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Review of Morningside Heights

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Historically, literature has been filled with stories of the transformative influence gifted educators have had on their usually petulant students. Recently, however, literature seems to have yanked away the pedestal on which those admired paragons have stood, leaving their flawed, beleaguered successors ankle-deep in mud.

In Morningside Heights, the problem for brilliant Shakespeare scholar Spence Robin is early-onset Alzheimer's. From a popular, high-achieving man of letters, Spence rapidly devolves into a helpless burden on his colleagues and especially on his wife, Pru.

Though Spence's disease is the predicate of this contemporary narrative, the story's focus is on his family and caretakers and their struggles to balance the empathy they naturally feel toward Spence with their need to take care of themselves. Pru, especially, agonizes once she starts a new relationship with another man even as Spence continues to need her love and care. Nevertheless, though he recedes mentally and emotionally, Spence, through the agency of his disease, continues to be an influencer and a motivator for those around him.

VERDICT: Joshua Henkin (Swimming Across the Hudson) treats the complications of a complicated disease with insight, honesty, and humanity in a style that is as readable as it is consummately literate.