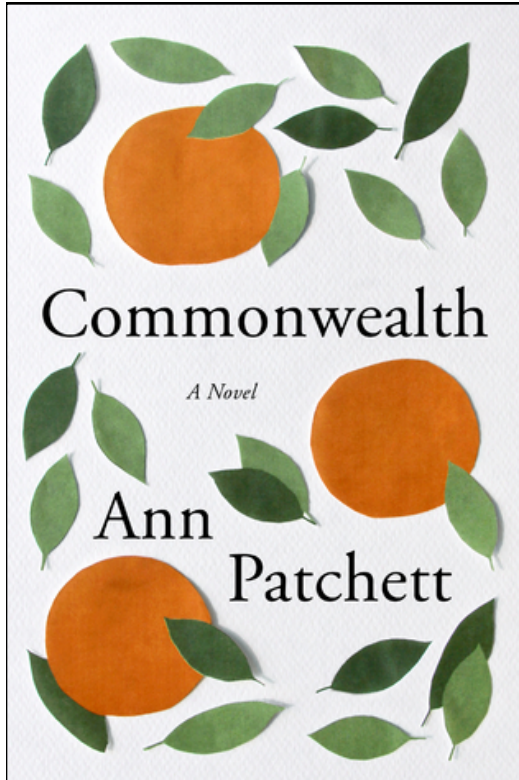


## Ann Patchett: 'I just keep writing the same book'

By Alyson Ward October 17, 2016



As she worked on her latest novel, Ann Patchett consulted members of her family every step of the way. She made copies of her work and passed them around, asking for opinions.

"I cared so profoundly what my family thought about this book," she said in a recent interview.

That's because "Commonwealth" is, in many ways, about her family.

The novelist will be in Houston Monday to discuss her work as part of Inprint's Margaret Root Brown Reading Series, where she'll share the stage with author Lauren Groff. (Tickets are sold out, but it'll be live-streamed.) And she'll likely have to field a few audience questions about just how autobiographical this piece of fiction really is.

Since "Commonwealth" was released in September, it's hovered near the top of the best-sellers list. The story stretches over decades, following two families from the 1960s, when they're uncomfortably stitched together by divorce and remarriage, to the present day. At first the step-siblings spend unhappy summers together, six kids who "looked more like a day camp than a family, random children dropped off on the same curb." But as time and life go by, they face enough trauma together that they learn to rely on each other in unexpected ways.

Writing "Commonwealth" was sort of inevitable, Patchett says. Making the decision to do so was the hardest part.

"I realized," she said, "that I just keep writing the same book over and over again."

Throughout her well-known catalog — "Bel Canto," "State of Wonder," "Run" — the characters and settings are all vastly different, but at heart "they're all the same book," Patchett said: Her novels all tell a story of strangers who are thrown together by circumstance and form lasting bonds.

She discovered that, despite the exotic settings and dramatic stories, she was always retelling the story of her own parents' divorce and remarriage — and how she and her sister had to blend into a family of step-siblings, strangers with whom they eventually bonded.

"I think that subconsciously, that's what I keep untangling and unpacking," she said. "At some point I thought: Wouldn't it be interesting to do this without all the scenery and props?"

Some authors are coy about putting their own lives into fiction, insisting that even the most obviously autobiographical story is one they pulled out of thin air. Not Patchett.

Since "Commonwealth" was published last month, she has been upfront about the book's real-life parallels.

"My publicist said to me before the book is published, 'Are you going to tell people? Are you going to deal with this?' " she says. She figured she might as well. "Any reporter who spent five minutes on Google could probably figure this out, so there's no sense lying about it."

But there's one thing to keep in mind, reading "Commonwealth:" While the characters are based on Patchett's own family, "the things that happen to the people in the book didn't happen to us," she says. There's no childhood death, no story that becomes a secret even to the kids who lived through it. The truth is found in the "emotional energy" of "Commonwealth's" six kids — "how we felt at that time in our lives."

The other half of Monday's program, Lauren Groff is the author of "Fates and Furies," which President Obama declared his favorite book of 2015.

"Nobody would mistake a Lauren Groff novel for anybody else's novel," Patchett says. "She has a really singular voice."

The two writers know each other, Patchett says; they started corresponding because Groff once considered opening an independent bookstore.

Patchett, who opened Nashville's Parnassus Books in 2011, has become an outspoken booster of independent bookstores. Bookstores matter because they build community, she said, especially with readings and book signings that help readers find each other.

"Reading is a solitary act," she said. "Readers really need to come out of their house to bump up against other readers."

With our computers and phones, "we perfected a world in which we never have to leave the house — and then we realized we wanted to leave the house," she said. "I'm doing author events every night right now (at Parnassus), and what I hear over and over again is people are standing in line and they're making friends. They've come to hear an author whose work that they like and they're exchanging book recommendations, they're joining each other's book groups. I think as humans, we really need that."