

Netherworld

From the novel The Happy Man by Eric C. Higgs

A Series Bible Presentation

Written by David M. O'Neill

Novel by: Eric C. Higgs – The Happy Man

Sandstone Artists

Genre: Thriller

Period: Current Day

Location: Chula Vista, California, Mexican Border

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Logline

When enigmatic neighbors Ruskin and Sybil Marsh move into a quiet valley community, Charlie is lured into their intoxicating world of ritual, pleasure, and power. What feels like liberation soon devours him, as the real danger isn't outside his door — it lives next to it.

Tagline

“Evil just doesn't arrive — it moves in to the neighborhood.”

Series Synopsis

Charlie thought life in the valley meant stability — a safe home, a steady job, and the quiet rhythms of family life. The arrival of Ruskin and Sybil Marsh dismantles that illusion overnight. Charismatic, enigmatic, and irresistibly magnetic, the Marshes exude a glamour that conceals something far older and darker. Their philosophy, the *Antico Usanza*, draws on the forbidden writings of the Marquis de Sade, promising liberation through indulgence, cruelty, and ritual. To Charlie, their presence feels both threatening and intoxicating, a spark of danger in his otherwise ordinary existence.

Ruskin does not force Charlie into corruption; he invites him into it. Every gesture, every story, every “game” is designed to pull Charlie deeper into the Marshes' orbit. What begins as harmless curiosity becomes ritual participation, thrilling Charlie with a sense of power he has never known. Yet each indulgence costs him something — a compromise at work, a fracture in his marriage, a piece of his moral core. Shelly, his wife, is drawn down a parallel path through Sybil's influence, and what was once a sanctuary of marriage becomes another crucible of temptation and betrayal.

By season's end, Charlie is no longer simply a neighbor watching from across the fence. He is entangled in Ruskin's design, both victim and accomplice to the horrors unfolding in the valley below. The confrontation between Charlie and Ruskin is not a battle of fists but of wills — a struggle over identity, freedom, and corruption. Whether Charlie resists or surrenders, one truth becomes undeniable: the Marshes just didn't bring the darkness with them, but wakened the unsuspecting couple to the horrors already waiting in the tranquil valley below.

By season's end, Charlie faces Ruskin — not as neighbor, but as master of the valley's hidden secrets.

Themes

- **Seduction of Evil:** Darkness doesn't force itself in — it invites you, flatters you, and makes you want it.
- **Power and Corruption:** Ruskin offers Charlie a taste of dominance and freedom, but every indulgence rots his soul and destroys his life with every passing bite.
- **The Fragility of Domestic Life:** Marriage, family, and community are fragile sanctuaries — easily dismantled by temptation and manipulation.
- **Masks and Truth:** Ruskin and Sybil wear neighborly charm as a mask, revealing how ordinary settings can conceal monstrous veracities.

Stakes

- **Personal:** If Charlie resists, he keeps his life intact; if he surrenders, he loses his marriage, his career, and himself.
- **Relational:** Shelly's seduction threatens not only their marriage but pits husband against wife as both are drawn deeper into Ruskin's philosophy.
- **Community:** The valley, seemingly idyllic, is at risk of becoming a theater for Ruskin's rituals — corrupting not just one household, but an entire neighborhood.
- **Existential:** Ruskin's *Antico Usanza* isn't just philosophy — it's a contagion. If Charlie succumbs, he becomes both disciple and proof that anyone can be broken.

Ruskin's Mythology & Rules

- **Antico Usanza:** Ruskin's personal philosophy of indulgence, dominance, and ritual cruelty, cloaked in elegance and charm.
- **Rules:**
 1. *Pleasure is the only truth.*
 2. *Pain must be shared to be pure.*
 3. *No act is forbidden even if it leaves a mark on the soul.*
- **The Trap:** Ruskin seduces, never forces. His brilliance lies in making Charlie *want* the darkness himself.

Ruskin’s Impact on Charlie

Power vs. Weakness: *“For once, I’m not invisible. I matter. But at what cost?”*

Pleasure vs. Guilt: The rush of Ruskin’s rituals versus the shame that gnaws at him in the quiet after.

Control vs. Submission: Is Charlie choosing this path, or is Ruskin pulling every string?

Identity Erosion: The horror of realizing he’s no longer the husband, father, or man he thought he was.

Marriage as Battlefield: Watching Shelly succumb to Sybil’s influence, Charlie wonders whether he’s lost her — or whether he’s the one leading them both into darkness.

Rationalization: Convincing himself that each compromise is “just this once,” only to find himself further entangled.

Addiction to Transgression: Recognizing that the thrill he feels in cruelty and indulgence is addictive, and he doesn’t want to stop.

Fear of Exposure: The dread that his neighbors, friends, or colleagues might discover what he’s become.

Seduction of Belonging: Ruskin makes him feel chosen, special, worthy — something Charlie secretly craves.

Final Reckoning: *“If I resist now, I lose everything I’ve gained. If I continue, I lose myself, wife, home, job, friends.”*

Series Engine

Each episode repeats the cycle of Ruskin’s seduction and Charlie’s unraveling. The Marshes invite Charlie (and eventually Shelly) into seemingly innocent encounters — dinners, stories, games, rituals — that escalate into acts of transgression.

What drives the season is Charlie’s transformation: from cautious husband to eager participant, to corrupted disciple. Ruskin orchestrates it all, drawing Charlie closer to the valley’s horrifying, secret rituals.

Pilot Beat Sheet

- **Inciting Incident:** The Marshes move into the border valley town with charm and generosity, inviting Charlie and Shelly to dinner. As wine flows and the night grows strange, Ruskin recounts a story of the *Antico Usanza* — an ancient philosophy of cruelty masked as liberation. The tale is hypnotic, leaving Charlie unsettled but unable to shake the thrill of what he’s heard.
- **Midpoint:** At a gathering disguised as a playful evening, Ruskin orchestrates a ritual under the guise of a party game. Charlie is coaxed into participating. The room hums with tension as he feels, for the first time, the electric rush of forbidden power. It’s exhilarating — and terrifying — a moment that emboldens him even as his instincts scream to flee.
- **Point-of-No-Return:** Ruskin pushes Charlie past the boundary of morality. In front of the group, Charlie commits a small but deliberate act of cruelty, cheered on by laughter and Ruskin’s approving gaze. The act horrifies him, yet the thrill it ignites leaves him shaken — because he wants more.
- **Final Images:** Later that night, Charlie stands at his window, staring at the Marshes’ house, glowing like a beacon in the darkness. Shadows flicker, voices rise — laughter mixed with screams carried on the valley wind. His face is torn between fear and longing. He knows he should resist. But he cannot look away.

Season One Overview

- **Objective:** Ruskin seeks to corrupt Charlie and Shelly completely, making them disciples of his *Antico Usanza*. Charlie fights, fails, and finally succumbs.
 - **Decisive Moves:**
 1. Recruiting Charlie into a ritual that costs him his job.
 2. Drawing Shelly into her own spiral of temptation.
 3. Staging a valley-wide event that reveals the depth of Ruskin’s influence and leaves Charlie no way back.
 - **Season Drive:** Charlie’s fall — his seduction, corruption, destruction and final showdown with Ruskin.

Season One Episode Guide (10 Episodes)

1. **Pilot – “New Neighbors”**: The Marshes arrive. A dinner at their house plants seeds of fascination and dread in Charlie. Ruskin’s charisma and a strange story about the *Antico Usanza* hint at darkness to come.
2. **“The Invitation”**: Charlie is lured to a gathering that blurs the line between party and ritual. He experiences a rush of power from participating in a seemingly harmless but unsettling game.
3. **“The Favor”**: Ruskin asks Charlie for a small act — bending a rule at work. The favor costs Charlie his job and proves Ruskin’s hold is growing.
4. **“The Valley Below”**: Charlie sees a procession in the valley at night. Laughter, torches, and haunting sounds fuel paranoia. He’s drawn to watch even as he fears what he’s seeing.
5. **“Shelly’s Secret”**: Shelly begins spending time with Sybil. She returns home changed — more confident, more reckless. Charlie realizes the Marshes are seducing her too.
6. **“Broken Boundaries”**: Charlie crosses his first moral line in Ruskin’s presence — an act of cruelty disguised as fun. He feels thrilled and terrified by what he’s done.
7. **“The Gathering”**: Ruskin hosts a ritualistic dinner for select valley residents. Charlie sees that others are falling under Ruskin’s sway, making escape seem impossible.
8. **“The Betrayal”**: Shelly participates in a ritual without Charlie, aligning herself more fully with Sybil. Charlie feels betrayed, but also jealous of her intimacy with the Marshes.
9. **“The Valley Burns”**: A horrifying event in the valley — part spectacle, part sacrifice — shakes the community. Charlie tries to resist but finds himself complicit, trapped in Ruskin’s orbit.
10. **Finale – “The Master”**: Ruskin reveals his true power over Charlie and Shelly. A confrontation explodes between Charlie and Ruskin, but Charlie is too far gone. The final image: Charlie standing shoulder to shoulder with Ruskin, gazing over the valley below, now part of its darkness.

Character Arcs (Want / Need / Change)

- **Charlie**
 - *Want*: Stability and respect.
 - *Need*: Resist seduction.
 - *Change*: Becomes addicted to Ruskin’s world, corrupted beyond recognition.

“Where Terror Lurks in the Friendship of Others”

- **Ruskin Marsh**
 - *Want*: Corrupt his neighbors.
 - *Need*: Feed his philosophy through disciples.
 - *Change*: Reveals himself as more than neighbor — a master of the valley’s darkness.
- **Sybil Marsh**
 - *Want*: Guard Ruskin’s secrets.
 - *Need*: Entangle others in their web.
 - *Change*: From enigmatic hostess to co-conspirator, equally dangerous.
- **Shelly (Charlie’s Wife)**
 - *Want*: Protect her family.
 - *Need*: Resist temptation.
 - *Change*: Seduced into the same darkness, betraying Charlie in her own way.

Comps

- *The Outsider* — Borrowing the dread of evil settling into a small community; subverting by making evil seductive, not monstrous.
- *You* — Borrowing the charm of a predator in plain sight; subverting by focusing on the victim’s corruption instead of the predator’s POV.
- *The Haunting of Hill House* — Borrowing the transformation of ordinary domestic life into terror; subverting by grounding horror in human depravity, not ghosts.
- *Dahmer* - Borrowing: Like *Dahmer*, *What Lies in the Valley Below* explores how evil can take root in ordinary settings — a home, a neighborhood, a quiet community — and how those around it either fail to see it or are drawn into its orbit. Both shows create dread not through jump scares but through the unbearable tension of proximity to horror. **Subverting**: Unlike *Dahmer*, which is a true-crime biopic focused on the killer, *Valley Below* shifts POV to the *victim’s corruption*. Charlie isn’t investigating Ruskin, he’s being seduced by him — making the story less about *observing evil* and more about *becoming complicit in it*.

“Where Terror Lurks in the Friendship of Others”

Why Now / Market Positioning

- **Target Buyers:** HBO, Netflix, Hulu, Amazon.
- **Tone:** Prestige psychological thriller with horror undertones; seductive, erotic, and terrifying.
- **Budget Lane:** Mid-range (\$5–7M per episode); character-driven but visually atmospheric.
- **Why Now:** In an era obsessed with appearances, wellness, and safe suburban lives, audiences are drawn to stories about the rot beneath the surface. *What Lies in the Valley Below* delivers a chilling, irresistible tale of how evil doesn’t storm in — it moves in next door, smiling.

“The appetite is always sharpened with the first bite.”