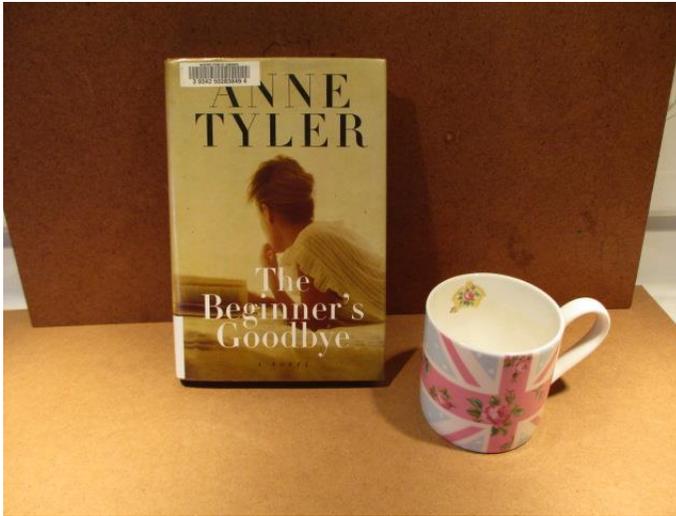


The Beginner's Goodbye

By Rod Fraser



MY INTEREST IN Anne Tyler's novels is always at its height in the summer months. I head out to the front porch with a drink and one of her recent books (or perhaps an old standby I have read before). It doesn't matter; her books (twenty in all) are easily read once, twice or even more often.

This article is a review of *The Beginner's Goodbye*, a novel written by Tyler in 2012. It was thought this might be her last novel; after all she was 71 years of age when it was published. But fortunately not: three more have been published since that time. I

have just ordered *Clock Dance*, her most recent book, published earlier this year.

Before I get to my review of *The Beginner's Goodbye*, I'd like to give you an idea of Tyler's unusual background. Perhaps it might explain her ability to view the ordinary American family with such amusing insight and acuity.

Anne Tyler was born in Minnesota, but she lived most of her early life in a succession of Quaker communities in the south. Up until age 11, she never attended a normal public school, nor had she ever used a telephone. Tyler learned her lessons from a combination of correspondence school and informal schooling provided by the local Quaker community.

When the family moved to Raleigh, North Carolina in 1952, much to her surprise Tyler found that she was more advanced academically than her peers. She finished high school at age 16. It is true her early communal living left her feeling very much an outsider in a public school setting. But in turn, this experience provided her with an outsider's view of the American family, which she would later incorporate into her novels.

Tyler won a scholarship to Duke University where she majored in Russian literature and graduated at age 19 in 1961. She continued her Slavic studies at graduate school at Columbia, but withdrew after a year to return to Raleigh, where she worked in a

library. During this time, she worked on her first novel, *If Morning Ever Comes*, which was published in 1964 and *The Tin Can Tree* was published the following year.

In Raleigh in 1963, she married Taghi Modarressi, a young man from Iran who was to become a child psychologist. He was also a writer. During the mid-1960s, the couple had two children.

They focused on Madarressi's career during this time, moved a number of times and finally settled in Baltimore. This proved to be a good choice since there was a sizable Quaker presence in the city. As the children grew older, Tyler enrolled them in a local Friends school and continued her writing. John Updike, writing a review of *Searching For Caleb* (her sixth novel and one of my favourites) said, "This writer is not merely good, she is wickedly good." Quite so.

It is interesting that *The Beginner's Goodbye* is about a young man, Aaron Woolcott, whose life is devastated by the untimely death of his wife, when a tree falls on their home. Although Aaron is only 36 when this tragic accident occurs, Tyler's husband died of lymphoma at age 65 in 1997, when Tyler was just 56 years of age. When she writes of coming to terms with grief and facing a solitary life without a partner, she knows of which she speaks.

Aaron Woolcott has a small stutter and a slight

disability, being crippled in his right arm and leg. He wears a brace for his leg and his right arm is of little use to him. Still he counts his blessings: he is left-handed and works for his family's eccentric publishing business, earning a decent living, surrounded by his sister and a number of co-workers in a congenial environment.

The business is a form of vanity-press with a slight difference. Of course, they print a variety of war memoirs, family histories and other tales written by their customers, and they are paid for their publishing efforts by these same customers. But their most promising line of books, is called the *Beginner's* series.

Here is how Aaron describes the series, "Charles was our sales rep and he dreamed up, single-handedly, the concept of the *Beginner's* Series. *The Beginner's Wine Guide, The Beginner's Monthly Budget, The Beginner's Book of Dog Training*. These were something on the order of the *Dummies* books, but without the cheerleader tone of voice—more dignified."

Because of the success of this line of publishing, the company was generally known as The Beginner's Press, but it was more formally Woolcott Publishing. Aaron's father had started it, and when he had a heart attack, Aaron and his sister, Nandina, took over management of the firm.

Because of Aaron's disabilities, and fierce desire to live independently, his sister and co-workers find him prickly and difficult. So when he finds Dorothy and decides to make her his wife, one of her attractions is that she didn't make a fuss over him.

As Aaron told it, "I mostly spent my childhood fending off the two women in my life—my mother and my sister, both of them lying in wait to cosset me to death. Even that young, I sensed the danger. You get sucked in. You turn soft. They have you where they want you then. Is it any wonder that I found Dorothy a breath of fresh air?"

Dorothy was an accomplished woman, a medical doctor, but squat, chubby and matter of fact. His sister didn't like her much and many people wondered what the attraction was. But during their years of married life, Aaron loved her and missed her terribly when she died so suddenly.

The novel has some amusing and poignant things to say about Aaron's disinterest in repairing his home after the tree fell on it. He procrastinates hiring a contractor and lives in the home, with a tarp over the roof and a tree still lodged in the sun porch. In short, he makes do.

But after a serious rainfall, the ceiling in the living room falls in. Aaron takes refuge by moving in with his sister, Nandina, in the old family home. When he hires Gil to fix up his home, he notices that Gil drops

by his sister's home every day, in neatly laundered clothes to give him an update on the construction. It is soon clear that Nandina and Gil have formed a romantic relationship. Aaron feels it is time to move back to his home, which is now more or less livable (albeit the construction work still continues).

During this time, Aaron notices Dorothy appearing to him, from time to time, in human form. They often walk together and talk over their past life. It seems they have some unfinished business to conclude. During their last visit, Dorothy complains that Aaron never allowed her to get too close to him and she was still angry that this was so.

Aaron tells Dorothy, I don't understand that. You "were always so busy, so businesslike.... You never even made me a cup of tea when I had a cold."

"And if I had," Dorothy replied, "What would you have done? Swatted the cup away, I guarantee it.... If I had behaved any other way, do you suppose" we would have even got together.

Aaron finally gets the message and realizes that he's made a big mistake in life, fighting people off who cared for him. Even Dorothy, seemingly so aloof, wanted to be closer to him in life. And from the grave has come to tell him that this was so.

He makes amends to Dorothy, saying how it should have been, telling her how he would have done things differently had he had another chance.

As the moments pass, Aaron is having some effect. "Dorothy was smiling for real now and her face seemed to be shining. In fact, she was shining all over and growing shimmery and transparent.... And then she was gone altogether."

As the weeks passed, Aaron reflected on his final meeting with Dorothy. He was sad, as she was now gone forever. But on the other hand, he had left her happy and smiling at the last, knowing that he had loved her desperately and would have welcomed her attentions had he been given one more chance.

He now turned his attention to his current life, hoping he could use his new-found knowledge in a future relationship. Ready for love, Aaron returned to the office one sunny day, after a lunch with his colleagues, months after Dorothy's last visit. He walked over to Peggy's desk, and said.

"Would you ever be willing to—would you ever like to go out someplace with me?"

Her fingers paused on the keys. She turned and looked up at me.... "She studied me for a moment. Then, 'why don't you ask Irene?'" she said.

"Irene?"

"I thought Irene was the one you admired so much."

"Oh well, she was... she is. But you're the one I'd like to go someplace with."

She went on studying me. I stood a little straighter and tried to look my best. I said, "Couldn't you give me a chance?"

After another moment, she said, "Well, I could. I would like to give you a chance."

And she did.

December 31, 2018