

In response to *Being Mortal*

BY MARGARET PERROW DELLA SANTINA

This Christmas my father-in-law, a former English teacher, gave our family a reading assignment: Atul Gawande's *Being Mortal: Medicine and What Matters in the End*. Just before New Year, we had a family "book club" meeting to talk about the book, an examination of the medical profession's role in how we age and how we die. A bit of a downer for holiday reading, I secretly thought. But by the time I'd finished it, Gawande had helped me clarify my own response to being mortal with his bold and brilliant book.

We often say it's important to talk about end-of-life decisions, but may not have the tools. Gawande, a surgeon and an extraordinary writer, suggests some simple questions:

What do you understand about your situation/condition?

What are your fears; what are your hopes?

Which matter more? What trade-offs are you willing to make?

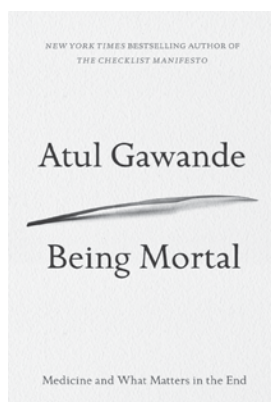
Gawande courageously uses these questions to guide his narrative on two levels: our personal stories, and a larger cultural story. What is our situation, the relationship between mortality and medicine in the 21st century? What do

he (as a doctor) and we (as a culture) fear? What do we hope? What trade-offs are we making, to what end?

This New Year marked the tenth anniversary of my mother's death. Reading Gawande's book, I relived the months between learning of her illness and hearing her take her last breaths. I appreciated that my mother had made her priorities clear. Granted, she had *not* taken care of the practical things that my in-laws have: creating a living will, moving to a "continuous care" facility, asking who wants which pieces of art. Yet knowing what mattered to her was an enormous help: she wanted to be at home, with people she loved.

Gawande's questions pertain to all of us, all the time—not just when we are mortally ill. If we were in the habit of asking ourselves and each other these questions throughout our lives, we might be able to ask (and answer) them more easily at the end. Even though we knew what my mother wanted and we were able to move her from the hospital to her little condo in the mountains, those last weeks were nonetheless painfully uncertain: were we doing the right thing(s)?

We all want to be authors of our own



stories; even within life's constraints, Gawande argues, there is room for authorship. He cites some intriguing research on memory: we remember the

intense high points and the endings of stories better than what happens in between, even though the peaks and endings occupy a relatively short amount of time in the overall story. As "remembering selves," we want our stories to have... not necessarily happy endings, but good resolutions, whatever that may mean to us.

With the death of my sister this fall, I have been thinking about the sense of narrative that propels us along in our lives. It has been hard for me to imagine the story my sister must have told herself about her own troubled life; it has been equally difficult for me to tell myself a coherent story about her death, a death involving depression, pills, alcohol, and a constellation of factors I will never fully understand. But *Being Mortal* helped bring the "kaleidoscope" of her story (of her life) and my story (of her death) into momentary focus.

Gawande writes that as people

approach their death, they "want to share memories...and keepsakes, settle relationships ... and ensure that those who are left behind will be okay. They want to end their stories on their own terms." At the end of her life, my sister gave away her bicycle with the broken chain, removed her Facebook posts (except pictures of her cat), and called me on the evening she died to be sure that everyone was happy, that my son was doing well. This time, she did not want "help" that would prolong her suffering and lower her quality of life. She even asked if she could come and visit us—she had, of course, no intention of coming to visit, but simply knowing that she *could* was part of the *ending* that she wanted. Gawande helped me understand this.

Gawande masterfully weaves his own family's story into a larger cultural one. As much as it's a critical analysis, the book is also a story where he is a main character, and a fallible one to boot. The narrative arc of the book becomes increasingly personal toward the end, where we're left with... not a happy ending, but a satisfying one. Because even though the bigger societal issues remain unresolved, Gawande's personal story touches what's human in our hearts.

Like my father-in-law, I include *Being Mortal* as "recommended reading" on life's syllabus.

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BOOKS & MOVIES

— Book —

Two topical subjects

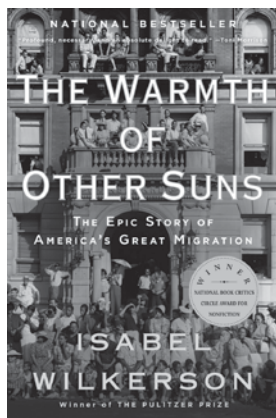
I first considered writing this review about Isabel Wilkerson's Pulitzer Prize winning *The Warmth of Other Suns: The Epic Story of America's Great Migration* (Random House, 2010). However, I feel that my pen is not adequate to do justice to that remarkable book. So here are just a few points, after which I will move on to another topical-subject book.

Other Suns tells of the trek after World War I by six million black Southerners to escape the emotional, physical and economic depredations of the South. They left to make new lives in other parts of the United States. I think most readers will be surprised to learn that this was the largest migration in American history. Those six million souls dwarfed the one hundred thousand of the 1850s California Gold Rush and the three

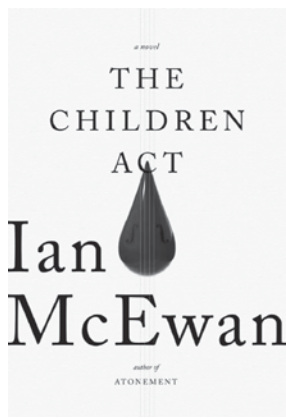
hundred thousand migrants during the 1930s Dust Bowl years.

I don't presume that my words, or any book, will change many set-in-concrete opinions about racism in America, but anyone who wants to ensure that their opinions are not based on ignorance should read Isabel Wilkerson's thoroughly researched book.

Another topical issue, one that receives fewer attention-grabbing headlines, has recently been



addressed in the latest book by Ian McEwan, *The Children Act* (Nan A. Telese/Doubleday, 2014). McEwan is the winner of Britain's prestigious Man Booker Prize. Britain's Children Act is a law pertaining to the legal protection of children, covering everything from divorce and custody issues to child abuse to, in this book, the separation of Siamese twins. McEwan's novel is about a London Family Court judge, a woman who must rule on the lawsuit brought



by a hospital to force the administration of a crucial blood transfusion to a young man whose religion forbids such a procedure. The young man is just a few weeks short of

the legal decision-making age of 18, but he is not expected to live more than a few days without the transfusion. He envisions dying a hero, in accordance with the beliefs of his parents and his fellow community of church members. The obvious time-is-of-the-essence drama gives the book its vital edge, and the resolution of the dilemma unfolds in McEwan's masterful prose.

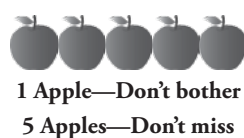
A second theme followed throughout this novel is the failing marriage of the woman judge. Some readers judge her harshly; others admire her. Read and see what you think.

There, you have two of the recent year's best, one American, one British, very different in subject, but alike in that each addresses an issue of deeply personal conscience.

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Julia Helm Hoskins is the author of She Caves to Conquer, a novel set in the American Midwest and southern Turkey.

— Movie —

The Theory of Everything



Reviewer rating: **5 Apples**

Genre: Drama film/Romance

PG-13 (Parents strongly cautioned. Some material may be inappropriate for children under 13.)

Opened: November 2014

Cast: Eddie Redmayne, Felicity Jones

Director: James Marsh

The Theory of Everything is based on the true story of the relationship of famous British physicist Stephen Hawking and his wife Jane Wilde Hawking, and is adapted from Jane's book, *Traveling to Infinity: My Life with Stephen*.

Review by Kathy Kliever

The Theory of Everything is a beautiful movie. The performances by both Eddie Redmayne and Felicity Jones were astonishing. To see the journey that Stephen

Hawking and his wife Jane embark on—from his dire diagnosis of Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis or Lou Gehrig's Disease at the young age of 21, to the crumbling of their marriage—was both captivating and heartbreaking. This is a story of self-sacrifice and dedication—a true love story. If one embraces the brilliance of Hawking's mind, combined with his courage, humor, honesty, and his denial of being a victim, it becomes undeniably clear throughout the movie that all of these elements, plus his wife's tireless dedication, are what may have enabled Steven Hawking not to lose his will to live but to thrive instead.

This film will take you on an emotional roller coaster, but trust me, it is worth the ride. A fantastic movie/story about the



power of the human spirit overcoming insurmountable odds that will surely stay with you long after the movie is over.

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Review by Mikell Nielsen

I absolutely loved this beautifully acted and richly filmed story. In the face of almost unbearable physical adversity there is the undeniable and unbreakable

spirit of Stephen Hawking. Here we have a man with a genius mind who is so fiercely strong and alive it seems there could be no limitations for him. But his physical body has failed him and made him completely dependent for his very existence. Just one mechanical failure or one tiny human error could end his life. The fact that Stephen has lived at all is because of the undying love and devotion of family and friends whose lives he touches so deeply with his amazing spirit, soul and mind.

This film is about relationships and commitment and possibilities. Leaving the theater I felt overwhelmingly inspired and in awe of the depth of humanity of these fine people.

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Ed. Note: *This film received five Academy Award nominations, including Best Picture, Best Actor and Best Actress. Eddie Redmayne won for Best Actor. The film also won two Golden Globes and three BAFTA awards, including best British film.*