



## Matters of Chance

By Jeannette Haien  
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Maud and Morgan Shurtliff, young, blissful newlyweds, discover they are unable to have children of their own. By chance, they visit the Tilden-Herne Adoption Agency, where they fall under the spell of the mysterious Miss Zenobia Sly, who offers them not the boy they wanted, but two newly-born twin girls. Before Morgan has a chance to bond with his children, however, their idyllic life is ruptured by World War II. Morgan takes a leave of absence from his promising future as a lawyer and volunteers for the Navy. Just as he reaches the rank of Lieutenant, his ship is torpedoed and, before being rescued, he and the survivors endure a harrowing three days in a life raft off the coast of Africa. When the war ends, Morgan returns home to discover two daughters who no longer remember their father and a wife with whom he must renegotiate a marriage. Old friendships are renewed, and Miss Sly continues to have a hand in Morgan's life, as a correspondence he maintained with her during the war blossoms into a secret, intimate friendship. Morgan settles comfortably into the role of successful lawyer, father and husband, only to have his tranquillity shattered by the sudden death of his beloved wife, Maud. As he picks up the pieces of his old life, he realizes he cannot reconstruct it, but instead must discover life

anew.

### Topics for Discussion

1. The torpedoing of the *Stubbins* is a seminal event in Morgan's life. How does the experience help to shape his post-war life? How does it effect his relationship with Maud? With the world at large?
2. The exigencies of war allow the relationship between Morgan and Zenobia to continue beyond the boundaries of their client/server identities. What role does their friendship play in each of their lives? What does Morgan mean when he refers to their relationship as his "secret life?" Are their intimacies a betrayal of Maud?
3. What is the significance of the title, *Matters of Chance*? Sylvia wonders, "what will our penalty be if we buck Fate's 'unknown-to-us decision?'" Do you think Morgan's life is a series of chance events, or fated? What does he think? Does he buck his fate?
4. What kind of a character is Miss Zenobia Sly? Morgan refers to her as the "earthly, overseeing goddess of his luck" and in a fanciful frame of mind, he imagines she has a hand in his destiny. Does she? Does she manipulate his fate? Is she his guardian angel?
5. Upon Morgan's return from the war, his father, Ansel, consoles him by telling him that "in time you'll find a resting place for your sorrows, one you can go to in thought if not in body, and come away from strengthened." Does Morgan find a way to put to rest his sorrows? What might his "resting place" be?
6. Morgan learns that his name means "a dweller on the sea," conjuring up images of "perpetual brine, perpetual drift." He passionately believes it to be a misnomer. Is he right in asserting that he is "a dweller on the land" instead? In what ways might he be a "dweller on the sea?"
7. Haien invokes an all-but-forgotten world of decorum and propriety in *Matters of Chance*, which she sharply contrasts with the crudeness and carnality of her characters' sexual desires and fulfillment. How do her characters cope with the contradiction between their sexuality and propriety? How does the juxtaposition contribute to your impression of her characters?
8. Why does Morgan recite the poem "Memorabilia" by Robert Browning to his daughters upon their return from college? What might the poem mean to Morgan? How do his memories (of Maud, the *Stubbins*, his childhood, his daughters) contribute to his understanding of the "matters of chance" that make up his life?
9. The novel spans thirty-five momentous years of the twentieth century. As we learn about the life of Morgan Shurtliff, we also relive the social and political events that surround him. How does the timeline of world events impact your appreciation of Morgan's story? How do they frame his life?

### About the Author:

After more than thirty-five years as a professional concert pianist and music teacher, Jeannette Haien, in her 60s, began her second career as a novelist. Her first novel, *The All of It*, published in 1986, garnered the Sue Kaufman Prize for First Fiction from the Academy of Arts and Letters. Haien then took eight years to finish her second novel, *Matters of Chance*, published in 1997. Born in Dayton, Ohio, to a Dutch immigrant-industrialist father and a violinist mother, she received a bachelor's degree in English and a masters degree in Music from the University of Michigan. Even before Haien graduated, she was already winning renown as a professional pianist and teacher. It was through her understanding of the structure of classical music that she learned how to create her classically constructed stories. According to Haien, "the structure of a work is the essence of it. It's discipline, if you will, which makes great freedom possible. Under the laws of structure, you have the freedom to work in the freest way imaginable." Writing five to eight hours a day, she marries rigor to a highly developed sense of expectation. Says Haien, "my life has been nothing but a dawning exercise every day of expectation. I have been continuously so surprised, that I am childlike to the point of glee sometimes." Haien and her husband have a daughter and grandson and live in New York City and Connemara, Ireland.