ReadingGroupGuides
The online community for reading groups

The Beginner's Goodbye

by Anne Tyler



About the Book

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.

Discussion Guide

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?

Author Bio

Anne Tyler was born in Minneapolis, Minnesota, in 1941 and grew up in Raleigh, North Carolina. She is the author of more than 20 novels. Her 20th novel, A SPOOL OF BLUE THREAD, was shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize in 2015. Her 11th novel, BREATHING LESSONS, was awarded the Pulitzer Prize in 1989. She is a member of the American Academy of Arts and Letters. She lives in Baltimore, Maryland.

Critical Praise

"Elegant... 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 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."

The Beginner's Goodbye

by Anne Tyler

Publication Date: April 3, 2012
Genres: Fiction
Hardcover: 208 pages
Publisher: Knopf
ISBN-10: 0307957276
ISBN-13: 9780307957276