

## A Choose to Read Ohio Toolkit

Use this toolkit to plan book discussion groups or library programs.

Meet the nineteen contributing authors with Ohio roots.

Select from a range of discussion questions and extension activities to deepen the experience of reading and sharing **Good Roots**.

Discover additional books, films, and websites to explore topics and themes in depth.

# Good Roots: Writers Reflect on Growing Up in Ohio

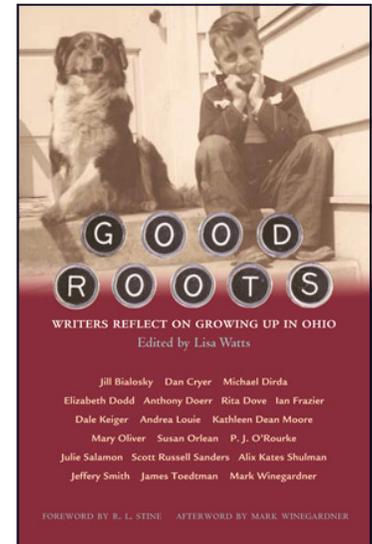
Edited By Lisa Watts



## About the Book

"A good place to be from." That's how some people might characterize the Buckeye State. The writings in **Good Roots: Writers Reflect on Growing Up in Ohio** are testimony to the truth of that statement. By prominent writers such as P. J. O'Rourke, Susan Orlean, and Alix Kates Shulman, these contributions are alternately nostalgic, irreverent, and sincere, and offer us a personal sense of place. The contributors' childhoods are as varied as their work. Some were raised in urban Cleveland, Akron, and Cincinnati, others in the small Ohio towns that typify the Midwest, and still others in the countryside. Yet what they have to tell us about their roots resonates with a shared heritage, a sense of what is universal and enduring about growing up in the heartland.

Their collective résumé reads like a literary Who's Who, including four Pulitzer Prizes, several National Book Awards, and many prestigious fellowships. **Good Roots** is also plain good reading from some of our country's most accomplished contemporary writers.



Permission to use book description and book jacket image granted by Ohio University Press.

## Book Details

**Good Roots: Writers Reflect on Growing Up in Ohio** edited by Lisa Watts. Ohio University Press, 2007, ISBN 9780821417294.  
<http://www.ohioswallow.com/book/Good+Roots>

## Contributor Snapshots

**Lisa Watts**, born in Cleveland, is an editor and writer who returned to Ohio to raise her family in Wooster.

**Jill Bialosky** (Shaker Heights) has authored poetry collections and novels. She is an editor at W. W. Norton and Company and lives in New York City.

**Dan Cryer** (Findlay) served as a book critic at *Newsday* for twenty-five years. He has been a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize in criticism.

**Michael Dirda** (Lorain) is a memoirist and longtime columnist for the *Washington Post Book World*. He was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for criticism in 1993.

**Elizabeth Dodd** (Athens) grew up in southeast Ohio. She is a professor, a creative writing program director, a poet, a critic, an editor, and an award-winning essayist.



Photograph of editor Lisa Watts provided by Ohio University Press. Used with permission. Contributor snapshots are drawn from biographies provided in *Good Roots*, with updates from authors' websites and other sources.

## Get In Touch

For publicity and speaking engagement inquiries for editor Lisa Watts or any of the contributing authors:

Contact Jeff Kallet at Ohio University Press, [kallet@ohio.edu](mailto:kallet@ohio.edu).

**"...this was a place where people knew where they'd been and could predict where they were going... a place where the striking of lightning was an exception, not the rule"**

**- Julie Salamon**

## Contributor Snapshots (continued)

**Anthony Doerr** (Novelty/Geauga Co.) has won many awards for his writings, including the Pulitzer Prize for his 2014 novel *All the Light We Cannot See*.

**Rita Dove** (Akron) is an English professor who won the 1987 Pulitzer Prize for poetry and in 1993 became the youngest-ever Poet Laureate of the United States.

**Ian Frazier** (Hudson) works as a literary journalist and essayist. He writes for the *New Yorker* as well as the *Atlantic Monthly*, *Outside*, and other publications.

**Dale Keiger** (Mt. Healthy; Athens) is an award-winning journalist, associate editor at *John Hopkins Magazine*, and a frustrated fan of the Cincinnati Reds.

**Andrea Louie** (Wayne County), Executive Director of the Asian American Arts Alliance, is also a novelist, editor, book reviewer, reporter, teacher, and artist.

**Kathleen Dean Moore** (Berea) is best known as the award-winning author of essays that explore our cultural and spiritual connections to wet, wild places.

**Mary Oliver** (Maple Heights) has published over thirty volumes of poetry and prose, including *American Primitive*, which won the 1984 Pulitzer Prize.

**Susan Orlean** (Shaker Heights) is an author, a literary journalist, and a writer for the *New Yorker*. She once wrote a cookbook for canines under her dog's name.

**P. J. O'Rourke** (Toledo) is a graduate of Miami University (the real one—Miami was a university before Florida was a state), who writes cheeky political books.

**Julie Salamon** (Seaman) is an award-winning author who has been an essayist and reporter for the *New York Times* and a film critic for the *Wall Street Journal*.

**Scott Russell Sanders** (Portage County) has won much acclaim for his novels, collections of short stories, creative nonfiction, personal essays, and children's books.

**Alix Kates Shulman** (Cleveland Heights) became a feminist activist in 1967, a novelist in 1972, and a teacher in 1973. She received an honorary doctorate in 2000.

**Jeffery Smith** (Monroe County) won the PEN/Albrand Art of the Memoir award for *Where the Roots Reach for Water: A Personal and Natural History of Melancholia*.

**James Toedtman** (Berea) is a veteran journalist, newspaper editor, and Pulitzer Prize winner. He is currently editor of the *AARP Bulletin*.

**Mark Winegardner** (Bryan) was handpicked by Mario Puzo's editor and estate to continue the Godfather saga. He often sets scenes and stories in Ohio.

---

## Go Further

*Ideas for extending the experience of reading **Good Roots**.*

Did you know that you may have free access to genealogy sites like Ancestry.com through your local public library? Since local history and genealogy are popular research topics, many libraries contain a special collection of related resources, and have free access to online resources like Ancestry. For a list of Ohio public libraries, see Find A Library: <http://www.oplin.org/content/find-a-library>.

You don't have to win a Pulitzer to have an engaging story of your own roots. Set aside some time to reflect on your history. Who and what has influenced you? What are important aspects of your personal identity, and where did these aspects come from?

After reflecting on your roots, consider taking an afternoon to share your roots with younger family members, either

## Talk About It

Topics to share when discussing **Good Roots**.

Poet and essayist Elizabeth Dodd writes of ravines, creek beds, and hollows of Southeast Ohio and the legacy of that landscape in her life. Was there a significant feature, historical event, or landmark where you grew up that you believe had an influence on your life?

P. J. O'Rourke claims that he'd move back to Toledo if it weren't for the wholesomeness of the place — it wouldn't prepare his children for the world. What small town stereotypes does he employ to describe Toledo and its residents?

Julie Salamon is the daughter of Hungarian Jews, the only Jews in Seaman, Ohio. Describe the ethnic mix of your neighborhood or hometown and how it shaped your views.

Many of the writers — Jill Bialosky, Alix Kates Shulman, Michael Dirda — describe coming back home after they've grown up. How do the writers' experiences compare? Describe your own experience with returning home as an adult.

Michael Dirda admits that he mythologizes about his hometown because "childhood can be a golden age no matter where it is spent." Why might that be true?

James Toedteman launched a career in journalism with a story about a bunny rescue written when he was a third-grader. What "precursors" did you have of the job or career you ultimately pursued?

What is one of the best articles, stories, or books you've ever read about "home"?

Thinking about Mark Winegardner's afterword, what other books would fit in a literature of the Midwest? Why isn't that much of a recognized genre?

What effect is created by collecting these pieces in one book, as opposed to reading a few of them separately?

Discussion questions courtesy Ohio University Press, from *Good Roots Reading Guide*. Used with permission. Find more discussion questions in this reading guide, available online at <http://www.ohioswallow.com/extras/WattsREADINGguide.pdf>. For additional resources, consider visiting Ohio University Press's dedicated webpage for **Good Roots** at <http://www.ohioswallow.com/book/Good+Roots>.

## Go Further (continued)

verbally (possibly in a group setting with multiple sharers, over a nice hot meal) or in writing (consider a handwritten letter — this activity may lend itself to a memory box more naturally than an electronic note). What about older family members? Have you heard all their "roots" stories, or might they be willing to share one more?

Did **Good Roots** leave you with a sense of nostalgia about your old neighborhood and childhood friends? While it's true that things will never be the same, common memories and shared experiences can make for a lasting bond. Often neighborhoods reunite at weddings and funerals, but if you'd like to both catch up and reminisce in a more casual setting, consider setting up a "neighborhood reunion" to reconnect with old friends. Travel and adult life

certainly make it more difficult to meet up than showing up at the corner store after school, but modern travel opportunities and social media sites like Facebook can help to make it easier to get back in touch with old friends.

Reading **Good Roots** can remind us of our own personal histories, and all the complexities of life. If you've left your old neighborhood, with little desire to return, perhaps the "neighborhood reunion" project isn't something you can relate to. If that's the case, consider connecting a little more directly with your personal history by marking the anniversary of your transition in some personal way. Do you know the date you left? What caused you to set out on your journey? Were you looking for something in particular? If so, did you find it?

## Check It Out

Companion books and films for **Good Roots**.

Read **My Appalachia: A Memoir** by Sidney Farr (ISBN 9780813124506). Several of the authors in **Good Roots** reflected on their family's time in the naturalized and hardscrabble region that extends into eastern and southern Ohio. Those who connected with those recollections will find themselves in a familiar place in Farr's earnest memoir.

Read **Forgotten Columbus** by Andrew Henderson (ISBN 9780738519616). In the forward to **Good Roots**, R. L. Stine observes that "our childhood memories are of a place that doesn't really exist any longer". As generations pass, areas – especially more urbanized areas – change and change, until it takes careful research to show the way things once were. **Forgotten Columbus** is the product of this sort of careful research, a pictorial history of "what used to be" in the state capital.

Watch **Precious** (2009), directed by Lee Daniels. While retelling an experience that is ugly and raw, Daniels manages to present a story of gritty hope in the face of serious abuse and disenfranchisement. A sobering reminder that not all childhoods involve loving families and an old tire swing.

<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0929632/>

Read **The River Home: A Memoir** by Dorothy Well (ISBN 9780821414057). The full spectrum of human experience is explored in this soul-searching memoir, with the Ohio, Missouri, and Mississippi rivers bringing together a broad array of wanderers. The lessons are universal, with fruitful reflection on themes like family, memory, uncertainty, and mortality.

Listen to **Flyover Lives: A Memoir** by Diane Johnson, read by Suzanne Toren (ISBN 9781480575523). Are Americans "indifferent to history"? This is the question that propels Johnson to dig into the history and cultural memory of the "flyover states" of the American Midwest, and ultimately to discover the humble determination of the pioneers.

Watch **A Christmas Story** (1983), directed by Bob Clark. A light-hearted coming of age story filmed in Cleveland but set in fictional Hohman, Indiana, **A Christmas Story** is a comedic celebration of early 1940s Midwestern Americana.

<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0085334/>

## Explore More

Additional ideas and resources to use with **Good Roots**.

**"How to Write a Memoir" by William Zinsser**

<http://theamericanscholar.org/how-to-write-a-memoir/>

Thinking about writing a reflection on your own roots? Enjoy this essay from *The American Scholar* magazine by the late writer, editor, and literary critic Zinsser.

**Ancestry.com**

<http://www.ancestry.com/>

The largest for-profit genealogy company in the world includes a variety of services, including over 5 billion online records and DNA testing. Cost-conscious? Check with your local library to see if they carry an Ancestry.com subscription.

**Ohio History Connection**

<https://www.ohiohistory.org/>

The official website of Ohio History Connection, which promotes historical awareness and preservation throughout the Buckeye State.

Choose to Read Ohio, a project of the State Library of Ohio, the Ohioana Library Association, and the Ohio Center for the Book, encourages public libraries, schools, families, and others to build a community of readers and an appreciation of Ohio authors and literature. CTRO is adaptable for use in classrooms, libraries, bookstores, by book discussion groups, families, and other community groups.

Explore Choose to Read Ohio resources & toolkits: <http://library.ohio.gov/ctro>.

This toolkit created June 2015.

STATE  LIBRARY OF OHIO

274 East First Avenue. Columbus, Ohio 43201-3692  
(614) 644-6910 • [www.library.ohio.gov](http://www.library.ohio.gov)