

The Press Democrat

Author Ann Patchett talks about her fear and love of bookstores and her newest novel

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Ann Patchett's blog is sprinkled with pictures of the best-selling author in bookstores, always smiling broadly. A fresh-faced Ann in jeans and T-shirt perched on the upper rungs of a library ladder. Ann demurely seated atop a stack of art books on a bookstore shelf, cuddling a dog with bookstore shelves a conspicuous backdrop. Bookstores appear to be Patchett's Happy Place. It wasn't always so.

The author of a raft of best-selling novels and works of nonfiction admits that, as an adult, they became kind of scary.

A string of beloved books beginning with “The Patron Saint of Liars” in 1992, followed by evergreen reads like “Bel Canto,” “The Magician’s Assistant,” “State of Wonder and “Truth and Beauty” put Patchett on the literary A list. Whether she was on the road promoting a book or just shopping, she began to feel “a little like a hunted rabbit” among the stacks.

“I am so often overwhelmed historically when I’m in a bookstore. I have a little bookstore PTSD,” she revealed.

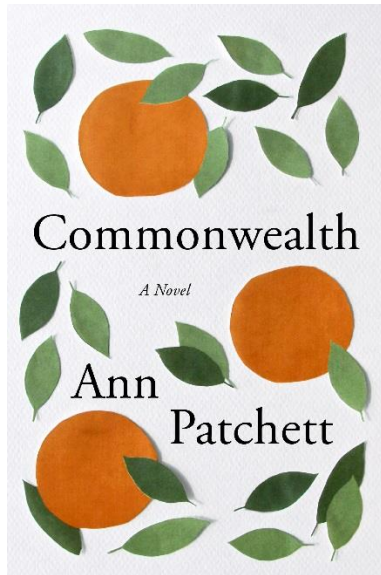
“Not that I’m insecure. I just want to vanish. People will cry and want to hug and take pictures. It’s all good. I’m grateful. There’s a lot of love in it all. But it’s really overwhelming. I have to put my game face on to do it.”

She is saying this as she prepares to embark on yet another book tour for the newly released novel “Commonwealth,” inspired by her own experience in a blended family thrown together by divorce. It involves 26 appearances in 15 states lined up between now and Oct. 22, including a stop in Santa Rosa on Thursday, Sept. 22 for an evening talk at the Luther Burbank Center, co-sponsored by Copperfield’s Books. She will also meet readers for a noon luncheon earlier in the day at Book Passage in Corte Madera.

“I have a cousin in Santa Rosa,” she said. “When looking at places I could go in the Bay Area, I thought of all the times my cousin has schlepped to Book Passage. I thought, this time I’m going to Santa Rosa.”

What transformed Patchett’s fears about bookstores was “Parnassus,” the bookshop she opened in Nashville, Tenn., with Karen Hayes, a former sales rep for Random House. They were inspired to dive into retail in 2011 after Nashville lost its only two bookstores — Borders and Davis-Kidd — within a six-month period. The void left locals with no place to browse and authors with no place to meet readers and promote their books in a city of nearly 700,000 people.

They named their shop for the mountain in Greek mythology that was the home of art and poetry and opened it in a former tanning salon. Soon it became, for Patchett, “the warm and loving environment” she missed while working in solitude as a writer.



“It’s a dynamic, like a sitcom. It’s Mary Tyler Moore’s newsroom or the bar at ‘Cheers,’” she said of the neighbors, friends, regulars and legions of fans who make pilgrimages from afar in search of Patchett.

“We’ve had two weddings in the bookstore. If one of us gets sick, we make food. We bring each other presents and bring each other dresses we don’t like.”

The “staff” includes five dogs, one long-haired dachshund and a collection of “weird mutty little dogs” that usually hang out in a back room under a desk, but also are there to warm the place and amuse.

“A lot of people don’t have dogs. They bring their kids into the store not only to read, but to be socialized to dogs. Kids crawl into a dog bed and read the dog a book or play with the dog,” said Patchett, who was born in L.A. but moved to Nashville as a child after her parents were divorced.

Having her own bookstore has other rewards, she said, including luring great writers, many of whom are good friends she rarely sees. “Now I get to see all my writer friends,” she said with a trace of mischief. They include Jonathan Franzen, Barbara Kingsolver and Michael Chabon.

When the elusive Donna Tartt released “The Goldfinch” three years ago, she launched her eight-city tour in Nashville. Patchett claims the Pulitzer Prize-winning writer as one of her closest friends.

In practice, she is more the face of the book store than its manager. She goes in four to five times a week, sometimes for 15 minutes, sometimes for a few hours, frequently darting in and out to sign books that people leave for her or to sign vast stacks of her novels. Every Patchett title at Parnassus bears her signature.

“I have to have a lot of energy to be out on the floor. I have to have brushed my hair, which I don’t think I’ve done today,” she confessed in a late afternoon phone interview.

There are days she regrets showing up in shorts and an old T-shirt figuring she’ll hole up in the back room, only to be summoned out to the floor because someone has come all the way from Australia to meet her. But she said she also loves the experience of hitting the floor and

schmoozing customers, finding out what they're reading, recommending books or even telling them the book in their hand is not so good and, "Let me find you a better book."

Patchett's books however, consistently please. The New York Times said "Commonwealth" is "impossible to put down." USA Today said it is "so refreshingly honest, you can't help but laugh."

Driven more by character than plot, "Commonwealth" begins with an illicit kiss over a baby at a christening party, a kiss that breaks up two families and thrusts six offspring into a crazy blender. The story follows the stepsiblings and their parents through five decades. When that baby, a now grown-up Franny, gets involved with a much older author to whom she spills out her story, he turns it into a best-selling novel. It forces Franny and all of her family to lose control over the narrative of their own lives and leads them to look at it in a profoundly different way that is both hurtful and healing.

The underlying scenario is close to Patchett's own experience after her parents split up, thrusting her and her sister into a forced relationship with a stepfather and his four kids — two girls and two boys.

"The specific details and the action are not true. The outcomes are not true. But the emotional content is true; how we all felt about divorce and remarriage and having a blended family and moving around and growing up," she said of the book.

"Commonwealth" is perhaps the closest to autobiographical of any of her novels, but as Patchett describes it, all of her novels "are the same story," exploring what happens when strangers are thrust together or people are thrown completely out of their element.

"I just work at dressing them up, but they're basically the same story. 'Bel Canto' was the story of how two groups of people are taken hostage and stuck together without wanting to be together, and how they form a society. 'State of Wonder' is about a woman taken out of her home in Minnesota who gets stuck in the Amazon in a world she doesn't understand."

Unlike her fictional narrative, Patchett didn't just surprise her family with a story that circled the edges of their own. She talked to everyone at the beginning, middle and end of the writing process, careful not to step on anyone's life.

"I don't want to inconvenience anybody or hurt anybody, but I also don't want to close myself off to any part of my life. And," she said, "everybody was very supportive."

Dedicated to stepfather

She dedicates the book to her stepfather, Mike Glasscock, who she said takes “the hardest hit in the book” and yet generously called her after reading it to acknowledge, “You were very fair to me.”

Her own father died at 83 of Parkinson’s disease while she was writing “Commonwealth,” a death that was painfully long. A veteran officer with the Los Angeles Police Department, Frank Patchett was one of a team of officers who rounded up Charles Manson and was the man to take assassin Sirhan Sirhan into custody after the Jordanian immigrant fatally shot Bobby Kennedy at the Ambassador Hotel in 1968.

“My father and I were very close and I loved him very much. When he died I was glad he wasn’t in the process of dying anymore. It was so past done. And I felt terrible for him having to go through that.”

As a young writer, Patchett said she was driven to write books that were profoundly based “in the imagination.” She finds, at 52, that she can be the omniscient narrator of her own life, seeing with more clarity multiple perspectives.

“I really wanted to make everything up. But now,” she said, “I really have access to everything.”

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An evening with Ann Patchett

When: 7 p.m. Thursday, Sept. 22

Where: Luther Burbank Center for the Arts, 50 Mark West Springs Road, Santa Rosa

Cost: \$46, includes copy of “Commonwealth”

Presented by: Copperfield’s Books

Tickets: lutherburbankcenter.org, (707) 546-3600