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## Patchett Writes Closer to Home

By John Wilkens September 18, 2016



Ann Patchett's new novel, "Commonwealth," follows the siblings in a blended family across five decades as they forge their identities, test their allegiances and come to grips with a shared tragedy.

The author of six other novels, Patchett lives in Nashville, where she co-owns a bookstore. She'll be at the University of San Diego Friday at 7 p.m. in a ticketed event organized by Warwick's.

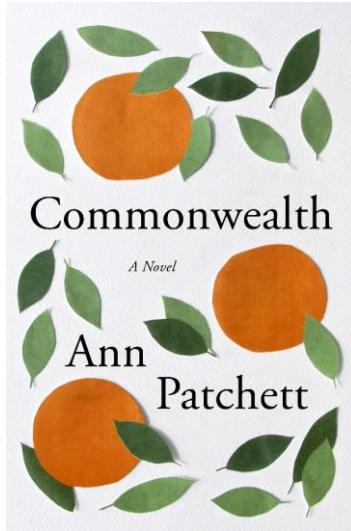
Q: What got you thinking about this book?

A: When I was on tour for "State of Wonder" in England I was on a train going from London to Wales with my U.K. publicist, who was telling me the story of her little son named Albie. I had never heard of a kid named Albie. That was the moment when I thought, I want to write a book about a little boy with this name.

Her son sounded tremendously gifted and cherished and amazing and I thought I wanted to write a story about a kid who has sort of the opposite circumstances.

Q: All this sounds a little bit like Alice and the Looking Glass. You heard a story that you used in writing this book, a book that is in part about someone who hears a family story and turns it into a book.

A: Oh, it's a not a looking glass; it's a hall of mirrors. It just goes on and on. And it's funny because I had really forgotten that part of it. It's just the way the brain works and stories work that one thing really does light a match and then you get so far away from that match by the time the book is done you don't remember it.



Q: I've read a description by you of this book being "closer to home" than your others. What were the challenges for you in doing it that way?

A: The challenge was feeling that it was an OK thing to do. My books have always been on one hand very highly imagined and they're in far-flung places and they are about people who are nothing like me, but they are always the same story, which is the story of "Commonwealth," which is you're taken out of one family and put in another.

That's "Bel Canto" and "State of Wonder" and "Patron Saint of Liars" — all of them. I'm not trying to do this, but I continually do, and even when I tell myself not to, I discover that I have. So I was interested in the idea of instead of setting things in very dramatic circumstances in very exotic places, what if I told this story that I keep telling over and over again in a more basic, American, close-to-home kind of way?

Q: Have you been able to unpack why you keep being drawn back to that story?

A: Well, it's very much the story of my life and my family. My parents got divorced, my mother remarried and there were six of us, all of that. And I've always been somebody who thought you shouldn't base fiction on fact. Fiction is fiction and it's much more honorable to keep those two things separate. And then at some point I realized that I wasn't keeping them separate, I was only keeping them hidden.

Q: I'm wondering if that's why Albie has a line late in the book where he tells Franny, "It turns out a novel isn't the worst place to hide things."

A: I think I've been hiding them in my novels all along, just with more elaborate costumes.

Q: Have there been instances when the people in your life have read your books and had a reaction to the things you were hiding?

A: This is the first novel where things are not nearly as hidden. I talked to everyone in my family while I was working on this and said, "At this point in my life, I don't want to feel cut off from anything. I don't want to feel cut off from my own experiences so I can avoid making anybody else uncomfortable. And I understand that my life is also your life, but in order for me to grow I need to feel I have access to everything that is mine. And that's going to also overlap onto things that are yours."

And everybody was great, really supportive. When I finished writing the book I made a giant stack of copies and sent one to everybody and said, “Are you guys OK with this? Want to talk about anything?” And people in my family kind of all said the same thing, which is, “Boy, this really made me ill and I think it’s your best book and I’m really proud of you.”

Q: Are you somebody who ranks your own books?

A: I don’t because I never read them once they’re done. That’s really true for most authors. If you ever get on the phone with an author who reads their own books over and over again, beware. The book that I am always interested in is the book that either I haven’t written yet or I am writing. So I have a book in my head that I’m just working out and that’s the book that I feel like, oh, that’s my great book.

Q: This book has a lot of characters. Was juggling all that part of the attraction in writing it?

A: It was a lot of people and a lot of time. The book takes place over 52 years. I was very interested in that because I own a bookstore and I read an awful lot of new fiction, way more than I ever did before, and something that I see a lot is people who are really good writers and have a good story to tell, but there are like three or four people in the whole book. It just seems like it’s always the story of an only child marrying another only child. And I thought, it’s not like that. In my life and the life of so many people I know, the families are bigger and messier and people change over the course of time. So I really did want to take that on.

So many of my books take place over three or four months. To have a whole bunch of people really change — you know, they’re kind of crummy kids but they grow up to be decent people, they get lost but they get found at different points in their lives — yeah, that was interesting to me.

At this point in my life, I’ve written a lot of books and so I have to always feel like I’m trying to do something that is a challenge to me. It keeps me more engaged in the writing.

Q: You mentioned your bookstore. How has owning one affected you as a writer?

A: It certainly has affected me as a reader, which is completely intertwined with my life as a writer. I am somebody who used to read a lot of Henry James and a lot of Dickens and a lot of Jane Austen. I read maybe a half-dozen contemporary novels a year and a lot of classics. Now I just read not only books that have just come out, but books that are going to come out in four months. I’m always reading ahead because I want to be able to recommend books.

I have often said I write for myself, which is true, and I write the book I feel is missing. And that I have a much better sense of now. So it does influence me because I start to think, I don’t see this part of life represented right now in fiction. This is the kind of book I want to write.