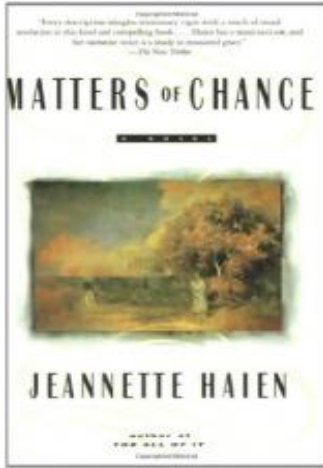


# Matters of Chance

by Jeannette Haien

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## About the Book

*Matters of Chance* is a glorious, activating novel about Morgan and Maude Shurtliff, who fall in love and marry in the years before World War II. Unable to have children of their own, Morgan and Maude adopt twin girls. The four go home to their beautiful house in the country outside of New York City and begin to settle into what they hope will be a long and happy life. When the twins are still young, Morgan is called to serve in World War II, leaving Maude to raise her daughters alone. Jeannette Haien has rendered Morgan's war experiences with astonishing detail, just as she has captured the American post-war era with a precision that is unrivaled in recent fiction.

## Discussion Guide

1. The torpedoing of the Stubbins is a seminal event in Morgan's life. How does the experience help to shape his post-war life? How does it effect his relationship with Maud? With the world at large?
2. The exigencies of war allow the relationship between Morgan and Zenobia to continue beyond the boundaries of their client/server identities. What role does their friendship play in each of their lives? What does Morgan mean when he refers to their relationship as his "secret life?" Are their intimacies a betrayal of Maud?
3. What is the significance of the title, *Matters of Chance*? Sylvia wonders, "what will our penalty be if we buck Fate's 'unknown-to-us decision'?" Do you think Morgan's life is a series of chance events, or fated? What does he think? Does he buck his fate?
4. What kind of a character is Miss Zenobia Sly? Morgan refers to her as the "earthly, overseeing goddess of his luck" and in a fanciful frame of mind, he imagines she has a hand in his destiny. Does she? Does she manipulate his fate? Is she his guardian angel?

5. Upon Morgan's return from the war, his father, Ansel, consoles him by telling him that "in time you'll find a resting place for your sorrows, one you can go to in thought if not in body, and come away from strengthened." Does Morgan find a way to put to rest his sorrows? What might his "resting place" be?

6. Morgan learns that his name means "a dweller on the sea," conjuring up images of "perpetual brine, perpetual drift." He passionately believes it to be a misnomer. Is he right in asserting that he is "a dweller on the land" instead? In what ways might he be a "dweller on the sea?"

7. Haien invokes an all-but-forgotten world of decorum and propriety in *Matters of Chance*, which she sharply contrasts with the crudeness and carnality of her characters' sexual desires and fulfillment. How do her characters cope with the contradiction between their sexuality and propriety? How does the juxtaposition contribute to your impression of her characters?

8. Why does Morgan recite the poem "Memorabilia" by Robert Browning to his daughters upon their return from college? What might the poem mean to Morgan? How do his memories (of Maud, the Stubbins, his childhood, his daughters) contribute to his understanding of the "matters of chance" that make up his life?

9. The novel spans thirty-five momentous years of the twentieth century. As we learn about the life of Morgan Shurtliff, we also relive the social and political events that surround him. How does the timeline of world events impact your appreciation of Morgan's story? How do they frame his life?

## Author Bio

After more than thirty-five years as a professional concert pianist and music teacher, Jeannette Haien, in her 60s, began her second career as a novelist. Her first novel, *The All of It*, published in 1986, garnered the Sue Kaufman Prize for First Fiction from the Academy of Arts and Letters. Haien then took eight years to finish her second novel, *Matters of Chance*, published in 1997. Born in Dayton, Ohio, to a Dutch immigrant-industrialist father and a violinist mother, she received a bachelor's degree in English and a masters degree in Music from the University of Michigan. Even before Haien graduated, she was already winning renown as a professional pianist and teacher. It was through her understanding of the structure of classical music that she learned how to create her classically constructed stories. According to Haien, "the structure of a work is the essence of it. It's discipline, if you will, which makes great freedom possible. Under the laws of structure, you have the freedom to work in the freest way imaginable." Writing five to eight hours a day, she marries rigor to a highly developed sense of expectation. Says Haien, "my life has been nothing but a dawning exercise every day of expectation. I have been continuously so surprised, that I am childlike to the point of glee sometimes." Haien and her husband have a daughter and grandson and live in New York City and Connemara, Ireland.

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