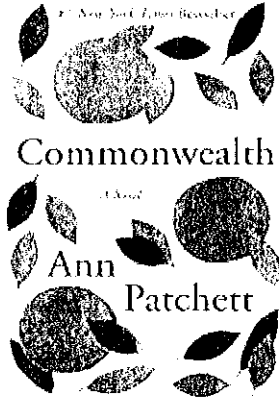


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Commonwealth

by Ann Patchett



About the Book

The acclaimed, bestselling author --- winner of the PEN/Faulkner Award and the Orange Prize --- tells the enthralling story of how an unexpected romantic encounter irrevocably changes two families' lives.

One Sunday afternoon in Southern California, Bert Cousins shows up at Franny Keating's christening party uninvited. Before evening falls, he has kissed Franny's mother, Beverly --- thus setting in motion the dissolution of their marriages and the joining of two families.

Spanning five decades, COMMONWEALTH explores how this chance encounter reverberates through the lives of the four parents and six children involved. Spending summers together in Virginia, the Keating and Cousins children forge a lasting bond that is based on a shared disillusionment with their parents and the strange and genuine affection that grows up between them.

Discussion Guide

1. How is each child --- Cal, Caroline, Holly, Jeanette, Franny and Albie --- affected by the divorce and neglect that results?
2. What does it mean to become a family again in the wake of divorce? How does each child grow to respond to the family difficulties?
3. In what ways are the siblings good for and to each other?

4. Bert believes that his divorce, all the difficulties for the children, and his marriage to Beverly were inevitable. "We're magic," he says to her. In what ways might this be true? To what extent does romantic love justify their decision?
5. What influence did the time periods, especially the '60s and '70s, have on the behavior and decisions of the characters?
6. What's added to the novel by the presence of Lomer, Fix's first partner on the police force?
7. How does the ageing of the four parents --- Beverly, Fix, Teresa and Bert --- affect their feelings and behavior regarding each other and the children?
8. Franny falls for Leon Posen because of "the brightness in him." What might this mean? Why do you think Franny and Leo were willing to overlook their age difference?
9. As adults, Jeanette suggests to Albie, perhaps in jest, that they create a family therapy plan for Holly and their mother. What does it take to repair and rebuild family relationships after so much division and tragedy?
10. What do the various literary allusions (DAVID COPPERFIELD, THE RETURN OF THE NATIVE, *The English Patient*, T. S. Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock") bring to the novel?
11. After writing his novel based on the life stories of the siblings, Leon Posen says "it's my book," while Albie asks, "how did he end up with my life?" What are the ethical and legal issues of the situation? Should there be regulations for writing about others without their consent?
12. Fix believes, "There's no protecting anyone...keeping people safe...is a story." To what extent is this true? Why does he believe this?
13. Holly chooses meditation over medication as a way of dealing with her suffering and stress. In what ways is this a healthy response to her life? What of her mother's question of whether it's "a real life"?
14. Among other things, Holly is attempting to find inner peace. To what extent does childhood experience determine who we become? How can an unsatisfying or unhealthy self be transformed?
15. Beverly admits late in her life that "other people's children are too hard." What does she mean? In what ways is this true or not?
16. Discussing their difficult past, Holly says to Teresa, "you got through it." What's the value of this? In what ways does each character go beyond this to remake his or her life?
17. Bert and Beverly's kiss sets everything in motion for a lot of people who had no choice in the matter. How does that single decision shape everyone else's life?

Author Bio

Ann Patchett is the author of seven novels: *THE PATRON SAINT OF LIARS*, *TAFT*, *THE MAGICIAN'S ASSISTANT*, *BEL CANTO*, *RUN*, *STATE OF WONDER* and *COMMONWEALTH*. She was the editor of *BEST AMERICAN SHORT STORIES 2006* and has written three books of nonfiction --- *TRUTH & BEAUTY*, about her friendship with the writer Lucy Grealy; *WHAT NOW?* an expansion of her graduation address at Sarah Lawrence College; and *THIS IS THE STORY OF A HAPPY MARRIAGE*, a collection of essays examining the theme of commitment.

A graduate of Sarah Lawrence College and the Iowa Writer's Workshop, Patchett has been the recipient of numerous awards and fellowships, including England's Orange Prize, the PEN/Faulkner Award, the Harold D. Vursell Memorial Award from the American Academy of Arts and Letters, the Book Sense Book of the Year, a Guggenheim Fellowship, *The Chicago Tribune's* Heartland Prize, The Governor's Award for Excellence in the Arts, the American Bookseller's Association's Most Engaging Author Award, and the Women's National Book Association's Award. Her books have been both *New York Times* Notable Books and *New York Times* bestsellers. Her work has been translated into more than 30 languages.

In November 2011, she opened Parnassus Books in Nashville, Tennessee, with her business partner Karen Hayes. She has since become a spokesperson for independent booksellers, championing books and bookstores on NPR, "The Colbert Report" (including the series finale), Oprah's "Super Soul Sunday," "The Martha Stewart Show" and "The CBS Early Show," among many others. Along with James Patterson, she was the honorary chair of World Book Night. In 2012 she was named by *Time* magazine as one of the 100 Most Influential People in the World.

Ann Patchett lives in Nashville with her husband, Karl VanDevender, and their dog, Sparky.

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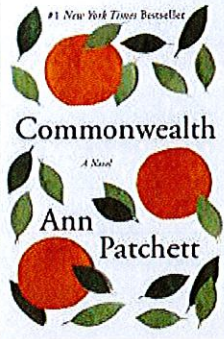
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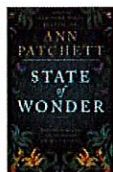
Books by Ann Patchett



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State of Wonder

by Ann Patchett - Fiction

Dr. Marina Singh is sent to Brazil to track down her former mentor, who seems to have disappeared in the Amazon while working on what is destined to be a valuable new drug. She also hopes to find answers to

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‘Commonwealth’: Ann Patchett’s masterful novel of family and family secrets

By Ron Charles September 6, 2016

We love Ann Patchett for her novels, but her new one, “Commonwealth,” reminds us that, in another world, she could have been one of our favorite short story writers, too. When she edited “The Best American Short Stories” in 2006, she singled out Eudora Welty as “the hero of my life,” and that veneration shows in the adroitly shaped, exquisitely subtle scenes that make up her fiction.

“Commonwealth” opens with a 32-page story about a party at Fix Keating’s house in Los Angeles. Fix is a policeman, and among the fellow cops and family members who come to celebrate the christening of his daughter Franny is a deputy DA named Bert Cousins, who crashes the party — with a bottle of gin — just to avoid going home to his suffocating wife and kids. As the afternoon wears on, we jumble through the crowd, spying guests and catching snippets of conversation. The narrator is transparent, but omniscient, recording the tremors running beneath the happy exterior of these people’s lives. Pay attention: This is a scene with hardly any apparent drama, yet it’s pregnant with implications that will roil two families for the next half century.

In someone else’s hands, “Commonwealth” would be a saga, a sprawling chronicle of events and relationships spread out over dozens of chapters. But Patchett is daringly elliptical here. Not only are decades missing, but they’re also out of order. We’re not so much told this story as allowed to listen in from another room as a door swings open and closed. When that door opens again in Chapter 2, Franny is taking her elderly father to chemo. By now, the divorces sparked by an illicit kiss at her christening are history, but the adult children of the Keating and Cousins families are still living amid the wreckage of their parents’ broken and reconstituted marriages.

Offered only the thinnest exposition and confronted with the details of four parents and six children, you may find yourself grasping for a *dramatis personae*. Indeed, for many pages, reading “Commonwealth” feels like being somebody’s baffled second husband at a family reunion. Who are all these people? How is he related to *her*? Whose child is *that*? Even Franny admits that “she couldn’t follow all the lines out in every direction: all the people to whom she was by marriage mysteriously related.”

But very soon, we're thoroughly invested in these families, wrapped up in their lives by Patchett's storytelling, which has never seemed more effortlessly graceful. This is minimalism that magically speaks volumes, further demonstration of the range she demonstrated in "Bel Canto" and "State of Wonder." As we follow the Keating and Cousins children, their stories come into focus the way our own family legends gradually cohere from scraps of information and fractured memories. Even the most traumatic events — such as the death of one of the children — can be only partially known, thwarted as these characters are by invention, by gossip, by the deep emotional need to avoid the truth.

One exceptionally brilliant chapter captures a summer when the four Cousins children are shipped out to the commonwealth of Virginia to see their obnoxious father, Bert, and their two Keating step-siblings. They arrive at Dulles Airport with absolutely no luggage — a masterful bit of strategy by their abandoned mother back in California. (It's also a reminder of what a witty writer of domestic comedy Patchett can be.) The weeks swell with marital tension and adolescent resentment as though we're watching the most passive-aggressive episode of "The Brady Bunch" ever conceived. Driven mad by caring for four extra unhappy children, Bert's new wife hides in the car. "She thought about the fact that if she were in the garage rather than the carport she'd be killing herself now," Patchett writes. And left on their own, the six children invent their own ways of managing each other, sometimes with tragic results.

How families remember and judge themselves becomes one of the novel's richest themes, and Patchett ingeniously ties that to how novelists fictionalize other people's lives. In her 20s, when Franny has an affair with a famous writer, her tales of home inadvertently supply him with the plot of a novel that becomes an award-winning bestseller. "He said that what she had told him was nothing but the jumping-off point for his imagination," Patchett writes. "It wasn't her family. No one would see them there." But, of course, Franny's siblings and step-siblings do see themselves there. This famous stranger's book is a jarring act of exposure and misrepresentation of their most private moments.

Lots of novelists are peppered with questions about how much of their stories are "real," and most of them invariably, somewhat condescendingly explain that their work is wholly the product of imagination. Which makes it particularly fascinating to watch Patchett dismantle this vain and insincere male novelist who steals Franny's life story. And yet Patchett justly insists that the relationship between fact and fiction in "Commonwealth" remains irreducibly complex. In a recent interview, she acknowledged, "I've always been writing about my family," but she goes on to say, "I have a real fear that the whole publication of this novel is going to center around questions of autobiography."

Aside from the allusions to author's life (like Franny, Patchett is the daughter of an L.A. policeman and was raised in a blended family), the larger issue of who owns the past also recalls a more uncomfortable, real-life disagreement that broke out 12 years ago after the publication of "Truth & Beauty ." That work of nonfiction was a popular memoir about her friendship with Lucy Grealy, a writer who had survived jaw cancer as a child but succumbed to a heroin addiction as an adult. Grealy's sister, Suellen, publicly castigated Patchett for intruding on her grief and sullyng her memory of her sister: "It is mine alone," Suellen Grealy wrote in the Guardian, "one that I don't have to share with the hundreds of thousands of total strangers who think they understand Lucy through Ann Patchett's personal vantage point."

That's a sentiment that Franny's siblings and step-siblings know well, and it's explored in "Commonwealth" with exceptional sensitivity. What family stories belong to us alone? Who in the family can be entrusted with the mismatched fragments of our

history? Drawing us through this complex genealogy of guilt and forgiveness, Patchett finally delivers us to a place of healing that seems quietly miraculous, entirely believable.

Ron Charles is the editor of *Book World*. You can follow him on Twitter @RonCharles.

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COMMONWEALTH

By Ann Patchett

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Ron Charles is the editor of The Washington Post's Book World. For a dozen years, he enjoyed teaching American literature and critical theory in the Midwest, but finally switched to journalism when he realized that if he graded one more paper, he'd go crazy. 🐦 Follow @roncharles