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Book Review - Far Beyond the Gates

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Off the SHELF

Far Beyond the Gates by Philip Lee Williams
(Mercer University Press, 2020: ISBN
9780881467369, \$25.00)

The clock is ticking for Pratt McKay, a Pulitzer Prize-winning history professor at the University of North Carolina. His late-onset multiple sclerosis is progressing, and he desperately wants to reconcile with his daughter, Lucy, before the disease renders him unable to speak. Pratt invites Lucy to come for the summer and stay with him in his expansive (and expensive) mountainside home.

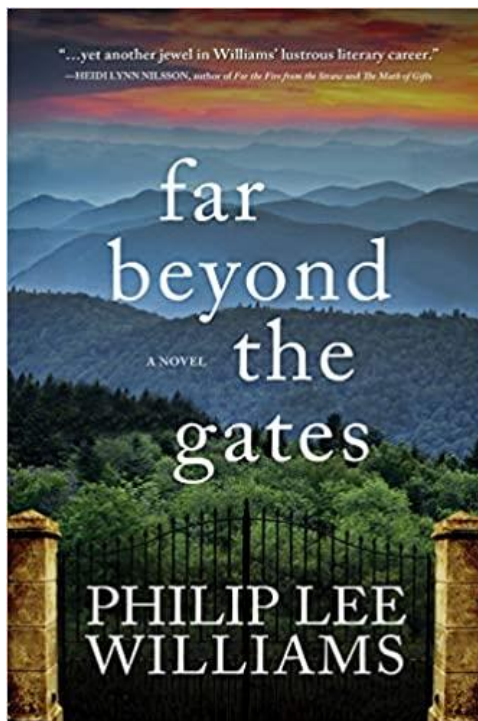
Pratt and his ex-wife, an equally successful academic at Duke University, were self-absorbed and rather indifferent parents. Lucy is alienated from both, and when the opportunity arose, she thumbed her nose at the academy. Nevertheless, Lucy didn't stray too far from the life of the mind. She chose to become a high school teacher and married an aspiring writer whose aspirations almost always exceeded his talent. By the time Lucy arrives at her father's doorstep, she is a somewhat rudderless, divorced, 35-year-old English teacher. Once at Pratt's, Lucy has trouble connecting with her father and spars with the live-in graduate student, who is part transcriber and part errand boy.

Eventually, Lucy settles into life in Pratt's gated community. She makes friends with neighbors

and townspeople—especially the landscape contractor, Sean Crayton. The two begin to date, and over time Lucy begins to open her heart to the possibility of love. Meanwhile, Pratt's attempts to close the distance between himself and his daughter come in agonizing fits and starts. He records his thoughts in the evenings and envisions that Lucy will play the tape of his confession on her trip back home at the summer's end. But events conspire to force him to confess a secret that he has been harboring since he was in college. Pratt reveals but also continues to conceal—while the clock continues to tick.

Four-time Georgia Author of the Year Philip Lee Williams tells the story of Lucy and Pratt through alternating diary entries. Both father and daughter are wounded and need each other and the full truth to heal. Most readers will view *Far Beyond the Gates* as a story of regret, reconciliation, and love—and

it is. But it also seems to be a tacit indictment of the academy. The book is peppered with "failed academics," individuals with dissertations that sputtered out, and successful academics with severe character flaws. In this story, if happiness is to be had, it will be found beyond the gates of the university. Recommended for public and academic libraries.



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