

# AUTHOR'S NOTE

## BY

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When I left the country I had grown up in to begin a new life on the other side of the world, I was just following in the family tradition.

My mother was born and raised in New Zealand. In her early twenties she took a boat to England, met my father, and decided to stay. A few generations earlier, her great-grandparents had made the trip in the opposite direction, eloping from their English families who disapproved of their union, and hoping for freedom in the wilderness of the Southern Hemisphere. I left England to live in America because that is where my former wife is from. Like Jette and Frederick, the impulse that fuelled all our journeys was the same: love.

Before beginning *A Good American*, I had begun, and abandoned, a couple of other ill-fated novels. Some of the most common advice given to aspiring writers is “Write what you know.” It’s a fine theory, but probably only if you have something worth knowing. As I was pondering this, it occurred to me that the experience of packing up my life and moving to a new country, with no expectation that I would ever return home again, might just qualify.

Finally, I had my story.

In some ways, my experience of moving to America in 2003 could not have been much more different to my ancestors’ journey to New Zealand in 1864. But certain essential elements had probably not changed much: the hope for a better life, the fear of the unknown, and the paradox of wanting to adapt to your new country without forgetting where you came from. (My mother has lived in England for more than fifty years now, but she still calls New Zealand home.)

I wanted to set the story in Missouri not just because it’s where I live, but also because there feels something uniquely, unflashily *American* about this strange, largely empty place; it’s the quintessential “flyover” State. You don’t have to spend much time here to recognize the legacy of its German settlers, so it made sense for me to have my characters depart from there, even though Frederick and Jette arrived decades after the first significant influx of German immigrants.

Writing this book was an illuminating experience. It shone a light on my own feelings about moving here. Despite the long and generally amicable relationship between England and

America (if we pass discreetly over the War of Independence), people still relish the little things that divide us, like the funny way I talk. But having lived here for some time now, I prefer to consider what unites us. I practiced law for eight years in England, and when I arrived here I had to re-qualify as an attorney. While I was studying for the bar exam I learned that much of the American legal system was (unsurprisingly) based on the English one. But there remain important differences. Many of the rights of which Americans are so rightly proud – freedom of speech, of religion, of association – are enshrined in the Amendments to the United States Constitution. England has no equivalent. We rely instead on cloudier concepts, an unwritten constitution, shrouded by centuries of jurisprudence.

But I like the American system more. As a writer, I find the Declaration of Independence and the U.S. Constitution are two of the most exciting and inspiring documents ever written. The principles and beliefs upon which this country was founded are unimpeachable. They are simply magnificent. I am a lawyer and a novelist, and so I have a reverence for words. They are the tools of both of my trades. America's founding documents provide the guiding light by which much of the world sets its course for the future. In 1630, as he stood on the deck of the *Arabella* just before landing in New England for the first time, John Winthrop preached a sermon which talked of the new settlement as a "city on a hill". Winthrop knew that the eyes of the world would be upon them. Nothing has changed. The world still looks to America for hope, for inspiration, and for guidance. It's one reason why people have always dreamed of coming here, by fair means or foul.

One of the appeals of the immigrant tale is its ubiquity. Almost every family living in the United States today has a story similar to this one somewhere in its past. Whether ten years ago or three hundred years ago, whether with due process or by way of a midnight ghosting across an unmanned border, whether by slave boat or luxury airplane, we all came here from somewhere.

Finally, a brief word about the music. At around the same time that I was beginning to consider immigration as a theme for this novel, my wife's great-aunt passed away. Half way through the memorial service, four men (who, I later discovered, were brothers) stood up at the front of the church and sang a beautiful, close-harmony version of "Abide With Me". And as I listened, while I should have been thinking about our recently departed family member, all I could think was: *I must put this in a novel*. So I did. (Sorry, Ethel.)