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## **I CANNOT GET YOU CLOSE ENOUGH**

By *Ellen Gilchrist*

*Little, Brown*

When Ellen Gilchrist addresses aspiring writers, she recites a bit of Shakespeare, reads a little Twain, and says, "That's why you have to make your work wonderful. If it isn't, a reader can simply close your book and pick up one of those guys."

When you set your sights that high, you have to take chances. Gilchrist does. She walks, as always, a slippery wire where people dare to dream in a world swarming with disappointment, sentimentality waiting for Gilchrist on the one side, callousness on the other. She slips, but in this richly satisfying trilogy of novellas she never falls.

Gilchrist's milieu is a modern South where the ground is shifting. An older generation of women want freedom and achievement. They also want love, but they'll settle for good sex or money. Meanwhile they cheer on, even gush over, a younger generation of women liberated by birth control and new opportunities who won't have to make the compromises that fettered their mothers.

Familiar Gilchrist characters make this less a new book than the latest three jigsaw pieces in the Hand and Manning family portraits. Though dead, poet/novelist Anna Hand, who chose quick drowning over slow melanoma in the 1988 *The Anna Papers*, hovers over the book like the ghost of King Hamlet. The first novella, "Winter," is an addendum to Anna's papers, relating her attempt to save her 11 year old niece, Jessie, from falling into the custodial clutches of her soul-dead mother, Sheila, who "can't love anyone because her father didn't love her." Anna prays, "Oh God, don't let Jessie inherit that darkness, that tightness, that tightmouthed hatred and despair," and when Sheila appears, eyes "cold as the winter sea," we join the prayer, rooting for Anna's spirited quest to keep Jessie with her father, Anna's younger brother Daniel.

In the second and most successful of the novellas Daniel and we learn that Jessie has a half-sister a few months older than herself, the fruit of Daniel's hasty and hastily-annulled marriage to Cherokee hippie Summer Deer Wagoner back in his pot-and-acid salad days at Berkeley. In a zestfully poignant scene, the cast-off Summer Deer dies in childbirth back among the Cherokee, hating to leave behind blue skies and jazz and lysergic acid and sandals and sex and her baby, Olivia de Havilland Hand, named when her pregnant mother watched a late night showing of *The Snake Pit* and realized her unborn was driving her, like the movie's star, crazy. Fifteen years later, the girl writes heart-melting letters to Anna in hope of claiming her birthright to the money and opportunity that go with being a Hand.

In the final, longest piece, the characters assemble in Maine three years later, each with her own dream, each fully equipped to dismantle it.

Gifted with a keen tragic sense, a poet's eye, a rich humanity and a tough witty-gritty vernacular, Ellen Gilchrist once again shows why we cannot get close enough, how we cannot get from another what is necessary to fill our terrible need "not to be dissolved, not to sink back into sand . . . . And so we revolve around each other and our dreams collide." Says Anna, "It is embarrassing that it should be so hard."