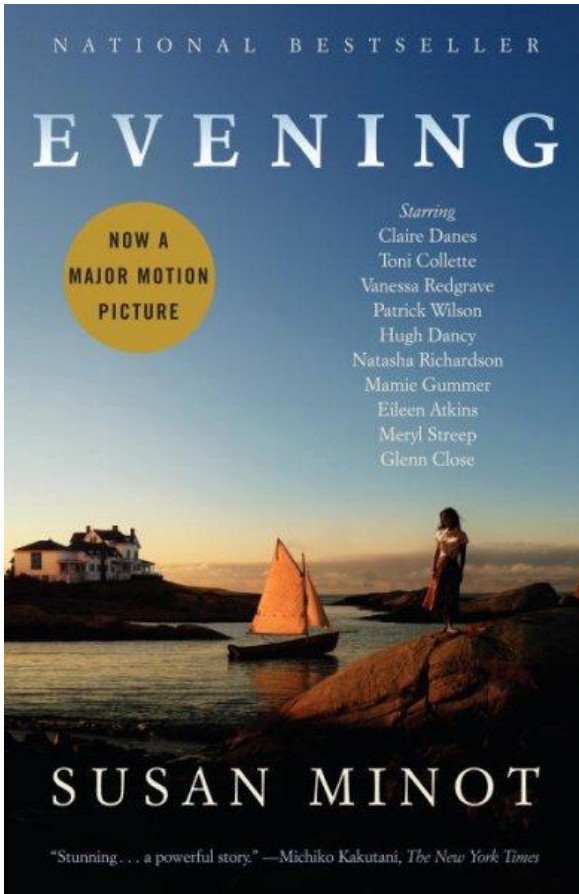


## About the book...



Ann Lord is dying of cancer. As she lies in bed, drifting in and out of consciousness, visited by friends and family members, we enter the twilight world of her memories, dreams, and regrets. Although she has had three husbands and five children, it is, above all, to one turbulent weekend that her mind keeps returning--and to one all-too-brief, never-to-be-forgotten romance. As she loses hold on present reality, Ann is drawn insistently back forty years to memories of the glorious Maine wedding of her friend Lila, where she met, fell in love with, and finally lost the one man who has ever meant anything to her; and where a fateful tragedy struck at the heart of their happy group of friends. *Evening* is a magnificent, richly-textured work of art about youth and age, passion and compromise. It triumphantly confirms Susan Minot's place as one of the foremost, and most beloved, of American writers.

## About the author...



Susan Minot (b. 1956) was born in Boston, Massachusetts, and grew up in Manchester-by-the-Sea. She studied writing and painting at Brown University and received an MFA in writing from Columbia University. After publishing short stories in *Grand Street* and *The New Yorker*, she was offered a contract for a novel by the legendary publisher Seymour Lawrence, who published her next three books. His initial support for "a work of fiction" became *Monkeys*, nine stories that together make up a novel about the Vincents, a New England family of seven children with a Catholic mother and Brahmin-background father. Often labeled a minimalist, Minot gained popularity with her 1989 collection *Lust and Other Stories*. The title story, "Lust," has helped lead the way in the styling of modern American short fiction. Recently, Minot stepped into a more public spotlight by writing the screenplay for Bernardo Bertolucci's 1996 film *Stealing Beauty*.

## Reviews

### *Booklist*

Minot is renowned for the exquisite precision of her language and her emotional insights, traits she has elevated to new and exhilarating heights in this supremely sensual, sensitive, dramatic, and artistic novel, her finest work to date. In the present, Minot's narrator, Ann Lord, is 65 and facing certain death from cancer. It's July, she is confined to bed in her gracious Boston home, and her doctor has told her that she won't live to see the leaves change. Inebriated with pain and morphine, Ann drifts from memory to reverie to dream as her children from three marriages take turns sitting with her and conferring nervously downstairs, as Nurse Brown tends gently to her contracting body, as comforting sounds and smells drift in through open windows, and as the ceiling appears to her as a blank page on which to write her life. And what does she remember most clearly? Not her husbands, although we do get glimpses of them, and not her children's childhoods, but a summer weekend 40 years ago when she attended a close friend's elaborate wedding on a Maine island and found and lost the one true love of her life. The instant she met Harris Arden, every cell in her body went wild with a fever as overwhelming in its own way as the delirium that seizes her now. And so she tells herself the story in minute detail, recounting every stirring sea breeze, every bracing wave, every star and glint in Harris' eyes, every commanding touch of his hands, lips, limbs. It was a weekend of revelation and tragedy, and its lessons burn bright in Ann's wavering consciousness. Minot's renderings of the heat of the past and the cooling of the present are gorgeously cinematic, so rich in color and motion, music and atmosphere that sorrow and death become no less glorious than joy and life.

### *Publishers Weekly*

A dying woman's abiding passion for a lover she met in her 20s propels this eloquent third novel by the gifted author of *Monkeys and Folly*. As 65-year-old cancer patient Ann Grant Lord drifts in and out of a morphine-induced haze, her recollections range back and forth between 1954 and 1994, mulling over the influences that have shaped her life. In particular, she clings to the memory of Harris Arden, the young doctor she met at the wedding of her best friend, Lila Wittenborn, and their brief affair, which he ended to marry another. Resigned to a life without bliss, Ann subsequently sang in cabarets and accumulated husbands, survived motherhood, widowhood and the death of her 12-year-old son but never knew another passion like the one she felt for Harris. With insight and sensitivity, Minot sketches the small daily travails of the deathbed vigils shared by Ann's friends and step-siblings and keeps tension high by skillfully foreshadowing (or back-shadowing) certain of the novel's largest, saddest events, all the while withholding longed-for particulars. The day after the wedding, we eventually learn, the Wittenborns suffered a crushing loss. The juxtaposition of Ann's heartbreak with the more universal tragedy that affected her friend's family accentuates the novel's achingly poignant climax. As the end nears, Ann's drug-induced hallucinations, memories and imagined conversations with Harris all merge into one roiling stream in which Minot's flair for dramatization comes to the fore, rendering her heroine's experience of love at first sight plausible and enviable. Minot has created in Ann a woman whose ardent past allows her to face death while savoring the exhilaration that marked her full and passionate life.

### *Library Journal*

Ann Lord is facing the evening of her life as she lies dying of cancer in an upstairs room. Visited daily by her adult children and old friends, attended around the clock by professionals, she is aware of them only sporadically--she is reliving a weekend more than four decades past, during her 25th summer. As a bridesmaid at a New England wedding, Ann experienced love, passion,

loss, and tragedy so intense that the rest of her privileged, eventful life was anticlimactic. As Ann slips in and out of the past, her memories and reflections are crafted with elegant stylistic flair, but the action, occurring mostly in her mind, can be slow going, even when the plot strays toward soap opera. The dry patches are relieved too infrequently by tantalizing glimpses of the interaction among Ann's caregivers. Nevertheless, as with Minot's novel *Folly* (LJ 2/1/93), this book offers rewards for serious readers. Buy where the author is in demand.

### *Kirkus Reviews*

Minot (*Folly*, 1992, etc.) aims high in taking a long look at the beginning and end of a love-life--in a project that's not without its gripping moments but that requires an excess of artifice to stay aloft and doesn't steadily convince. Ann Lord, 65, is dying of cancer, attended by a nurse and her various adult offspring from three not-so-happy marriages. In matters of love, Ann's entire life, it seems, has been in one way or another less than blissful--though all might have been otherwise if things had been slightly different back in 1954--when Ann was 25--during a gala seaside weekend celebrating a friend's marriage. Those were the three days when Ann met ("The person's face seemed lit from within"), loved ("The great thing was happening to her"), and lost (to another, by a cruel twist of fate) the ultra-handsome doctor and Korea vet whom she (though not necessarily the reader) fell in love with at first sight ("His tall legs kept coming toward her"). Minot's decision to pin the whole weight of the novel on one weekend causes much strain, and her best successes come when she drops romance altogether and lets her character (à la Mrs. Ramsay) meditate on loss and the passing of time (" . . . they would last and not she . . . The things in the house were not herself"). Elsewhere, though, the burden of making the 40-year-ago weekend ("the highest point in one's life") significant enough for the book to work tempts the author back into her familiar Hemingway-style filler-mode ("Ann had had feelings with a few other boys and with each there was something particular . . . which was unique and it seemed that the . . . feeling around Harris Arden was more unique than usual") or into topping the story with a sensational event to try to up the psychological ante. As always with Minot, moments of incisive and telling beauty, mood, and atmosphere...

## **Literary Criticism**

Evening is extraordinary for presenting a woman in her sixties, dying of cancer, as a point-of-view character. Ann's disassociation from her family's experience of her illness, and the urgency with which she returns to the riches of her remembered past as her body is drugged and dying, are as innovative as they are engaging.

At its best, the novel recalls the fiction of [Virginia Woolf](#) in its lyricism, distinctive chronological shifts, and concern with the alternating "moments of being" and "cotton-wool of non-being" that for Woolf characterized human experience. The novel falls short, however, in its development of the rest of the family's engagement in Ann's illness.

The relative absence of intensity of Ann's feelings for her children, in comparison to her feelings for the man with whom she might have experienced fulfillment, is part of the novel's valuable iconoclasm: Evening refuses to see a dying woman as primarily a wife and mother, and insists on making us see her as a woman who once had, and now has again, a rich inner life apart from her family responsibilities. The novel is made awkward, however, when the adult children's perspectives are raised as a significant plot thread and then barely developed.

## Discussion questions

1. Minot gives the novel an epigraph from William Faulkner: "I give it to you not that you may remember time, but that you might forget it now and then for a moment and not spend all your breath trying to conquer it." How does this quotation relate to *Evening*? Does Ann try to "conquer" time?
2. Minot renders Ann's thoughts in what might be called stream-of-consciousness. Which things does Ann remember most distinctly? Which does she remember least distinctly? Which does she repress? What does the relative weight she allows each memory tell us about the emotional shape of her life?
3. Outsiders see Ann rather differently than she sees herself. Her daughter Constance, for instance, says that "her big thing" is "her stuff"; "That's what she cared about, her house and her pictures and all her things" [p. 129]. Her daughters imply that she doesn't laugh much [p. 32]. The doctor's wife says Ann is "just like other women, maybe a little more stylish if you had to say something, but like other women" [p. 12]. What, if anything, does this elderly Ann have in common with the young, passionate Ann she still feels herself to be? What does this dichotomy imply about the differences between our inner selves and the outer person our friends and family see?
4. What might have attracted Ann to each of her three husbands? How did she come to view each of them as the years went by? How does the language in which Ann recalls her marriages differ from the language in which she recalls Harris, and what does this difference in language tell us about her feelings?
5. Ann wishes that she "might have been able to read the spirit within herself and would not have spent her life as if she were only halfway in it" [p. 137], then goes on to reflect that "her life had not been long enough for her to know the whole of herself, it had not been long enough or wide" [ibid]. In what ways has it not been wide enough? Does the fault for this lie with the cruelty of fate, or with Ann herself? If fault lies with Ann, what might she have done to make things different?
6. How would you describe each of Ann's children? How has each been molded and shaped by his or her relationship with her? How does each of them behave toward her? Has the essential sadness of Ann's life rubbed off on them?
7. How has Paul's death affected Ann, Teddy, and the other children? Has it made them closer, or estranged them from one another? How, and at what times, is Ann compelled to remember Paul?
8. What sort of a person is Harris, really? What do you deduce about him and about his feelings, principles, and desires from his behavior, from what others say about him, and from the short section written from his point of view [p. 232-233]?
9. In one of Ann's imaginary discussions with Harris, he says that she might have become a little "hard" [page 224]. Does this seem a fair assessment, judging from what you know of the older Ann? If so, how does this hardness manifest itself and why has she become hard?
10. How does Minot thematically link Buddy's fate with the fate of Ann and Harris's romance? In what ways is this particular weekend the turning point in Ann's life, and how has Buddy's fate intensified this process of change?

11. Does Ann ever feel responsible for what happened to Buddy? Does Harris? Does a sense of responsibility for this tragedy, or a lack of one, have any specific effect on Ann's future life?

12. Ann conducts a number of imagined conversations with Harris in which the two meet again, for the first time in forty years. What sort of person is this elderly, imaginary Harris? Is he the sort of character you can imagine the young Harris growing into? How do you think the real sixty-five-year-old Harris might remember Ann?

13. If Ann and Harris had married, what sort of a life might they have had? Would they have been happy together? Might Ann have been unhappy and unfulfilled even with Harris?

### **Multimedia**

Evening (Film) <http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1297232>

### **Suggestions for further reading (from the publisher Random/Vintage)**

*Hotel du Lac* by Anita Brookner  
*A Widow for One Year* by John Irving,  
*Moon Tiger* by Penelope Lively  
*Charming Billy* by Alice McDermott,  
*So Long, See You Tomorrow* by William Maxwell  
*While I Was Gone* by Sue Miller  
*Open Secrets* by Alice Munro,  
*A Thousand Acres* by Jane Smiley  
*Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant* by Anne Tyler



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