



***Clock Dance*, by Anne Tyler**
Reviewed by Cindy Kennedy, September 2019

Clock Dance, Pulitzer Prize winning author Anne Tyler's latest novel, centers on lead character Willa Drake. Each section of *Clock Dance* focuses on a pivotal episode in Willa's life.

The story begins in 1967; Willa is a sixth-grader growing up in Lake City, Pennsylvania. Along with the usual angst that pre-teens experience, Willa has to deal with her high-strung mother's unexplained disappearances which could last for days. Whenever her passive father, a high-school teacher, made grilled cheese sandwiches for dinner, Willa knew that her mother had left home. Put in charge of her little sister Elaine, Willa vows to become a better parent when she herself is a mother.

The next section moves to 1977, with Willa now a junior attending college in northern Illinois. Her know-it-all boyfriend Derek, a senior, suggests that they fly to Lake City for Easter so that he can meet her parents. An unusual incidence occurs on the flight, which Derek dismisses as something Willa had imaged. Willa begins to have misgivings about their relationship. However, during dinner ("Who else would serve rabbit on Easter Sunday?"), Derek stands up to Willa's mercurial mother, which endears him to Willa.

Fast forwarding to 1997, Willa, the mother of two almost adult sons, wonders if her sons would remember their childhoods fondly: "She had tried her best to be a good mother—which to her meant a *predictable* mother....She was the only woman she knew whose prime objective was to be taken for granted."

The second—and strongest—half of *Clock Dance* takes place in 2017, with Willa living in semi-retirement in Arizona. One day, she gets an unexpected call from Baltimore, a city that's often a venue in Ms. Tyler's novels. The frantic caller identifies herself as Callie, a neighbor of Denise, who had dated Willa's oldest son Sean. It seems that Denise was injured in an accident, and someone is needed to

take care of Denise's young daughter Cheryl. Assuming that Willa could be Cheryl's grandmother, Callie asks Willa to come to Baltimore. Willa, who always strives to take the least complicated path, now has a life-changing decision to make.

Anne Tyler, who is known for her rich character studies, has a knack for depicting ordinary situations with profound tenderness and poignancy. *Clock Dance*, her twenty-second novel, is a worthy addition to the esteemed author's impressive canon.