

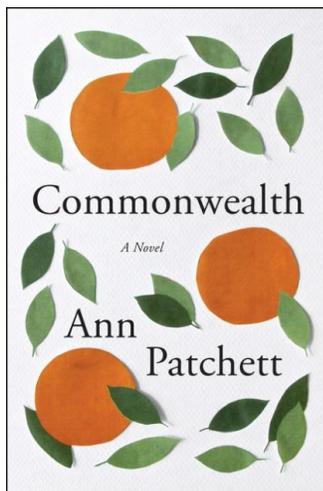


Novelist Ann Patchett on how independent bookstores build community

If you shop at the East Nashville Farmers' Market you can buy fruits and vegetables; but you can also meet a famous author with a stop by the traveling bookmobile. Ann Patchett is a co-owner of the Parnassus Books, founded at a time when bookstores were disappearing. Jeffrey Brown speaks with Patchett about her latest novel, "Commonwealth," a story that she says hits close to home.

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GWEN IFILL: Next: an award-winning novelist and bookseller draws on her own life story for her latest tale.

Jeffrey Brown takes the "NewsHour" Bookshelf to Nashville to visit with writer Ann Patchett.

JEFFREY BROWN: At the East Nashville Farmers Market recently, you could listen to music, down a cool drink, buy some vegetables, and, why not, grab yourself a new book to read.

ANN PATCHETT, Author, "Commonwealth": This is where the people are. You can get a squash and a book, a tomato and a book. It's great.

JEFFREY BROWN: You could also meet a famous local writer, Ann Patchett, who, since 2011, is co-owner of Nashville's Parnassus Books and its traveling bookmobile.

ANN PATCHETT: So, we got a little bit of everything. Lots of kids books, lots of kids. Kids love the bus.

JEFFREY BROWN: Kids love the bus.

ANN PATCHETT: Kids cannot get enough of the bus, so the books that are down low, those are always really important.

JEFFREY BROWN: You don't even need, like, kids' toys or anything to attract them, huh?

ANN PATCHETT: No, no, no bait. Books are the bait. That's our message.

JEFFREY BROWN: Books are the bait.

(LAUGHTER)

JEFFREY BROWN: The 52-year-old bookseller is herself a bestselling author. Her novels include the 2001 "Bel Canto" about an opera singer taken hostage in a terror attack in an unnamed Latin American country, and 2011's "State of Wonder," centered on pharmaceutical drug research in the Amazon.

Now she's done something closer to home, writing a novel about a family much like the one she herself grew up in, two families, in fact, blended together after a chance encounter leads to infidelity and divorce.

Her new novel, "Commonwealth," follows four adults and six children through 50 years of ups and downs.

We spoke in her Nashville home, not too far from where she grew up.

ANN PATCHETT: This is a story that's very close to home. This is a story that is very close to my life and my family and...

JEFFREY BROWN: It is?

ANN PATCHETT: It is.

JEFFREY BROWN: I wasn't sure.

ANN PATCHETT: It is.

JEFFREY BROWN: Well, tell me, how is it? In what ways is it close?

ANN PATCHETT: I was one of two girls, and my mother left my father and married someone who had two boys and two girls. And they moved to the other side of the country.

JEFFREY BROWN: So, this blended family, geographically spread out.

ANN PATCHETT: Yes, exactly.

JEFFREY BROWN: Parents in different places.

ANN PATCHETT: Exactly. Yes.

And I really talked to everyone in my family while I was working on this book. Is this OK with you? How do you feel about this? When I finished, I gave everybody a copy of the manuscript.

JEFFREY BROWN: Really?

ANN PATCHETT: We talked about it. Yes.

JEFFREY BROWN: Because you were nervous about how they would take it? Or...

ANN PATCHETT: Because I love and respect them. And it's their life too. And I have always been so careful to not write this story. I have always written "Bel Canto" instead.

So, when I wanted to write about someone ripped out of one family and put into another family, I put them in Peru. But I just said to everybody — at this point, I was probably 49 when I started the book. And I said, I want to have access to my life, which also means having access to your life. And are you OK with this?

JEFFREY BROWN: So, this was a completely different writing experience for you.

ANN PATCHETT: Totally, totally.

This is the book that I should have written when I was 25, instead of 52.

JEFFREY BROWN: One of the themes, obviously, is chance, right...

ANN PATCHETT: Yes.

JEFFREY BROWN: ... is how one thing leads to just everything.

ANN PATCHETT: Right.

I don't believe in fate, as in, which I — as a Catholic, I think, sort of predestination. But I certainly believe in chance. And I do think — don't you ever think that? Like, if I had turned right this morning, instead of left, maybe everything would have been different?

JEFFREY BROWN: Right. I think we all do.

ANN PATCHETT: Yes, you know, you miss the train, but then you meet the person.

And I think that that's — that's what the book is about. I mean, everybody believes in chance. So, there's a lot of chance in this book.

JEFFREY BROWN: But, as a novelist, that gave you a way into, sees what happens? Did you know where it was ending up, or did you start all this chance happening and then see where it might lead?

ANN PATCHETT: No, I always know where it's ending up.

JEFFREY BROWN: You do?

ANN PATCHETT: That's the way I work. I get it all plotted in my mind, and then I write it down.

I mean, sometimes, things change a little bit. But I always say it's like taking a trip. I know where I'm going. And if I don't know where I'm going, I don't tend to get anywhere.

JEFFREY BROWN: Another theme in this book is time, right, the passage of time.

ANN PATCHETT: Yes. Yes.

This book starts out with six kids, and they're not great kids. They have had a lot of upheaval in their life. They're irritating. But then you see them in their 20s, their 30s, their 40s, their 50s, and they grow on you. They grow into themselves. They become the people they're meant to be. And I liked the idea of having enough time to really see that.

JEFFREY BROWN: They're also children who we see who are kind of — emotionally, they're just kind of left on their own.

ANN PATCHETT: Yes. And I have had a lot of people say, oh, these are terrible parents. And I'm like, they're not terrible parents. It was the '60s. It was the '70s.

JEFFREY BROWN: Yes.

ANN PATCHETT: I mean, my parents...

JEFFREY BROWN: Go play outside, right?

ANN PATCHETT: Yes, exactly. Dig a hole. And when you're done, fill it up again.

And I actually think that's really important for creativity. I think, if you want to grow a novelist, for that person to have a lot of boring time trying to entertain themselves is very important.

JEFFREY BROWN: Her partnership in Parnassus Books came after Patchett saw Nashville losing the last of its independent bookstores and decided she had no choice but to enter the retail business.

ANN PATCHETT: I had no idea. I really thought that I was going a good deed. I thought it was like, the symphony is going under, I must save the symphony, that kind of thing.

But I actually really love this store. And I love being here. I love telling people what to read. It's my favorite thing in the world, to buy books and force books on people, take bad books away from people, give them better books.

JEFFREY BROWN: You opened this around the time when the whole narrative of bookstores was, they're going away.

ANN PATCHETT: Yes.

JEFFREY BROWN: The narratives of books, in fact, were going away.

ANN PATCHETT: Yes.

JEFFREY BROWN: So what's the story now?

ANN PATCHETT: Independent booksellers, independent bookstores are on the rise across the country.

JEFFREY BROWN: The ones who've survived.

ANN PATCHETT: The ones who've survived, but, actually, a lot of new ones have started since we opened this store.

So, I think that it had bottomed out, and then it was going up. But the other thing is, this is my hometown. I knew Nashville. And I knew that they loved the bookstore that they lost. And Nashville supports everything local.

They would always rather buy their coffee at Fido than at Starbucks. And so this was a city that was going to support and independent bookstore. And it has.

JEFFREY BROWN: And why do you think the bookstores are coming back across the country?

ANN PATCHETT: Because you can't spend your whole life in front of a screen. And you can't take your family to anthropology after dinner.

You need someplace to go and hang out. Everybody can come here. You can come here if you're lonely and you want to talk to other people who loves books. And you can come here if you're overwhelmed and want to be silent and sit down in a chair and read a book. You can bring your kid here for story time.

You can come here to listen to your favorite author. I mean, it's a community center. You can come here, spend time here, not buy a book here. This is a beautiful place. Or you can come here and buy a book here. That's good, too. We love that.

JEFFREY BROWN: Ann Patchett's latest novel, "Commonwealth," is now on sale at her bookstore and, we hope, one near you.

From Nashville, I'm Jeffrey Brown for the "PBS NewsHour."