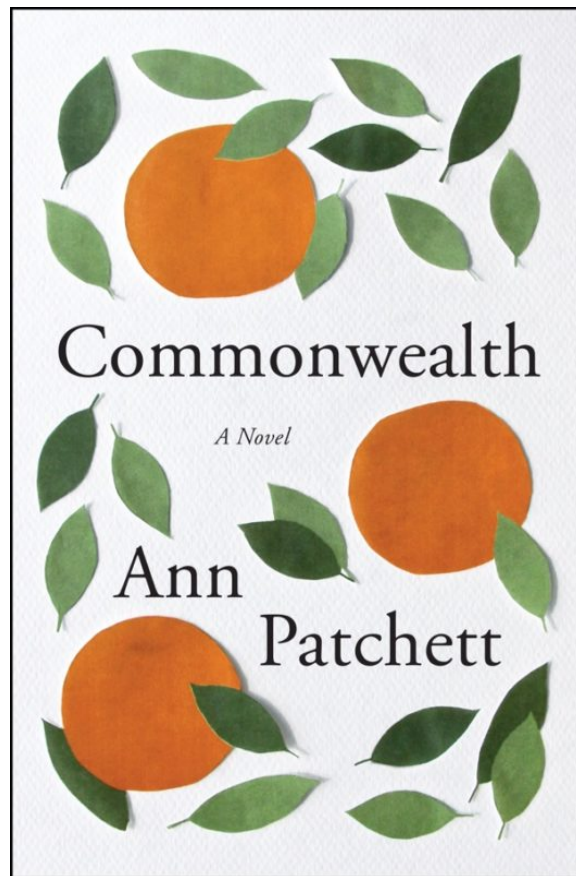


The Story She Can't Get Away From: An Interview with Ann Patchett

September 9, 2016 - Jennifer Puryear

Commonwealth begins with a christening party and ends with a death, covering half a century in the life of two shredded families in between. After the christening party comes the love affair — the divorces — then the wedding. The newly married Bert and Beverly escape Los Angeles, leaving Bert's ex-wife and four kids behind and taking Beverly's two kids with them to Virginia. The six children spend summers together in Virginia, where the central tragedy of the novel occurs. One of the siblings, many years later, tells the secret of the tragic "accident" to her lover, and he uses the material to write a bestselling novel. In this way, the past reaches forward into the present, forcing the family members to confront it and each other. *Commonwealth* asks about our obligations to each other and wonders about the possibilities and promises of love.



Commonwealth by Ann Patchett goes on sale Tuesday, September 13, 2016.

When did you begin writing *Commonwealth*, and how long did it take you to complete?

Honestly, I'm not really sure how long I was working on it. Two years maybe? It's so hard to know when to start counting the months because I was thinking about it a lot longer than I was writing it. I was writing it when my father was dying, and I just kept stopping and starting. There was a lot going on. I think I finished it last December.

How did you know when you were done? Is it a relief to finish, or does it also feel sad in a way?

I always know when I'm done. I knew what kind of scene I wanted at the end, what note I wanted to end on, and when I figured it out, that was that. I revise as I go along, so there are no big rewrites at the end. And I'm always glad to finish. Never sad. By the time I get to the end of a book I'm DONE with it.

Was it harder or easier to write, compared to some of your other works?

Probably easier once I had the story worked out in my head. I sort of felt like I hit a vein. That book was in me. I didn't have to go looking for it.

How has your writing process changed over the years? (Daily habits or otherwise ...)

It used to be that no one cared what I was doing, and no one wanted anything from me. There was no internet, there was no money. It was a lot easier to get work done because there were 7,000 fewer things tugging me away from my desk. Now the trick is just finding the time.

Was there any character in *Commonwealth* who came to you first, or was it a situation or particular relationship you wanted to explore?

I was going to Wales on a train with my publicist from London, this is when *State of Wonder* came out, and she was telling me about her son Albie who wanted to play the violin. I thought, I want to write a book about a boy named Albie. That was definitely the place this started.

Do you have a favorite character in *Commonwealth*?

Albie.

How do you usually feel on the official release date of a book? How does it feel to release *Commonwealth* into the world?

Book tour is hard. It's not as hard as having any kind of regular hard job, but still, it's like going over the falls in a raft. So when I think about the release of the book, I think about going to 29 cities and getting really sick, which is just how it goes. I'm not thinking about reviews or whether or not people are going to like this book. I'm just thinking about people taking my picture with their phones and falling asleep on planes and not getting any dinner.

Do you enjoy the process of promoting a book — book tour, interviews?

See above. Though I will say my sense of solidarity with independent bookstores is huge. I love the people who work in bookstores. That's my tribe. I want to go and have a big event and make money for bookstores in the same way authors come to Nashville to support Parnassus. That whole ecosystem is of vital importance to me.

What cities and bookstores are you especially excited to visit?

I love Boswell's in Milwaukee, Greenlight in Brooklyn, Square Books in Oxford, McLean & Eakin in Petoskey, Michigan — all because the people who own those stores are friends. As far as the city is concerned, it makes no difference. I never know what city I'm in.

Do you read reviews or skip them?

I don't read reviews on Amazon or any public sites. That's like cutting yourself — I'm not interested. I'll read some major reviews, but here's the thing: you can't learn anything from reviews. You can't go back and fix the book. Reviews are mostly plot synopsis, and they mostly get the plot wrong. A glowing review that gets the plot wrong can be as depressing as a review that trashes that book. I've been doing this a long time, and at this point I mostly find reviews of my own books boring. I never read interviews I give, and I don't listen to them on the radio or watch myself on television. That unnerves me.

Fix Keating says that “For the vast majority of people on this planet, the thing that’s going to kill them is already on the inside.” Do you think that being married to a physician has affected the way you think about health?

Probably. But my father was a police officer, and I do think he was more concerned that we were going to be killed by someone as opposed to something. Living with Karl [VanDevender], I've come to see there's a much higher probability of being killed by a disease than a suicide bomber.

A pastor I know once said that each great preacher has one sermon in him, and he keeps preaching it over and over. His name is Craig Barnes and he talks about grace. True or false: Authors and preachers have a lot in common.

Well, if you put it that way, I'd say yes. I've got one book in me. I take it to the jungle, I take it to the opera, I take it to a home for unwed mothers, but it's always the story I can't get away from: a group of strangers are thrown together by chance and form a society.

What are you reading right now?

I just finished *Underground Airlines* by Ben Winters. It was so thrilling. I couldn't tear myself away from it, and now that it's done it's affecting the way I look at everything.

Commonwealth is available for pre-order until Monday, September 12, and officially goes on sale the following day. Ann will autograph and/or personalize the book at no additional cost. [Click here to learn more.](#)