming war.

The events in the book, even if they sometimes appear a little exaggerated, are neither outrageous nor unbelievable. There are obsessive, mean-spirited, territorially overprotective people out there like Bulla and Rudy, people who, as they explain to Thomas, get their “jollies” out of annoying others. Most readers will nod their heads in recognition of similar fools they have had to suffer, and some may get ideas from the plot on how to handle such unwanted attention.

Rutherford's novel is also a bit of a cautionary tale, as he points out that to get such nuisances off one's back, a price must be paid. Thomas becomes consumed with standing up to Bulla and Rudy. He picks up Sun Tzu's classic *The Art of War* to guide him in his dealings with the elderly, curmudgeonly couple, for, as he explains, the decision not to take such abuse anymore meant “the start of war.” But, as in any war, there are casualties.

Rutherford writes well and keeps the story moving forward nicely. His characters will be recognizable for some readers. He deserves special praise for exercising admirable restraint in what could easily have devolved into a slapstick farce.

Rutherford also refrains from demonizing his antagonists. He describes them as having “permanent scowl[s]” on their faces and states that “forgiveness is not in their vocabulary, only revenge.” Rutherford also notes somewhat sympathetically that as awful as Bulla and Rudy are, “they live in a dark place. You know their own children won't even talk to them.”

MARK MCLAUGHLIN (September 10, 2012)

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