

BOOKS

# Best-selling author Ann Patchett gets up close and personal

The novelist broke a longtime vow, drawing on her own life for her latest book.

By Laurie Hertzler (<http://www.startribune.com/laurie-hertzler/10645026/>) Star Tribune |

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Ann Patchett swore she would never write an autobiographical novel. “I get too distracted by the facts,” she told the Star Tribune in 2007. “No room left for the imagination.” If she wrote about herself, “I would write the most boring book in the world.”

Her most famous novels have been set in exotic locales: Orange Prize winner “Bel Canto” (2001) took place somewhere in South America, “State of Wonder” (2011) in the Amazon.

But now here is “Commonwealth,” her big new novel, not boring at all, getting great reviews — the New York Times called it exquisite; the Star Tribune said its characters are uniquely real and sympathetic — and it is about an American family much like hers.

“Yes,” Patchett said, laughing, by phone before her sold-out appearance Tuesday at the Fitzgerald Theater for the Talking Volumes literary chat series. “It’s very funny, because my publicist said, ‘How are you going to handle questions of whether or not it’s based on real life?’ And I said, well, if anyone did a modicum of research they would know, so I would feel a little stupid saying I made it all up.”

Her reversal about autobiographical writing came gradually. It turns out she was less worried about being boring than she was about upsetting her family.

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But then she read Roz Chast's memoir of her aging parents, "Can't We Talk About Something More Pleasant?" and the highly autobiographic Patrick Melrose novels of Edward St. Aubyn.

"These are people who are drawing from their own experience," she said. "There was an emotional power to these books, and I wondered, if I allowed myself to do this thing that I have not allowed myself to do, if I could tap into some of that same emotional power."

She was further emboldened by her own most recent book, a collection of essays titled "This Is the Story of a Happy Marriage," which she published with some trepidation because it was so highly personal.

Her family read it, "and they were like, 'Seriously? This is what you think is going to bother us? Really?'"

"And I thought, omigod, I've spent my whole life cutting myself off from my own experience so I wouldn't rock anybody's boat," Patchett said. "And then no one cares."

### **Both true and not true**

"Commonwealth" opens with a killer first line: "The christening party took a turn when Albert Cousins arrived with gin."

The book is fiction, not memoir. While the characters are based on Patchett's family, the details of the plot are not from her life. "My mother said, 'None of it happened, and all of it's true,'" Patchett said. "I think that's kind of the best tagline."

The story begins in California in the 1960s, when Fix Keating, a police officer (like Patchett's father), and his wife, Beverly, a raving beauty (like Patchett's mother), are celebrating their new baby. A handsome stranger shows up (with gin) and kisses Beverly, and she kisses him back.

"What I wanted to do with 'Commonwealth' is write a birth-to-death novel, which I did not quite pull off," Patchett said. "I always want to grow. I always, in every book, want to do something I haven't done. And I definitely felt that time was compressing more



Ann Patchett

When: 7 p.m. Tuesday, Oct. 1

Where: Fitzgerald Theater  
St. Paul

(<http://stmedia.startribune.com/tickets>). Sold out.

Author Ann Patchett will be NEXT ON TALKING VOLUMES with her new book, "Commonwealth," at an event Tuesday at the Fitzgerald Theater. Her latest book is "The Book of David," a meditation on slavery, "The Railroad" (7 p.m. Nov. 3).

The series is produced by Minnesota Public Radio and Minnesota Public Radio MPR's Kerri Miller.

Read more at [startribune.com/talkingvolumes](http://startribune.com/talkingvolumes)

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and more in my books.”

“Bel Canto,” for instance, takes place over several months. “Run,” Patchett’s 2007 novel, takes place in one day.

So with “Commonwealth,” she went the other direction; the novel spans 52 years, moving gracefully from narrator to narrator. “I like a shifting point of view,” Patchett said. “That’s something that I really worked hard to master in my writing life, and I’m good at it, and I love doing it.

“I wanted to move people over a long period of time, for two reasons: One, I wanted to show the repercussions of an action, the action being two people who are drunk kiss at a party.

“And I also wanted to show how people change and yet are still themselves. To see them grow up, to see them in their 20s, to see them in their 50s, these people are themselves, they’re connected to the children that they were.”

### **A happy marriage**

Patchett, 52, is married to Dr. Karl VanDevender, a Nashville physician. They live in a pink-washed brick house that she loves so much she wrote an essay about it for the New York Times. (“I am in love with my house. It would be my final wish to have my ashes quietly deposited behind the garage.”) She writes on a computer in the back garden, or in a spare bedroom, and is happy to see “entire days go by from dark to dark, never going farther than the end of my driveway.”

But one thing that gets her out of the house is her famous bookstore. Patchett never intended to own a bookstore, but after the last two bookstores in Nashville shut down, she hoped that someone would come to the rescue. That someone turned out to be Karen Hayes, a former Random House sales rep, “who wore the steely determination of a woman who could clear a field and plant it herself,” Patchett wrote in “Happy Marriage.”

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Hayes had the desire; Patchett had the money. They teamed up. Parnassus Books opened in November 2011 and doubled in size this year to 5,000 square feet when Pickles and Ice Cream, the maternity shop next door, closed.

“It’s funny, because we haven’t grown into the space yet,” Patchett said. “Every time I walk in, I think, ‘That is a lot of floor.’”

Patchett is not on staff, but she is deeply involved in the store, more involved than she had thought she would be. She stops by several days a week. “I write a monthly blog post. I do a load of shelf talkers,” those little handwritten cards with staff recommendations that are tacked up in bookstores everywhere.

“I love recommending books. It is the greatest joy of my life,” she said. “If I go out on the floor, I just go up to people and tell them, ‘Hey, let me tell you what to read.’”

Not too long ago, she brought a box of cookies to the store and then just walked around, offering cookies and book advice to everyone she saw.

Her rescue dog, Sparky — a small, fuzzy Ewok of a dog — gets dropped off at Parnassus nearly every day, one of five shop dogs. (They have their own blog: [https://parnassusmusing.net/category/shop-dog-diaries/.](https://parnassusmusing.net/category/shop-dog-diaries/))

“I’ll tell you the best thing about owning a bookstore — all my friends come to visit now,” Patchett said. “Jackie Woodson has a new book out, wooo-hoo! Jackie, you can stay with me! I know you’re on book tour and I know you’re exhausted, but you can stay in my house and we’ll have breakfast together.

“That store is nothing but a joy in my life.”

### **Ignoring the press**

Patchett doesn’t read about herself online. “I have an enormous amount of restraint where the internet is concerned,” she said. “I don’t ever read anything about myself on the internet. Never.”

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Even when the sister of Patchett's close friend Lucy Grealy wrote an essay for the Guardian, taking Patchett to task for writing a memoir about Lucy ("Truth & Beauty"), Patchett did not read it.

"The day it came out, Elizabeth McCracken called me up," Patchett said. "And she said, 'Don't ever read this.' And I said, 'Baby, that is all you have to say.' And I never did.

"Every now and then something will cross my path, but I find that when I read an interview that I gave, I always feel bad. I always feel like I said something stupid or I was making a joke that didn't come off as a joke, or I said something I shouldn't have said. The only thing I could learn by reading all the interviews that I give is that I shouldn't give interviews."

But every now and then, chance intervenes, such as two years ago when she noticed her own name in the New York Times Book Review. It prompted her to write this letter:

"To the Editor:

"I was grateful to see my book 'This Is the Story of a Happy Marriage' mentioned in Paperback Row (Oct. 19). When highlighting a few of the essays in the collection, the review mentions topics ranging from 'her stabilizing second marriage to her beloved dog' without benefit of comma, thus giving the impression that Sparky and I are hitched. While my love for my dog is deep, he married a dog named Maggie at Parnassus Books last summer as part of a successful fundraiser for the Nashville Humane Association. I am married to Karl VanDevender. We are all very happy in our respective unions."

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