An Anne Tyler man laments his loss

The Beginner's Goodbye
A Novel
By Anne Tyler

Alfred A. Knopf. 198 pp. $24.95

Reviewed by Glenn C. Altschuler

Anne Tyler is one of America's premier novelists of middle-class morality and manners.

Tyler places her quirky, flawed, and fundamentally decent characters in ordinary situations, generating smiles and sighs of recognition from her readers at their responses. She reminds us that human beings cope with the vicissitudes of life because they have no other choice, that small things loom larger than large things, and that, on balance, in relationships that matter, it is best to tap untapped feelings. Although she believes that forgiveness must be earned, Tyler is a benevolent god: She chooses, more often than not, to baptize the men and women she has created in the Church of the Second Chance.

In The Beginner's Goodbye, her 19th novel, Tyler, whose husband died more than a decade ago, explores loss and recovery. Aaron Woolcott, her narrator, is a thirtysomething publisher of a print-on-demand vanity press that specializes in books for beginners. Saddled with a stutter and a crippled right arm and leg, he is not demonstrative - and is uncomfortable around those who are. When an oak tree crashes into the sunporch of his house, killing his wife, Dr. Dorothy Rosales, Aaron feels bereft.

Until Dorothy reappears, "as real as the no parking sign beside her." She looks as clumsy and ordinary as usual, with her left shoe untied, "a faint sheen of sweat on her upper lip, her stocky forearms crossing her stomach to hug her satchel close to her body." Gazing directly at him, she seems to view his "situation" with much more equanimity than he does.

Aaron was initially attracted to Dorothy because of her matter-of-fact attitude, her lack of condescension, her "lit from within calm." Unlike his former girlfriends, who treated him like a pet project, a cripple who needed to be rescued, Dorothy did not dwell on Aaron's handicaps. After a four-month courtship, they married in the minister's private office, accompanied only by his parents and sister. Because of Dorothy's schedule, they did not take a honeymoon.

After her death, Aaron dwells on her annoying habits - she had the social skills of a panda bear, left crumpled tissues and empty coffee mugs all over the house, and took excessive pride in her medical degree - in the hope that he could
stop missing her. It doesn't work.

In time, Aaron will acknowledge that his marriage wasn't all that happy, or, more precisely, that he and Dorothy were often out of sync. He will discover that he wanted - and he wants - the "jolts and jogs of ordinary life," even if it meant that his consonants interrupted his vowels and he had to use his cane. By "moving the heavy furniture around in his head," and by revealing something he never knew, Dorothy will teach Aaron that although he fended her off, rendering her more coldhearted than she actually was, he really wanted (and needed) to be fussed over - and told that he was loved.

Aaron would like nothing better than to have Dorothy put a hand on his shoulder. He looks for her in his home, in the backyard, and on the street, but sees only a stray black cat. His conviction grows stronger and stronger that she is gone for good.

We can be sure, however, that Anne Tyler won't abandon him. She has him edit a new vanity title, *Why I Have Decided to Go on Living*. Filled with "inspirational moments" (when a baby grabs your index finger), it elicits grunts and groans from almost all of his colleagues. But not from Anne Tyler. And, when all is said and done, not from Aaron Woolcott.

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