

Excerpted from *Welcome to the Neighborhood: An Anthology of American Coexistence*.
Edited by Sarah Green. Swallow Press, 2019.

Neighborhood Talks

Opening the Discussion

Close Reading:

1. Compare and contrast the following two poems: “Watch” by Gary Jackson and “To the Fig Tree on 9th and Christian” by Ross Gay. How would you describe the mood of the speaker in each poem? Why does each speaker feel this way? In what ways do these mostly dissimilar poems overlap or allude to a shared reality? Be sure to evidence your ideas with specific lines from each poem.
2. Reread the following short stories: “The Kindest” by Sonya Larson and “Religion” by Christine Schutt. Although neither of these stories centers around neighbors or neighborhoods in a conventional sense, what forms of neighboring do you see taking place in each story? How do the themes of Larson’s and Schutt’s stories fit in with the other works in this anthology?
3. In the essays “Shelter” by Sarah Einstein and “Occupants” by James Miranda, each writer develops a profile of a nonfictional character (or group of characters). What aspects of these characters’ descriptions do you find most memorable and/or compelling? What compelled Einstein and Miranda to write about them? What ethical principles, if any, do you think essayists should follow when writing in a documentary style about the people they meet and befriend in their neighborhood?
4. U.S. Poet Laureate Joy Harjo’s poem “Perhaps the World Ends Here” closes the book. What do you think the kitchen table symbolizes in this poem? What do you notice about Harjo’s patterning of various uses of the kitchen table? Is this a celebratory poem?
5. What do you think is the “moral” of Jarod Roselló’s comic “The Neighbor”? How does it resonate with contemporary social issues?

Writing:

1. Picture your childhood street. Which sensory details stand out the most to you? What childhood memories do they evoke? Are these memories solitary or shared with others? Why do you think these particular moments stood out to you? Note: If it is challenging for you to choose a particular childhood location, pick the one that you have the strongest sensory memories of; alternately, write about what makes this exercise challenging for you.

2. Describe your relationship with your current neighborhood. How long have you lived there? What do you know about its history? How has it changed over the years? What landmarks and people have you come to know well? What parts of it (if any) are mysterious and/or alienating to you? Do you think everyone who lives there feels welcome? Why or why not?

3. Think of a moment when your assumption about a neighbor was disproven—perhaps during your childhood, because of your limited perspective as a child. Write both the backstory and a scene describing how the shift in your perception happened.

4. Draw a map of your current neighborhood. Provide as much detail as possible, including streets, houses, trees, alleys, and any other little details you can remember. What parts are the most vivid for you? Mark locations where memorable events occurred. What were they and why have they stayed with you? What parts of the map are less detailed or even blank? Write about the process of drawing this map and what it reveals about your relationship to your neighborhood. How might you get to know your neighborhood better?

5. Invent a neighborhood. Make your narrator omniscient, and write a scene in which you describe what several characters are doing (and thinking) at the same moment—say, 3 p.m. on a Tuesday—in different homes/yards. No one character needs to stand out. Let the shared neighborhood setting be another character with which they all interact. Find ways for the neighbors to connect without necessarily interacting directly (for example, a bee shoed away by one neighbor drifts into another neighbor's yard; one neighbor tapes a flyer to another's door; a sudden burst of rain affects everyone).

Group Discussion:

1. In a small group, introduce yourselves in turn with your name and the neighborhood you call home. Tell the group about your neighborhood. What are your favorite places in your neighborhood? Who are some of your neighbors? What

makes your neighborhood feel like home? Does anything about your neighborhood make you uncomfortable?

2. In your neighborhood, what does “neighborliness” look like? What are some ways people in your neighborhood help each other? How does your community welcome new members to the neighborhood? What can sometimes make it challenging to build community where you are? What community-building ideas can you think of that have not yet been tried, or that existed in the past in your area but could be profitably rekindled?

3. What contribution stood out as your favorite (or most memorable) piece in the anthology? Does this piece remind you of your own neighborhood and experiences? Why or why not?

4. What are some of the primary themes you notice among pieces included in *Welcome to the Neighborhood*? Which pieces do you think best exemplify concepts like neighborliness, community, and altruism?

5. What do you remember about the ways your family gave and received neighborly aid when you were a child? Does a particular person stand out in your memory as the embodiment of a welcoming neighbor?

Share!

Welcome to the Neighborhood can be a great tool for getting to know your neighbors and your community. Organize a potluck and invite people who might be interested in forming a book discussion group. Plan some meetings and use these prompts to spur conversation. Let people create their own connections and observations. Your local library and bookstore are also good places to check for book club information if you're not yet ready to organize your own gathering.

Feel free to contribute to the *Welcome to the Neighborhood* Facebook page here: <https://www.facebook.com/welcome2theneighborhood/>