

THE TENNESSEAN

Ann Patchett discusses 'Commonwealth,' her most personal novel yet

By Keith Ryan Cartwright by September 8, 2016



Ann Patchett's latest novel, "Commonwealth," has been applauded in early book reviews for its "subtlety" and "sympathetic" characters.

Nevertheless, Patchett is fine with however it's received.

But on the cusp of her first author event for the title, which takes place Monday evening at Montgomery Bell Academy, her only uneasiness comes from the seven weeks of airports and hotels that await her latest national book tour.

"Commonwealth" is her seventh novel, following "The Patron Saint of Liars" (1992), "Taft" ('94), "The Magician's Assistant" ('97), "Bel Canto" (2001), "Run" ('07) and "State of Wonder" ('11). She's additionally written three books of nonfiction and published an essay collection.

Patchett is co-owner of [Parnassus Books](#), an independent bookstore in Nashville.

Though the time away from home never gets any easier, the book signings and the readings and, more importantly, the fans of her novels make it all worth it.

"Commonwealth" is, by Patchett's own account, the most personal of all her novels.

In a conversation with The Tennessean, Patchett said the characters more closely represent her own family than any of her previous novels and that she talked with them beforehand.

How much of the character development did you have to do before the timeline of your actual story begins on Page 1?

The way I work is that I do everything up front, so I knew it all. ... Always. Every book.

What's that process like? How much time does that take?

It varies from book to book, and it's mostly what I do when I'm falling asleep at night, what I do when I'm walking around the grocery store. It's not like I sit down in my office and think, 'OK, now let me start thinking.' I'll have a book kicking around in my head for a couple years and then when I have a sense of who all the people are and where they're going and the general arc of what's going to happen, then I'll start to write. Things might shift along the way, but the basic structure, the characters, the point of the book is already there.

When you talk about characters, there a lot of characters in "Commonwealth."

There are 11 main characters. There are six kids, four parents and one novelist, and then a handful of secondary characters, too.

And a lot of psychology and emotions. Do you know all of that, too, or does some of it reveal itself as the story unfolds?

Some of it reveals itself, but certainly those 11 people I knew. ... There are a whole lot of things I don't know, but the anchoring details I do know.

The story is linear and chronological, and because of that the story feels deceptively easy to read.

It's funny. Right now I'm reading a book that will be published in October called "The Mothers." It's a first novel and I'm feeling the same way about this book. It's just kind of a hot knife through butter. I am just moving through this book with such ease, and it's a smart book, it's a well-written book, but it has a complete natural ease of movement about it.

If I approached you with a book and I said, "It has 11 main characters," you would cringe and hope I don't ask you to read it, right?

Yeah, but the book I would cringe at is if you said, "Ann, I have this first novel and it's 800 pages." That's my thing. I want to tell the biggest story possible in the fewest number of words.

I brought that up because I thought the transitions from one character to another were smooth.

That's really important to me because, again, I read things that are good but not smooth. I think about the time and energy that *you*, as a reader, have to put into my book, and where do I want to spend your time and energy. Do I want to spend your time emotionally feeling for these people

and being emotionally engaged with them? Or do I want to spend your time making you figure out what's going on?

When it comes to reviews, is it easier this many novels into your career or just as difficult?

If you love the novel, I'm grateful and if you hate the novel, I respect your opinion, but there's nothing I can do about it. It's done. There are people who read my book, who are friends of mine, as soon as they finish it and they tell me what's wrong with it, I go back and I fix it and I work on it and I give it to another and they tell me what's wrong with it and I work on it some more. There's that whole process and, at that moment, I care tremendously what people think — when I can do something about it.

Who are those people?

I am so lucky. I have a really good group of friends who read for me. They're all writers — Elizabeth McCracken, Maile Meloy, Liz Gilbert, Donna Tartt, Jane Hamilton. Oh God. Jane Hamilton is at the top of the list. ... I send the book to them one at a time. I give it to Jane Hamilton and she gives me her notes, and then I try to make it the best I can. Then I'll send it to Elizabeth and take her notes. Then go through it all again.

Staying in your real life — as it relates to the book — there's one character in particular, Leon, the novelist — is that ever a concern of your family's, that you would do the same by writing about them in a novel?

No, because I've never done that. I've never been in that position, and I've very consciously not done that until this book. There's a lot in this book that really is based on my family. ... I told them why and asked them, 'Are you OK with this?' Everybody was.

If you go

What: Special edition Salon@615 featuring Ann Patchett

When: 6:15 p.m. Sept. 12

Where: Montgomery Bell Academy, 4001 Harding Road

Admission: Free ticketed event

Details: www.parnassusbooks.net or www.nashvillepubliclibrary.org/salonat615