

About the book...

THE
BEGINNER'S
GOODBYE
A NOVEL



ANNE
TYLER
WINNER OF THE PULITZER PRIZE

Anne Tyler gives us a wise, haunting, and deeply moving new novel in which she explores how a middle-aged man, ripped apart by the death of his wife, is gradually restored by her frequent appearances --- in their house, on the roadway, in the market.

Crippled in his right arm and leg, Aaron spent his childhood fending off a sister who wants to manage him. So when he meets Dorothy, a plain, outspoken, self-dependent young woman, she is like a breath of fresh air. Unhesitatingly he marries her, and they have a relatively happy, unremarkable marriage. But when a tree crashes into their house and Dorothy is killed, Aaron feels as though he has been erased forever. Only Dorothy's unexpected appearances from the dead help him to live in the moment and to find some peace.

Gradually he discovers, as he works in the family's vanity-publishing business, turning out titles that presume to guide beginners through the trials of life, that maybe for this beginner there is a way of saying goodbye.

A beautiful, subtle exploration of loss and recovery, pierced throughout with Anne Tyler's humor, wisdom, and always penetrating look at human foibles.

About the author...



Anne Tyler was born in Minneapolis, Minnesota, in 1941 and grew up in Raleigh, North Carolina. This is her nineteenth novel; her eleventh, [*Breathing Lessons*](#), was awarded the Pulitzer Prize in 1988. She is a

member of the American Academy of Arts and Letters. She lives in Baltimore, Maryland.

Reviews

Booklist/**Starred Review**/

Tyler's bright charm resides in her signature blend of the serious with the larky. Adept at dissecting family life, she is also intrigued by lonely guys, the focus in [The Accidental Tourist](#) (1985), [A Patchwork Planet](#) (1998), and [Noah's Compass](#) (2009). Her newest variation on this theme is an exceptionally lithe, sparkling, and covertly philosophical tale, set, as all her novels are, in

Baltimore. Hampered with a crippled leg and arm, Aaron has always refused to be coddled, fending off his guilt-ridden mother and strong-willed sister. He married Dorothy, a doctor, because he loved her brusqueness and pragmatism. He is devastated when she dies in a freak accident that destroys their house until Dorothy begins returning from beyond. These precious, if mysterious, encounters are all that matter to Aaron. He moves in with his sister, turns his wrecked house over to Gil, a sympathetic contractor, and barricades himself in his office at his family's vanity press to avoid frilly, cookie-baking, overly helpful Peggy. The press stays afloat by selling its Beginner's series, little how-to books that Tyler astutely uses to illuminate how ill-prepared we are for life's relentless demands. As Gil restores Aaron's home, Aaron slowly rebuilds his life in this funny, sweet, and wise tale of lost and found love.

Library Journal

Although crippled in his right arm and leg, Aaron has spent much of his life fending off his family's attempts to protect him from the world. A

successful editor of a vanity press in Baltimore that publishes a series of beginner's guides to various subjects, Aaron one day finds himself falling in love with Dr. Dorothy Rosales, whom he has approached about helping to write *The Beginner's Cancer*. They soon end up married, but catastrophe strikes when a tree falls on their house and kills Dorothy. Unable to live in his house any longer because of memories and roof damage, Aaron goes to live with his sister. He moves through loss, despair, helplessness, and emotional paralysis until one day Dorothy appears to him in the street. Struggling with the meaning of her appearances, Aaron eventually comes to accept them as her way of both saying good-bye and helping him get over her death. VERDICT As always, Pulitzer Prize winner Tyler brilliantly explores a stunning range of human emotion, poignantly considering the challenges of death while creating lovable characters whose foibles capture our hearts. Essential reading.

BookPage Reviews

The odd man's guide to moving on

Aaron and Dorothy may have seemed an odd couple to family, neighbors and co-workers. Aaron, crippled in his right arm and leg by a childhood illness and plagued by sporadic stuttering, runs the family vanity publishing business, whose biggest success to date is a series of "Beginner's" books—*The Beginner's Wine Guide*, *The Beginner's Monthly Budget* or, most recently, *The Beginner's Book of Birdwatching*. Something on the order of the *Dummies* books, Aaron feels, but "more dignified." Dorothy was a doctor: "work-obsessed," according to Aaron's sister, Nandina; she left early for the office, stayed late and "barely knew how to boil an egg." And yet, as Aaron recalls after Dorothy's sudden death at the hands of a fallen oak tree, they were "happily, unremarkably married."

After her death, Aaron feels as if he's been "erased," or "ripped in two" . . . until he begins getting visits from Dorothy. At first he's afraid to speak, worried she will leave if he does. But gradually he engages her in conversation—asking if she's happy, if she misses being alive—even revisiting some of their ancient and petty arguments. But he also realizes they really loved each other, even if each of them was somehow unable to demonstrate that love when they had the chance.

Anne Tyler's novels (this is her 19th) have often been peopled with eccentric male characters. In 1974's [*Celestial Navigation*](#), it was Jeremy, a loner who crafted intricate paper collages for a living; Macon in [*The Accidental Tourist*](#) (1985) was a travel writer who hated traveling; and Liam, in 2010's [*Noah's Compass*](#), was a would-be philosopher who taught fifth grade at a second-rate private elementary school.

Aaron joins this celebrated group, portrayed with Tyler's signature quirky humor and her gift for drawing her characters into awkward situations all too uncomfortably familiar to every reader. Peripheral characters enrich the mix, including the ever-pragmatic Nandina, and their secretary, Peggy, a "pink-and-gold person with . . . a fondness for thrift-store outfits involving too many bits of lace," both of whom alternately try to nurture Aaron and chide him for his inability to move on. This glimpse into personal loss limned with an unexpectedly bright future will be welcomed by Tyler's many admirers.

Kirkus Reviews

Though the plot finds a man in early middle age coming to terms with the death of his wife, the

tone of this whimsical fable is so light that it practically floats off the page. Some might consider the latest from Tyler (Noah's Compass, 2010, etc.) typically wise and charming, while others will dismiss it as cloying. She employs a first-person narrator, a 36-year-old man named Aaron, who works for a small-family publishing firm that specializes in its Beginners series. "These were something on the order of the Dummies books, but without the cheerleader tone of voice," explains Aaron, who proceeds to offer the sort of insight that could come from almost any Tyler novel: "Anything is manageable if it's divided into small enough increments, was the theory, even life's most complicated lessons." At the start of the book, Aaron is in the beginning stages of mourning, after a tree crashed through his house and crushed his slightly older wife. She was a doctor; Aaron is "crippled" and something of an oddball. As Tyler's readers recognize, we are each of us crippled and oddball, deep down inside, and the fact that Aaron's was a marriage of misfits makes it no different from any other. Early on, Aaron receives visits from his dead wife, whom no one else can see, and whom he admits might well

be a projection or an apparition. If he is an unreliable narrator, he is also a flawed one, often sounding more like a much older woman than like a man his age (very few of whom use terms like "busy-busy"). Mourning is both a rite of passage and a process of discovery for Aaron, who early worries that, "I can't do this...I don't know how. They don't offer any courses in this; I haven't had any practice," but who is ultimately not a tragic but comic figure, one who will (more or less) live happily ever after. An uncharacteristically slight work by a major novelist.

Publishers Weekly/*Starred Review*/

In Tyler's elegant 19th novel, Aaron is an editor at a vanity press with a crippled right arm and leg who thinks of himself as "unluckier but no unhappier" than anyone else. He meets Dorothy, a brisk, no nonsense doctor, while editing a medical tome, and they fall in love, marry, and muddle along until Dorothy dies in an accident that nearly destroys their home. Aaron moves in with his overprotective sister and begins seeing Dorothy's ghost, spectral appearances that make him realize

just how many fissures there were in their marriage. Tyler's gentle style focuses on the details of daily life, and how the little things, both beautiful and ugly, contribute to the bigger picture. Tyler (*Breathing Lessons*, awarded the Pulitzer Prize in 1988) portrays complex, difficult, loving individuals struggling to co-exist and find happiness together. This is no gothic ghost story nor chronicle of a man unraveling in his grief, but rather an uplifting tale of love and forgiveness. By the end of this wonderful book, you've lived the lives and loves of these characters in the best possible way.

Discussion questions

(<http://www.readinggroupguides.com>)

- 1.** Aaron is handicapped on his right side as a result of a childhood illness. Why do you think the author chose to give her main character such a handicap? Is it significant --- a symbol or metaphor --- or entirely coincidental?
- 2.** Does the way that Aaron's mother and sister treated him when he was growing up impact his character as an adult? Or explain why he might have married Dorothy?
- 3.** In Aaron's recollections of initially meeting Dorothy and falling in love with her, he portrays himself as having been immediately besotted, though Dorothy herself seems less than scintillating. Is Aaron aware of this discrepancy?
- 4.** After Dorothy's death, does Aaron fully grieve for her, or is he reluctant to accept what has happened?
- 5.** Why does Dorothy reappear so many months after her death?
- 6.** Aaron states early in the book (pages 11-12) that he is an atheist. Does this (lack of) belief shed any light on Dorothy's appearances?

7. How does Dorothy act when she reappears? Why? Does her behavior indicate something about her character? About Aaron's?

8. Beginning on page 175, Aaron reveals that his marriage to Dorothy was not, after all, ideal. Does this come as a surprise? Do you think this has something to do with Dorothy's reappearances?

9. Toward the end of the book (pages 194–5), Aaron reflects on Gil's thoughts about *his* father's reappearances ("I know Gil felt it was his father's unfinished business that brought him, but what's occurred to me lately is, couldn't it have been *Gil's* unfinished business?"). Do Aaron's reflections suggest why Dorothy has reappeared?

10. If so, what should the reader make of Aaron's almost defensive remarks on the following page ("Do you imagine it hasn't occurred to me that I might have just made Dorothy's visits up?")? What should we think of Nate's comments on the page after that ("I think if you knew them well enough . . . you might be able to imagine what they would tell you even now")? Do these comments indicate how Aaron has come to view Dorothy's appearances?

11. What are the possible ways to interpret the final paragraph of the book? Are the apparitions of Dorothy real, after all? Is Aaron deluded? Does the final paragraph suggest a “moral” to the story? Was a moral hinted at earlier?

12. What is the significance of the book’s title?

Readalikes:

[The Love of a Good Woman](#) by Alice Munro

[A Widow for One Year](#) by John Irving

[Lost in the Forest](#) by Sue Miller

The Maples Stories by John Updike



Ann Arbor District Library