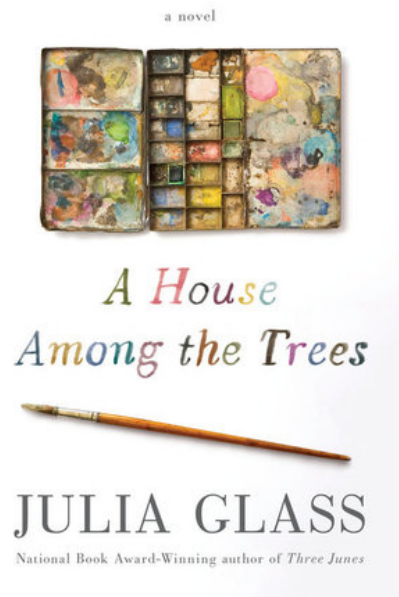




A House Among the Trees: A Novel

Julia Glass

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A House Among the Trees: A Novel Julia Glass

From the beloved author of the National Book Award–winning *Three Junes*: The unusual bond between a world-famous children's author and his assistant sets the stage for a richly plotted novel of friendship and love, artistic ambition, and the power of an unexpected legacy

When the revered children's author Mort Lear dies accidentally at the Connecticut home he shares with Tomasina Daulair, his trusted assistant, she is stunned to be left the house and all its contents, as well as being named his literary executor. Though not quite his daughter or his wife, Tommy was nearly everything to the increasingly reclusive Lear, whom she knew for over forty years since meeting him as a child in a city playground where Lear was making sketches for *Colorquake*, a book that would become an instant classic. Overwhelmed by the responsibility for Lear's bequest, she must face the demands of all those affected by the sudden loss, including the lonely, outraged museum curator to whom Lear once promised his artistic estate; the beguiling British actor recently cast to play Lear in a movie; and her own estranged brother. She must also face the demons of Morty's painful past—the subject of that movie—and a future that will no longer include him. A visit from the actor leads to revelations and confrontations that challenge much of what Tommy believed she knew about her boss's life and work—and, ultimately, about her own.

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From Reader Review A House Among the Trees: A Novel for online ebook

Jill says

I may be one of the few people reading A House Among the Trees who didn't know beforehand that the book was inspired by the famed children's author and illustrator Maurice Sendak and his legendary book, Where The Wild Things Are.

No matter. This intelligently written, character-driven novel stands on its own merits, using Mr. Sendak as a departure point and then building a wholly original character in Mort Lear, who is cared for by his trusted assistant Tomasina (Tommy) Daulair – whose brother Dani just happens to be the prototype for his own character, Ivo.

When Mort dies – and we know he has died from the first few pages – Tommy is named his literary executor and is left with a lot of memories and a palpable feeling that she may not have known the man to whom she has dedicated much of her life. When the well-known British actor and heartthrob Nick Greene shows up at her door – wanting to find out more about Mort Lear because he wants to inhabit him in a soon-to-be movie – both realize that knowing more about Mort may be key to knowing more about themselves.

Julia Glass is a fine writer and as a result, she does not rely on suspenseful plot twists and bells and whistles to elucidate the journeys of her characters. It might have been easy for her to fall into clichés with Mort's younger gay lover who is dying from AIDS, or the spurned Book Museum director who believed her museum would eventually inherit Mort Lear's archives. Instead, each character is fleshed out and becomes his or her own person.

The questions this book raises are: do we really ever know another human being? Do we ever truly know ourselves? Are each of us acting a role in life? Does it matter that mysteries remain in the end? Should we ever expect to become "whole" by trying to solve those mysteries? The novel, I believe, could benefit from a bit of editing here and there, but still maintained my attention all the way through.

At one point, Mort says in an interview, "A story is just like a road. It's got to take you somewhere. Somewhere fun, somewhere new! The trip would be dull indeed without some unexpectedly sharp corners." Here, in A House Among the Trees, Julia Glass is not particularly taking her readers somewhere new. But she is revealing new glimpses into life. And for me, as a reader, that is just enough. 4.5 stars.

switterbug (Betsey) says

If you've ever read Maurice Sendak's children's books, you may recognize the central but now dead (mort) character in Glass's new novel, Mort Lear. But don't expect him to be modeled entirely after Sendak; this is not a bio or even a "faction" of the great artist's life. Instead, this is Glass's original creation, about adults attempting to actualize their lives in a continuum of age and experience.

After an accident that kills Lear, his live-in assistant, Thomasina "Tommy" Dulair, is named Executrix, and

inherits his house in the Connecticut woods, the land, and a tidy sum of money. This does not please her; in fact, the future and her further obligations to her boss and friend trouble her. For over thirty years, she has been his assistant—many of these years his live-in assistant, who was his Jackie-of-all-trades, directing and organizing all of his professional obligations. Lear was increasingly reclusive as the years passed, and Tommy was indispensable to him.

At 55, Tommy was hoping to finally find a path separate and independent of Mort's life, and perhaps repair the relationship with her estranged brother, Dani, who was unknowingly the model for Mort's main character in his best-selling book, "Colorquake." Not only does she have a mountain of decisions and legacy requirements, she now has to accommodate a five-day visit from Nicholas Greene, the British actor and recent Oscar-winning heartthrob, who made plans with Lear to come stay at his house in order to "study" Mort's life. Nick is doing his homework/groundwork to star in a biopic of the American Lear, playing the late, great icon's most relevant years, the beginning and next several decades of the artist's crowning success. A child actor will play Mort's early years, when he endured unforgettable personal trauma that shaped him as an artist and an individual.

One task that Tommy keeps putting off is dealing with Merry Galarza, a museum director who expected to receive Lear's estate, and was shocked to be shunned. This now consigns the museum to a shaky future. Like Tommy, Merry is single, childless, and, as allegory to the museum, at a loss about her future.

Rounding out the cast is Mort's one time great love, Soren, a flamboyant partier who died of AIDS, and caused friction between Tommy and Mort due to Soren's emotionally immature and reckless behavior. His character was the least engaging, however, as his flamboyance and illness were treated with mostly pat and derivative execution. It didn't bring anything new to the table about either the tragedy of living with AIDS (before the latest life-saving medicines), or tortured relationships.

The book as a whole shines tantalizingly, as Glass hefts Mort, Tommy, Nick, Dani, and to a lesser extent, Merry, with a robust background that allows the reader to understand the fragile, struggling, and striving children within the adults. The narrative gives weight to the pressure of celebrity, "All celebrity does is arrange and spotlight your foibles as if they were mannequins in a shop window...you become a parade unto yourself, but if you are diligent and have a decent sense of direction, you determine the route." Nicholas considers Lear's celebrity while anxious about his own.

Moreover, there are philosophical questions that are mined: what is a full life, and what makes us whole? Do we establish our identity through the prism of others, is life a theater where we are merely players, or can we become our genuine selves, comfortable in our own skin? Glass also explores sons raised by distressed single mothers, albeit in different eras, and examines how our childhood experiences affect our behavior and trust in others as adults.

A few protracted scenes and events could have been redacted or tightened, but overall it was a thoughtful, character-driven, and highly engaging sixth novel from Julia Glass.

Larry H says

For me, reading a Julia Glass novel is like returning home after a long trip, or visiting close friends or family. You immediately feel so comfortable, so happy, and so interested in what is going on around you. I've been a fan of hers since her very first book, *Three Junes*, and while her books aren't always perfect, I love the way she unfurls her stories, and creates immensely memorable characters.

Tomasina "Tommy" Daulair was 12 years old when she first met beloved children's book author Morty Lear. She doesn't know who he is or what he has written, but he becomes immersed in sketching her younger brother while he plays on the playground, and she is caught totally unaware a few years later when she finds out that her brother became the inspiration for the main character in Lear's most famous book.

These encounters serve as the start of a 40+-year relationship, with Tommy serving as Morty's trusted assistant, confidante, and all-around savior. The job, and their relationship, opens Tommy's life to a lot of different opportunities, but despite the fact that Morty is gay and older than she is, her job and Morty's dependence on her serves to close off her life to little but him. And for the most part, she's fine with that fact.

Unexpectedly, Morty dies in a freak accident while Tommy is out running his errands. She is completely shocked to find that Morty has left her their Connecticut home and all of his possessions, and while she is overwhelmed by his generosity, when she realizes that he also intended for her to carry out many of his complicated, confusing, and sometimes surprising requests he outlined in his will, she resents having to do his dirty work one last time.

As she tries to figure out what her future holds, since so much of her life was lived on Morty's terms, she must deal with several different people, each of whom wants something else from her, or from Morty's estate. From her estranged younger brother, Dani, who has always resented her relationship with Morty, especially after learning he was the author's inspiration all those years ago and got nothing for it, to Meredith Galarza, the museum director to whom Morty all but promised much of his work, only to find he changed his mind without telling her, and Nick Greene, the handsome, Oscar-winning actor cast as Morty in a film about his life, to whom Morty disclosed secrets he never even shared with Tommy, these encounters will force Tommy to deal with Morty's legacy, and what he meant to her, in many different ways.

"It was invigorating to be indispensable to a man like Morty; at times it was a source of pride—even vanity. But equally vain was her notion that to meet his expectations would permit her to know him inside and out; to know, as the filmmakers believe they do, the inner Lear."

Spanning the years of their relationship, from their first encounter through the tumultuous times of Morty's life, including the death of his lover from AIDS, *A House Among the Trees* is an indelible portrait of life with an artist, and how easily dependency can merge into codependency, on both sides. It's the story of a woman struggling to find herself after so long of having her life defined by her job, which was so much more than a job, and it's also an interesting exploration of how much we truly know someone, even after working and living with them for more than 40 years.

Morty's character bears some slight similarities to Maurice Sendak, but this is hardly a fictionalized account of that man's life. Once again, I loved the way Glass told this story, and I loved the emotions she evoked in its telling. While I liked Tommy's encounters with Nick, Meredith, and Dani, at times when the story shifted to Nick or Meredith's perspective, it seemed a little jarring, and I wanted to get back to the core of the story. The pacing can be a little slow at times, but I felt this book in my heart and my mind, and overall, really enjoyed it.

There's a warmth to this story, and to most of Glass' writing, that I am so enamored of. If you like Glass' books, this is another one to savor; if you've never read her before, she's definitely an author worth exploring.

See all of my reviews at <http://itseithersadnessoreuphoria.blo....>

Jan says

"A House Among the Trees," while it was certainly well-written in a conventional sense, offered no surprises, no moments of thrilling "I wish I'd written that!" revelation. Is it possible to be too proficient a writer? At a certain level of competency, polished metaphors and technically adroit sentences just seem predictable and boring—even though the writer might be talented and accomplished. Julia Glass's words are so carefully chosen that I went from nodding at her success to rolling my eyes at her fussy perfectionism.

Plus, I don't understand her choice to tell this story about a "Great Man" (a very Sendak-like children's book author named Mort) from the POV of his dowdy, prudish live-in assistant. It could have been hilarious if it were satire, since "Tomasina" is kind of a prototypical Mrs. Danvers type (remember the sinister housekeeper in "Rebecca"?), only less domineering and more mousy. But her coldness and envy of her employer's colorful life are treated with the utmost seriousness. He is a dynamic, passionate gay artist, and she is an uptight, competent bore. We get LOTS of exposition about her past, which seems utterly beside the point. The novel often cuts away from potentially vibrant scenes to examine the lackluster, passive-aggressive interior rumination of the narrator. Can you imagine if Gatsby had ten more chapters, all about Nick Carraway?

There are two other part-time narrators, but they don't fare much better: One is Merry, a timorous, dowdy museum assistant who is also obsessed with the Great Man (duelling fag-hags?); the other is Nick, a British actor/celebrity who is slated to play Mort in a big Hollywood movie. How do we know he's British? Every other word out of his mouth is "fortnight," "knackered," or "Crikey." How do we know he's super famous? He's followed by paparazzi at all times! And his cell phone is constantly buzzing with demands from his agent!

I kept thinking of Zadie Smith's "Swing Time," and how much I loved her narrator, who is also a passive-aggressive, diffident celebrity's assistant. But her voice is humorous, self-examining, and morally ambiguous. So... it can be done! Just not by Julia Glass (whose work I've never read before, and probably won't again).

I feel like I need to note that most everyone in my book group loved this book, and it got glowing reviews and probably won numerous awards. Eye roll.

Karen says

Disappointing.

retronerd Steinkuehler says

I wanted to like this and I didn't. Well written but a oh-so-boring story.

Jackie Rogers says

Gave this book 162 pages and 5 days and still don't know what was going on. Could not spend another

minute in it and its strange characters. See it has good reviews, but just could not see it. Thanks to Goodreads.

Donna says

This was my first novel by this author so I wasn't sure what I was in for. But for some reason, I didn't care for this one. It felt long and that is never a good sign for me.

The author had some great descriptive strokes, and there was some humor....all things appreciated by me. But bottom line, I just wasn't pulled in by the story or the characters. It was a lot of telling. I will read another book by her just to compare.

Jennifer Blankfein says

For more book reviews and recommendations please go to my blog <https://booknationbyjen.wordpress.com>
Book Nation by Jen.

In author Julia Glass's latest, character driven novel, *A House Among the Trees*, Mort Lear, a famous children's author, vaguely reminiscent of Maurice Sendak, unexpectedly falls to his death off the roof of his Connecticut home in a fluke accident. His longtime, live-in assistant Tomasina (Tommy) is left to pick up the pieces, address his fortune, complete unfinished business and come to terms with their co-dependent relationship. In addition, surprising details of Morty's past surface causing Tommy to question how well she actually knew him.

When Tommy was a child she saw an eccentric man sketching pictures of her little brother as she watched over him on the playground. She gave the man the ok to continue as long as her brother remained unaware, and years later she came across Mort Lear's popular children's book with those familiar illustrations from long ago. As a favor, and to pay her back for allowing him to draw her brother, Mort gives Tommy a job working for him, and 40 years later after setting aside her personal needs and living with Morty in the country, Tommy is left alone.

Mort's best-selling children's book has a movie deal, and the unlikely famous, British actor, Nicholas Greene, cast to be the lead, had been in touch with Mort via email, sharing private stories and developing an unprecedented relationship. Both had experienced loss, fame and loneliness in different ways and Nick had been looking forward to continuing to bond with Mort in person prior to his unexpected death. As a courtesy, Tommy agrees to host Nick for a few days and help him get a feel for what Morty's life was like. Little did she know To her shock and surprise, Nick had learned some personal details of Morty's past that were very different from what he had shared with her during their lifetime together.

Tommy is faced with processing upsetting information about Morty's youth while hosting Nick at the Connecticut home, giving Merry the museum curator some bad news about artwork she had been expecting to receive, and reconnecting with her estranged brother who was never publicly recognized as the model for Morty's popular illustrations.

Julia Glass provides well written back story to enrich the detail and provide depth as she weaves her story around the characters. She touches upon issues such as fame and loneliness, nontraditional relationships between adults and children, what we think is owed to us, family, legacy, loyalty and the individual quest for

happiness. I enjoyed A House Among the Trees and highly recommend it for book clubs.

Rosemary says

I have Loved 3 of Julia Glass' books: Three Junes, The Whole World Over, and And the Dark Sacred Night, mainly because I love her character Fenno McCleod. I enjoyed reading all her other books, too. I was looking forward to this one, but for me, it never really clicked. Reading it required more work than I anticipated. I just didn't love it. I feel bad about that. This one just wasn't my cup of tea. I never really read anything in it that made me care about any of the characters. Maybe there were too many characters, too many subplots? I'm not sure. I look forward to reading the next one, Julia!

Kelly says

Reading a Julia Glass novel is like entering another lifetime for a few hours. I tend to favor character-heavy books, and this one does not disappoint. Meredith, Nick, and Tomasina are people whose lives were pulled into the orbit of Mort Lear, a beloved artist and author of best-selling children's books. Tommy has been especially close to the man, having served as his assistant and live-in companion for nearly all her adult life. After Mort's sudden death, she, who thinks she knows Mort the best, realizes that there were secrets unknown to her that were revealed to others. How well do we ever really know another person? For that matter, how well do we know ourselves, and how much of what we do is to protect others or ourselves? Glass's characters are trying their best to figure it all out, and I loved them for it. Highly recommended.

Irene says

The sudden death of an elderly wealthy and famous author/illustrator of children's books in the middle of the shooting of a film about his life, sets into motion a minor tug of war over his literary and personal legacy. I am sure that many readers will find this to be insightful and erudite. I thought it was tedious and pretentious. It was incredibly over-written, words lined up, pearlescent balls strung together, opalescent teeth, enamelized decay, so many shiny similes like Mylar bubbles atop curling ribbon. Most of this novel was spent on the back stories of the various characters: the deaths of romantic partners to AIDS and parents to cancer, overly hyped childhood traumas, the settling on a particular life path, etc. These threads of past narratives swelled, spread, swallowing up the current events until like some prehistoric nest of killer gnats, it covered and obscured the precipitating tension. If by this point in my review, the reader has absolutely no idea what I am getting at, then I have successfully communicated my frustration with this book.

Crystal says

Not my favorite Julia Glass novel. It felt like a slog most of the way, although there were chunks that I really enjoyed and kept me reading.

Bonnie Brody says

I have loved every book I've read by Julia Glass and this one is no exception. Her writing is exceptional, her story line fascinating, and the literary quality of her novel is superb.

Morty Lear, the protagonist of this book, is a world famous author of children's books and appears to be modeled after Maurice Sendak. His most famous creation, 'Colorquake', features a young character named Ivo who is much like Max in 'Where the Wild Things Are'. As the novel opens, Morty has just died and his loved and cherished assistant, Tommy (short for Thomasina), finds that she has inherited his home and land and has become the literary executor of his estate. As she tries to take all of this in, she is forced to face some difficult truths about Morty's life and her own.

There is a movie picture in the works about Morty's life. The star is Nicholas Greene, a new British sensation who has just won an Oscar. He will be playing the role of Morty. He plans on visiting the Lear estate in an attempt to find out as much as he can about Morty's life. Tommy, who is a lover of solitude, finds that the actor will be arriving shortly and she is aghast. Not only is she starstruck, but she is also very protective of her own solitude and Lear's legacy and life.

As the story unfolds, it become obvious early on that Lear gave an interview to a leading news magazine in which he revealed that he was sexually abused early in his life. Why he chose to tell this particular journalist about his trauma is a puzzle. He has also been emailing Nick and Nick believes that what Lear revealed to the journalist is only part of what happened to him. As he searches for answers, more and more questions about Lear's life emerge.

Another important aspect of the novel is that a book museum in New York City expected to be the beneficiary of Lear's literary estate. However, Lear's will indicates that he wants the bulk of his estate to go towards building a home for traumatized children. He wants this home to be called Ivo's house.

Tommy is trying to balance all the various facets of Lear's estate at the same time she is trying to deal with the conflicted relationship she has with her brother Dani, the original model for Lear's Ivo. She has worked for Lear for decades and now, at 55, she is wondering if she truly has a life of her own.

The novel is character driven and each and every character is fleshed out and given a rich and delicious fictional persona. Though there are some parts towards the middle of the novel that move a bit slowly, I still ate up every work. Glass knows how to entice and enchant her readers and she never disappoints.

Cynthia says

A little uneven, but very good character development.
