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## Widower's Tale (Glass) - Author Bio

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### Author Bio

- Birth—March 23, 1956
- Where—Boston, Massachusetts, USA
- Education—B.A., Yale College
- Awards—Tobias Wolff Award for Fiction, 1999; Nelson Algren Fiction Awards, 1993, 1996, 2000; National Book Award for Fiction, 2002
- Currently—lives in New York, New York

Julia Glass is an artist of many talents. After graduating from Yale University with an art degree, she received a fellowship to study figurative painting in Paris. Upon her return, she moved to New York City. She became involved in the city's energetic art scene, showing her works in group installations around town. Glass had a day job as a copy editor, and she wrote the occasional column for magazines. She had always been a good writer, but was initially focused on the possibility of a career in the visual arts. Eventually, the pull to write would become too strong. Glass put down the paint brush and picked up the pen.

One of her first short stories, never published, was titled *Souvenirs*. Its main character was a young art student touring Greece. It was based on her real-life experiences in Greece, yet another event from Glass' trip was to be the turning point in her career, although she couldn't have known it at the time. She met an older gentleman while on a tour, and in their brief conversation, the man mentioned that his wife had recently passed away... but what Glass remembered most was the mournful expression on his face and the stark, white, Grecian architecture.

Writing was a kind of therapy for Glass. While working on *Souvenirs*, she endured previously unimaginable tragedies. Her marriage ended, she was diagnosed with breast cancer, and her older sister passed away. The memory of the sad widower in Greece took on much deeper meaning, and she decided to rewrite the story from his point of view. This rewrite eventually becomes *Collies*, which won the Pirate's Alley Faulkner Society medal for novellas.

At her editor's urging, Glass continued writing the story, and *Collies* became the first part of her stunning debut novel, *Three Junes*.

It's rare that a first novel is widely considered to be brilliant, but brilliance is what you'll find in *Three Junes*. Her training as an artist is evident in each sentence where even the smallest moment—a gesture or an object—is labored over and paid the attention it deserves. And like the visual arts, in *Three Junes* even the slightest elements are suggestive of its whole.

The father and eldest son of the McLeod family live on opposite sides of the Atlantic and lead very different lives as they both deal with similar losses and passions. The first part of the novel takes place in June of 1989. Paul, the patriarch of the family, lives in Scotland. He visits Greece while still grieving for the loss of his wife and meets Fern, a young art student also on the tour. His brief time with Fern allows him a chance at passion when he least expected it.

The second part of the novel is told from another voice. Fenno, Paul's oldest son, is central to the story as a whole, and his presence connects his family's past to its future. In June of 1995, Fenno is a loveable, slightly repressed gay man who has moved to New York City and opened a bookstore. Glass captures the cosmopolitan West Village, setting the scene for Fenno to open his heart to love and face the rest of his family upon Paul's death.

The final story in the novel is the chance meeting between Fenno and Fern in June of 1999. Like his father before him, Fenno captivates Fern. All of their loves and losses over the past decade begin to be reconciled over one magical night's dinner. The web of people attached to their lives is revealed, surprising them at how a previous generation's choices have become their obstacles. In the end, though, their wounds are deep, but they're not paralyzing.

The book won the 2002 National Book Award for Fiction. It is praised for its perfect pacing, attention to the slightest degrees of human behavior, and the gentle humor we must all have when dealing with the ones we love. It's an extraordinary first novel.

### Extras

Glass's first published writing was a regular column on pets called "Animal Love" that ran in *Glamour* magazine for two years in the late eighties. Says Glass, "I grew up in a home where animals were ever-present and often dominated our lives. There were always horses, dogs, and cats, as well as a revolving infirmary of injured wildlife being nursed by my



## Widower's Tale (Glass)

*The Widower's Tale*  
Julia Glass, 2010  
Knopf Doubleday  
416 pp.  
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### summary

In a historic farmhouse outside Boston, seventy-year-old Percy Darling is settling happily into retirement: reading novels, watching old movies, and swimming naked in his pond. His routines are disrupted, however, when he is persuaded to let a locally beloved preschool take over his barn. As Percy sees his rural refuge overrun by children, parents, and teachers, he must reexamine the solitary life he has made in the three decades since the sudden death of his wife. No longer can he remain aloof from his community, his two grown daughters, or, to his shock, the precarious joy of falling in love.

One relationship Percy treasures is the bond with his oldest grandchild, Robert, a premed student at Harvard. Robert has long assumed he will follow in the footsteps of his mother, a prominent physician, but he begins to question his ambitions when confronted by a charismatic roommate who preaches—and begins to practice—an extreme form of ecological activism, targeting Boston's most affluent suburbs.

Meanwhile, two other men become fatefully involved with Percy and Robert: Ira, a gay teacher at the preschool, and Celestino, a Guatemalan gardener who works for Percy's neighbor, each one striving to overcome a sense of personal exile. Choices made by all four men, as well as by the women around them, collide forcefully on one lovely spring evening, upending everyone's lives, but none more radically than Percy's.

With equal parts affection and satire, Julia Glass spins a captivating tale about the loyalties, rivalries, and secrets of a very particular family. Yet again, she plumbs the human heart brilliantly, dramatically, and movingly. (*From the publisher.*)

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## Widower's Tale (Glass) - Discussion Questions

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### Discussion Questions

1. From the stories that the characters remember and tell, what kind of mother (and wife) was Poppy Darling? How would you explain the very different kinds of mothers her two daughters, Trudy and Clover, have become? Discuss the choices these two women have made and how they affect their relationships with their children. And how about Sarah? What kind of mother is she? Does being a mother define any or all of these women?
2. How do Percy's age, background, and profession shape the way he thinks about the world around him? How does the way he sees himself differ from the way other characters see him? How has being a single father and now an involved grandfather defined him? How do you think he would have been a different father and man had Poppy lived?
3. By the end of the novel, how has Percy changed/evolved?
4. Why do you think Percy chose to avoid romantic or sexual involvement for so many years after Poppy's death? Is it habit and routine, nostalgia and commitment to his wife, or guilt over her death; or a combination of all three? Why do you think he falls so suddenly for Sarah after all that time alone? Why now?
5. The novel takes place over the course of a year, with chapters varying from Percy's point of view (looking back from the end of that year) to those of Celestino, Robert, and Ira. Why do you think Julia Glass chose to narrate only Percy's chapters in a first-person voice, the rest in the third person? (Does this make you think of the way she handled voice in her previous books?) And why do you think, when there are so many important female characters in this novel, that she chose to tell the story only through the eyes of men?
6. What do you think of the allusion in this book's title to Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*?
7. This is a novel about family, the intricacies of the intertwining relationships among parents and children, grandparents and grandchildren, siblings and cousins, in-laws and girlfriends. Discuss and compare some of the central familial relationships here (particularly those between Percy and the various members of his extended clan). Do any of these relationships ring particularly true to your own family experiences? Which ones fascinate or move you the most?
8. Celestino is an outsider and a loner in the eyes of the law, an illegal alien who was brought to the United States by a stroke of good fortune, only to lose his favored status and end up in a precarious situation with little money and no close friends. Discuss the circumstances that bring him into Percy's circle and the way in which he becomes so important in Robert's and Percy's lives? What destiny do you imagine for him beyond the end of the novel?

9. Discuss Celestino and Isabelle's teenage relationship as compared with the way they view each other once they are reunited as adults. Do you think that it would have worked out differently under other circumstances, or do culture and class sometimes present insurmountable obstacles? Compare Celestino and Isabelle's youthful relationship with the one between Robert and Clara.
10. What do you think of Robert's relationship with his mother? Talk about the way he sees her in the college essay he wrote versus the way he sees her after the argument they have in the car the night before Thanksgiving and Robert finds out about the sibling he almost had. How is Robert's intimate view of Trudy, as her son and only child, different from Percy's fatherly view of Trudy as one of two daughters? Compare Robert's and Percy's different visions of her professional life: Robert's summer working in the chemo clinic versus Percy's first visit to the hospital when he seeks Trudy's advice about Sarah. Is there a generational difference to the way they encounter the world of modern medicine?
11. What about Percy's relationship with Clover? What do you think about his sacrifice of the barn to help her out? Is it entirely altruistic? What are the unintended consequences to their love for each other? Why does Clover resent her father and betray both him and her nephew, Robert, at the end of the novel?
12. Why does Robert, the good student and good son, allow himself to become involved in Arturo's missions? Discuss Robert's friendship with Arturo and why Arturo is so appealing to Robert. What do you think of the observation that Turo is of everywhere and nowhere?
13. What do you think about Turo's activist group, the DOGS, and their acts of eco-vandalism? Do you agree with Turo that conservation efforts like recycling and organic lawn care aren't dramatic enough to make a dent (p. 148) in society's lazy, consumerist ways that true change will come about only through extremism?
14. Discuss the importance of the tree house in the novel. What does it represent, if anything, to each of the four main characters?
15. What do you think of Ira and his relationship with Anthony? How have Ira's fears influenced his relationships in general? How do you imagine the crisis at the end of the book has changed him, if at all?
16. Homes often seem like characters in Julia Glass novels; compare Percy's house with key houses in her other novels, if you've read them (e.g., Tealing, Fenno McLeod's childhood house in *Three Junes*; Uncle Marsden's run-down seaside mansion in *The Whole World Over*). Describe Percy's house and its significance to various members of the Darling family. Discuss its tie to the neighboring house and the revelation at the end about the two brothers who built the houses. Why is this important?
17. How have libraries changed over the course of Percy's working life, through his youth, his daughters' youth, and now Robert's youth? Percy doesn't seem to approve of the direction libraries are going and the way in which society regards books. Do you?

18. "Daughters. This word meant everything to me in that moment: sun, moon, stars, blood, water (oh curse the water!), meat, potatoes, wine, shoes, books, the floor beneath my feet, the roof over my head" (p. 108). Compare and contrast Percy's two daughters.

19. Why is Sarah so evasive and even hostile when Percy confronts her about the lump in her breast and even after she starts cancer treatment with Trudy? What do you think about her decision to marry her ex-boyfriend when he offers her the lifeline of his health insurance and to keep this a secret from Percy? What does it say about Sarah and her feelings for Percy? Do you think the relationship, at the end of the book, is salvageable in any form?


20. While visiting a museum, Percy's friend Norval asks, So what sort of landscape are you? Percy replies, A field. Overgrown and weedy. Norval then suggests, Or a very large, gnarled tree (p. 278). How would you describe Percy? How about yourself; what sort of landscape are you?

21. How is *The Widower's Tale* both a tale of our time and a story specific to its place, to New England?  
(Questions issued by publisher.)

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