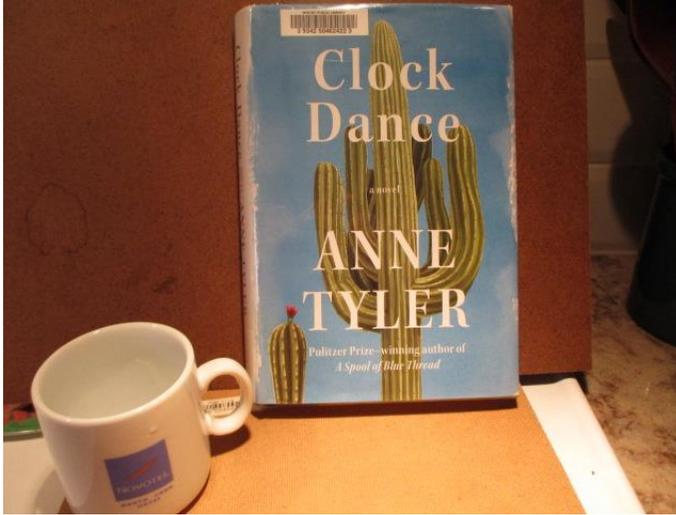


Clock Dance

By Rod Fraser



I PICKED UP a copy of *Clock Dance* at my library this week. This is Anne Tyler's latest book, published in 2018 and consisting of a little less than 300 pages.

Clock Dance is the third novel written by Ms. Tyler that I have reviewed in these pages. It was published when she was 77 years of age. I can easily say it is a wonderful story, brilliantly told. Since I am a fan, I would expect no less.

The story is about Willa Drake, a woman in her early sixties, widowed and now remarried, who

received a telephone call one Tuesday afternoon from a woman in Baltimore. The caller identifies herself as Callie Montgomery. She tells Willa she is a neighbour of Denise, who has recently been shot in the leg. Callie is looking after Cheryl and Airplane, Denise's daughter and their dog.

Callie assumes Willa is Denise's mother-in-law and Cheryl's grandmother. She expects Willa to drop everything and come to Baltimore to take charge of the situation. But Callie's facts are wrong. While Willa's son lived with Denise for a time, Willa is not Cheryl's grandmother, and she barely knows Denise.

But strangely enough, Callie has caught Willa at a time when her life is in a state of flux. She has a new husband, Peter, who is distant, obsessed with his golf game and his own life. She is trying, not very successfully, to fit in. As Willa puts it, "I haven't felt useful in ... forever".

So Willa takes it upon herself to fly to Baltimore to help this ersatz family. Peter is good enough to come with her, but he quickly tires of Baltimore, Denise and Cheryl. He decides to fly home—unable to persuade Willa to come with him.

THE NOVEL IS divided into two parts with the first part briefly telling the story of Willa's early years. Tyler gives us a snapshot of Willa's childhood,

college days and her early days of widowhood. Although not the main focus of the story, these insights show who Willa is as a person, wife and mother.

A childhood incident at age eleven tells of her dysfunctional family life with an unreliable mother—subject to mood swings and the odd disappearance—and a father who is a passive enabler.

As a college student at age 21, Willa is presented with a marriage proposal that would unnecessarily interrupt her education. Like her father, she allows events and the preferences of her husband-to-be to prevail. Events sweep her along and Willa foregoes a career to become a wife and mother.

At age 41, Willa suddenly becomes a widow when her husband dies in an automobile accident. Wholly unprepared for widowhood, she copes as best she can, looks after her two sons and comes to grips with her future.

Her father, widowed many years earlier, tells Willa how he coped with his loneliness after his wife died, "I broke my day into separate moments that I could still appreciate.... Like drinking the first cup of coffee in the morning. Working on something fine in my workshop. Watching a baseball game on TV."

Willa asked, was that enough?

"It turns out it was," her Dad replied.

BY AGE 61, Willa is married to her new husband, Peter, living in a golfing community outside Tucson. Her two boys are grown and live far away. Both her parents are dead; she has no close girl friends; and she gave up an ESL teaching job she loved to be here with Peter. Unfortunately, he "was out for hours each day with his golf chums," and Willa "didn't even know how to play golf."

In short, this telephone call from Baltimore asking for help gave Willa energy and hope. She tries to explain it to Peter, "Can't you see my side of it... here are these people who say they need me, Callie and Cheryl and Airplane."

Soon enough, Peter and Willa arrive in Baltimore and a taxi delivers them to Callie's house. By this time, Callie is aware that Willa has no family connection to Denise and Cheryl, but she is still relieved to turn over the responsibility for Cheryl and their dog, Airplane, to Willa.

Over the next few days, Willa and Peter settle into the spare bedroom at Denise's house, visit Denise at the hospital, meet her quirky neighbors, buy groceries and cook meals, all the while finding that Cheryl—and later Denise (after returning home from the hospital with a large cast on her leg)—are

coming to care for Willa in a big way.

Peter soon departs for home, fed up with the humidity of Baltimore in the summer, Cheryl, Denise and the whole situation. Willa makes one last attempt to explain herself, "I don't know how the two of them are going to manage on their own," Willa says.

"They're not on their own. They have neighbors. They have Denise's co-workers." Peter replies.

"That's not enough," Willa told him.... "If you really insist on leaving tomorrow, maybe I'll just stay on by myself...."

"All right, Willa, if that's how you want it."

IT TURNS OUT Cheryl, nine years of age, is an interesting and intelligent child. She is tidy, prefers to do her own laundry and likes to bake. She claims, "I'm more of a preteen than a child. Come January, I'll have two digits."

But self-reliant as she is, she still wants Willa for a grandmother. Even Denise has come to care for Willa. She tells her, "I had this plan in mind where you'd go on living in the guest room forever. "

The novel ends with Willa thinking about her life and trying to settle her future. Would she be happier back in Tucson with Peter, who definitely loves her

and wants her home? Or could she make a go of it in Baltimore?

She can't stay with Denise forever. She knows that. But she might find a place to rent in Denise's neighborhood. She has friends there. It provides a sense of community. Or she wonders? Could she "try something new that she hadn't even imagined yet."

You'll have to read the book to see what Willa decides. Suffice to say, she is torn until the last. And as with most decisions in Willa's life, it seems that events play a large part in her final decision.

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