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A wise and beautiful read

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A wise and beautiful read

Hays' novel centers on a family coping with Alzheimer's

Although we all know that you can't judge a book by its cover, the dust jacket of Tommy Hays' new novel, *The Pleasure Was Mine*, tells prospective readers a good deal. We see a wedding photograph, 1950s black and white, mounted as if in an album. The bride, however, is only partially visible, through a veil of paint.

The elderly narrator, Prate Marshbanks, and his son, Newell, are both painters — although Prate tells us that “Newell [is] a real painter, not a house painter like me.” But as the novel begins, Prate has a new vocation: taking care of his wife, Irene, a retired English teacher suffering from Alzheimer's disease.

Prate is a proud, headstrong, fiercely loyal man who sees his faults more clearly than his virtues. Irene is visible only through the veil of Prate's narration — and through the additional coloring of Prate's flashbacks, which show us a young Irene in full possession of her wit, charm and intelligence.

Concerned for Irene's safety, Prate has reluctantly moved her into a nursing home. He visits Irene every day, yet still agonizes over the quality of her care and the suspicion that he could have

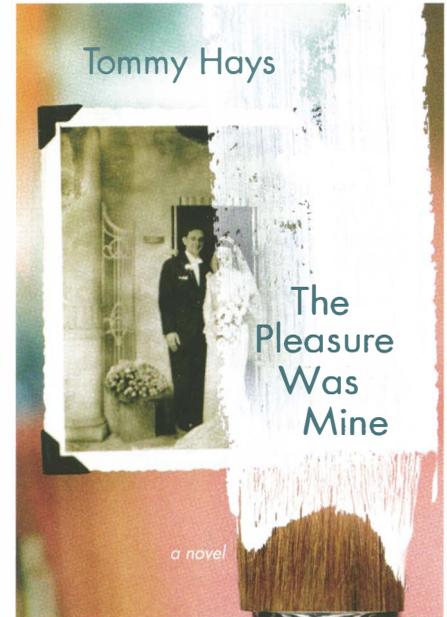
prevented, or at least delayed, the onset of her disease.

Four years earlier, Newell also lost his wife — to an auto accident rather than to disease. Prate agrees to take his nine-year-old grandson, Jackson, for the summer, so that Newell can paint. Much of the novel chronicles the new ties Prate forms with his still-grieving grandson.

The book almost reads itself. Hays' prose is elegantly lucid — direct and unpretentious, nicely complementing Prate's character. The book has no McFeelings and no stock, easy responses to the many dilemmas of Alzheimer's. Can we honor the past and still live in the present? Does the disease obscure the loved one's self, or does it reveal a self we never knew existed? Can we ever truly appreciate our blessings while we still have them?

Hays never asks us to feel more than the circumstances warrant, and he makes certain we're never inclined to feel any less. For me, the two most moving scenes center upon meals. (Throughout the book, eating appears both as an ordeal and as a sacrament.)

In the first, Irene is about to be

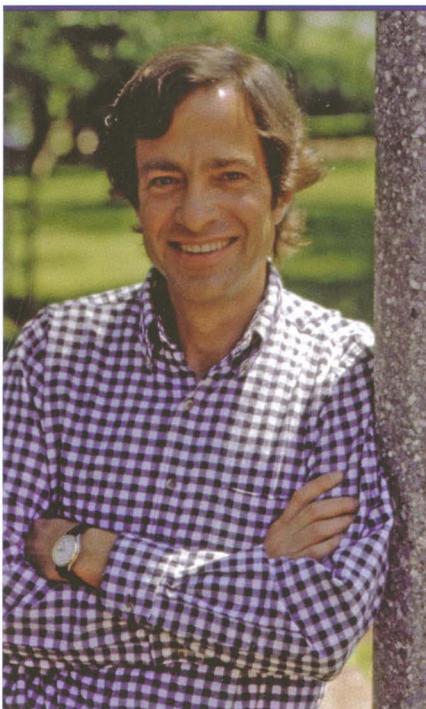


banished from the Rolling Hills dining room because Prate is breaking the rules by helping her eat. Then, a miracle happens: “For the first time in days, Irene was feeding herself, and she proceeded to eat every damn thing on her plate. I was prouder of her than when she won Best Teacher of South Carolina. . . . Of course I knew she might not feed herself tomorrow, but I had begun to see that the older we became, the smaller the victories, and if we didn't glory in the little ones, then likely as not, we gloried in nothing. And with every bite she took, Irene was telling that frowning dining room heifer, See? You don't know the first thing about the woman I was.”

The book's final scene takes place in the Traveler's Restaurant, a few miles north of the Furman campus. (Although Hays' novel would be a delight for any reader, it offers added pleasures for those familiar with the settings and history of upstate South Carolina.) I won't spoil the surprise, but I will say that Irene is the last character to speak aloud, and her words are both heartbreaking and consoling.

If you're looking for a wise and beautiful book, seek this one out.

— Gilbert Allen
Professor of English



The Pleasure Was Mine was published in March by St. Martin's Press. Author Tommy Hays '77 is executive director of the Great Smokies Writing Program at the University of North Carolina-Asheville and creative writing chair for the Academy at the South Carolina Governor's School for the Arts and Humanities. His first novel, *Sam's Crossing*, was published by Atheneum in 1992; his second, *In The Family Way* (Random House, 1999), received the Thomas Wolfe Memorial Literary Award and was a Book-of-the-Month Club selection.

Hays holds a graduate degree from the Master of Fine Arts Program for Writers at Warren Wilson College. He lives in Asheville with his wife and two children. To read an excerpt from the novel, visit www.tommyhays.com.