

Good intentions gone
wrong: the
connecting factor of
"best worst american"



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Across generations, language barriers, and cultures, there is one question that has stood the test of time: does the intent of our actions really matter if our actions have the impact of furthering the marginalization or oppression of those around us? Jamie Utt addresses this question and the arguments surrounding it in her article “ Intentions Don’t Really Matter”. Utt expresses the idea that “ the impact of our actions can be profound and wide-reaching. And that’s far more important than the question of our intent.” She makes readers think about how their intentions whether good or bad can lead to unwelcomed and in many cases “ oppressive” (Utt) results. Furthering her stance, Utt mentions how even in everyday life we hear people apologizing for the outcome of their intentions “ over and over again: ‘ I never meant any harm...’ ‘ It was never my intent...’” Juan Martinez, in his collection of short stories *Best Worst American*, explores a similar topic in “ Roadblock”, “ Big Wheel Boiling Hot”, and “ Northern”. Martinez explores how even though characters have good intentions their intentions can still cause harm and destruction. “ Roadblock”, the first short story in Martinez’s collection tells a story of a nephew and an aunt, Molly, who are living together because everyone else in their family was killed in four separate, unrelated plane crashes which left both of them on the brink of emotional chaos. After living together for a while they begin resenting one another. It isn’t long before the aunt starts plotting against her nephew and showing her rage. Unexpectedly, the pair takes in a neighbor boy whose family, they thought, was going on a trip. Later, they realize the boy’s family had been killed in Columbia, before he came to America.

With good intentions in mind, the narrator and his aunt move in together in an effort to be a support structure for each other and “ for consolation” (1) after “ the rest of [their] family died in four separate airplane accidents that took place - improbably, impossibly - within months of each other” (2).

However, fast forward ten years and they “[had] been living together [for a while] and the strain [was] beginning to show” (1). Because of the amount of time the two spent together both at work and at home the narrator’s aunt had begun to develop “ feelings of anger and frustration” (1) towards him that led to her inevitable destructive behavior

Initially, the destructive behavior of the narrator aunt is directed only toward her nephew. The first line of the short story exposes the reader to her behavior when the narrator says that “ lately [his] spinster aunt has been setting [his] personal possessions on fire” (1) Although Mollies behavior is fairly new, the narrator also tells readers that “ before the pyro bits she wrote household advice with magic markers. She wrote on the walls [...]” (1) and that “ today she drew a little comic strip on the front of the oven [where] a stick figure man is led to a guillotine and decapitated” (2). Even though the idea of the narrator and his aunt living together may have been a good one in the beginning, the aunt is resenting having the narrator living with her and destroying both is things and the feeling that he is welcome in her home. Although this is the overall example of good intention leading to destruction in “ Roadblock”, there is also another example in the aunt and nephew’s interactions with the Colombian boy.

When the narrator and his aunt first saw the little boy, he was wearing a polo shirt and jeans.”(3) As time went on molly noticed that the little boys shirt
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had begun to wear so “ molly brought home another polo shirt that had been returned to the store and since forgotten and gave it to the father [of the boy], who nodded and smiled and said something that sounded like thank you (3)” I would argue that the initial interaction with Molly and the narrator is what made the family caring for the boy feel comfortable asking a stranger to care for the child especially on such short notice. The narrator tells the reader that “ the father asked [him] the day before [...] [then] he brought the kid over on Saturday (4).” while taking in a kid that needs someone to watch over him seems like a noble thing to do, it is later revealed that the child’s real family had been killed in a roadblock before coming to the united states. Therefore, their good act of taking in a child had a devastating consequence of the child being abandoned and left with two adults who are not capable of getting along with one another let alone taking care of a child together.

In “ Big Wheel Boiling Hot”, a nameless stage director at a newly opened dinner theater attempts to find “ additional investors” (149) to purchase more musicians, dancers, and costumes. While he’s doing so Karen, the girlfriend of the theater owner, is trying to put together the show “ How to Succeed in Business without Really Trying” After the stage director manages to secure extra funding he finds out that Karen is a raging alcoholic with the inability to manage money effectively. After, her and mark, the theater owner, broke up he stopped paying the rent on the theater. In the end, Karen runs off with the money meant to pay the salaries of the performers and what is left of the donations made to the theater.

During the course of the plot, there are two good intentions, both of which are ruined by one person. When Karen established the theater, she wanted to bring the arts to Orlando. Something that would positively impact the lives of many and expanded the cultural horizons of the community as a whole. Furthermore, when the stage director realized that the production needed a bigger budget to afford “ the five additional dancers, the live cello, the four-piece string ensemble, the percussionist, [and] the costume upgrade” (149) he “ looked around for additional investors” (149) to ensure the success of the theater. He even “ talked to [his] manager at blockbuster” (page number) who “ eventually agreed that a community event of this sort would be good for our branch” (page number) and donated money. Both of these individuals held a high stake in the successes and failures of the theater, so both acted with good intentions.

However, what was initially Karen’s good intention turned both her and the stage director’s intentions in to a disaster. After Karen got overwhelmed with the responsibility of the theater she began to drink “ oversized water bottles” (154) filled with “ vodka” (155). The more Karen drank the more her good intentions got away from her and the more “ deeply creased, deeply worried, [and] deeply stressed” (155) she got. It reached the point where she couldn’t manage the financial aspect of the theater and couldn’t keep up with the rent and the theater is at risk of being “ close[d] down” (156). Once she realized how deep of a hole she had dug for herself Karen took off with all of the money. At this point, she had not only turned her good intention into a bad outcome, but also the stage directors. By taking off with all of the money, the investor that the stage director found will never get a return on

his investment meaning the good intention of the stage director had a detrimental effect on the finances of the investor.

Almost completely opposite of “ Big Wheels Boiling Hot”, where multiple pure intentions led to one bad outcome, in “ Northern” one good intention leads to multiple negative results. In the short story a married couple with a secure and sensible lifestyle takes in one of the wife’s friends, Marta Helena who is a recovering drug addict. At first glance the couple seems normal, but when the sun sets the wife conjures what are described to be demon children from her mind. After she does this her husband is responsible for disposing of the children.

Though the collection seems unconnected from the beginning to the end, the connecting factor is how the good intentions of the couple cause a series of events leading to multiple devastating effects. When the couple opened their home to Marta they were trying to keep her off the streets. They were also trying to keep her from reverting back to drugs as an outlet for her problems. Because of the couples good, unsuspecting nature Marta tried to manipulate them into what she wanted. First, she slept with the husband then tried to black mail him into paying for her plastic surgery. After the husband refused to pay for it Marta got the plastic surgery anyway on the black market. This led to an infection in the area that she had the surgery. Finally, after a prolonged infection Marta died from her black-market plastic surgery. All of which were a product of the couple trying to help a friend and could have been avoided had they never offered for her to stay with them.

Overall, Martinez uses the good intentions of his characters and the bad outcomes that stem from their good intentions to create a connection between “ Roadblock”, “ Big Wheels Boiling Hot”, and “ Northern”. In a collection of short stories, the topics and characters can often seem dispatched from one another but in an effort to connect his stories Martinez used this similar theme throughout the collection in order to keep readers active and engaged.

Works Cited

Martinez, Juan. Best Worst American: Stories. Small beer press, 2017. Print.

Utt, Jamie. “ Intentions Don’t Really Matter.” Everyday Feminism 13 Jul. 2013. Web. 13 Oct. 2017