

Hitting close to home

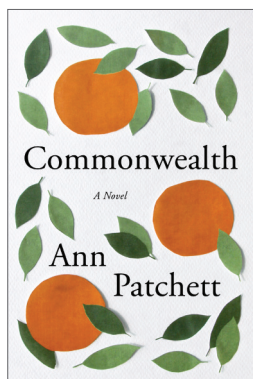
How are you with dogs?" Ann Patchett asks as she holds back two curious greeters behind the front door. She ushers me inside her roomy red brick house to a comfortable living room drenched in morning sun. After she tries to convince me to adopt a deaf Border Collie from her sister (if only), her own rescue pup, Sparky, a tiny ball of black and white fur, makes himself comfortable on the couch between us.



Patchett is both a champion for and veteran of the literary world. She's published six novels and three works of nonfiction, won numerous awards and owns Parnassus Books, an independent bookstore in Nashville. For her, being active in both the artistic and commercial side of the publishing industry is important, and at this point in her career, inextricably intertwined.

This fall, in true rock star fashion, she'll set off on a 30-city book tour. It's difficult and draining. "An entire day could go by, and you don't get the peanut butter sandwich you want because it's just thing to thing to thing," Patchett says. But she recognizes the importance of connecting with her readers, both as an author and as a bookseller. "I love going to the bookstores. These people are my friends."

COMMONWEALTH



By Ann Patchett

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LITERARY FICTION

As long as the journey ahead may be, the road to her new novel, **Commonwealth**, has been a much longer one. In her previous novels, Patchett has bucked the traditional wisdom of "writing what you know," opting instead to immerse herself in research. Recently, however, she experienced an aha moment that led to her latest novel.

"I read an essay by Jonathan Franzen where he said that it's important for the novelist to always do the thing that scares him the most. For me, nothing was more terrifying than writing a novel that had to do with my family. I've always thought it's so much braver and more honorable to just make everything up. But now that I'm in my 50s, I thought hey, I can do whatever I want," she says.

Aside from checking off the box of crafting an autobiographical novel, Patchett was also aiming to further explore her own obsession with time. She explains that *Bel Canto* deals with the suspension of time, *Run* is a story that takes place in real time, but what she really wanted to do was challenge herself by writing a birth-to-death novel. "I didn't make it. But [**Commonwealth**] is very much bookended by birth and death. Sometimes you just get as close as you can get. I felt like [with my previous novels] I had been sprinting for a long time, and I just thought: I need to stretch and open up."

Commonwealth focuses on 10 main characters from two very different families and follows them across 50 years. The story begins on a sweltering Southern California day at a christening party for blue-collar cop Fix and Beverly

Keating's second daughter, Franny. Amid the clamoring, cheek-pinching relatives, friends and coworkers, uninvited lawyer Bert Cousins and Beverly, emboldened by the party's generous

flow of gin, share a passionate, stolen kiss, setting off a chain of

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events that leads to the breakup and blending of their families, complete with six children. The young stepsiblings spend verdant summers together in Virginia, forge alliances, run free of adult supervision and commit shocking misdeeds. (You'll never look at Benadryl the same way again.) It's kids versus the world, until a sudden death carves a deep divide between them.

Yet time marches on, and we are reunited with Franny as an unmoored 20-something working as an upscale cocktail waitress. When her literary hero, Leo Posen, a lothario 32 years her senior, sidles up to her bar, their instant connection leads to a passionate affair. Years later, with a bit of a wink from the author, Leo is moved to craft a novel around Franny and



her family's tragedy, enraging some of her relatives and leading to some unexpected reunions.

If you're wondering whether Patchett identifies with a character, the answer is yes, but it may not be the one you expect. "People who have read this book go, oh, you're Franny! But I'm Leo," she says with a laugh. "The things that happened in this book didn't happen. But, it's all true. . . . The emotions are very close to home. *Bel Canto* is the same book: a story about not being able to go home and being trapped in a house with people that you don't know who are scaring you, and forming alliances with them and loving them. That's what this is. That's my story."

Her experiences with her own blended family and her move from California to the South serve as the most obvious blueprint, and readers familiar with Patchett's nonfiction will recognize autobiographical details aplenty. But the real question is, why tap into this wellspring now, after three decades of writing?

Patchett is aware that while she

was drawn to play with her personal narrative, family members may not be as game to become fictionalized. "Writing things that are too close to home can work for some family members and not for others, and I think this book would not have worked for my father," Patchett says. While she was working on the novel, however, she knew her father would not be alive to read the finished manuscript. He died of Parkinson's disease in 2015.

Fix does share vague similarities with her father, but some of the most personal plot points are found in the later passages that deal with caring for a terminally ill loved one. "The Roz Chast memoir [*Can't We Talk About Something More Pleasant?*] had such an impact on this book. She takes a lot of ownership for her life and her past and says this is the way it is—this was hard and heartbreaking and exhausting."

Patchett insists that waiting to write her most personal story was one of the best career choices she's made, and after reading the novel, it's hard to disagree. **Commonwealth** is an all-American family saga, but her touching and even-handed approach to themes such as family politics, love, the role of literature and the acidic nature of lies is buoyed by a generous sprinkling of matter-of-fact humor. It just might be her best novel yet, an assessment that Patchett agrees with.

"I feel like what I've been doing all my life is not writing **Commonwealth**. So now I have, and I'm hoping it will bring freedom." She admits she already has an idea for another novel, and while she hasn't started writing quite yet, she has made some notes.

"I just think it's interesting to think about all the things we might be wrong about, all the things we were sure of. I was sure that I wasn't going to write anything that seemed autobiographical. And then I did, and it was great. And now I'm thinking, what else are you sure you're not going to do? I'm sure that I'm not going to write a first-person novel again. Well, why not do that?"

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