

# Commonwealth by Ann Patchett

## Author Bio

- Birth—December 2, 1963
- Where—Los Angeles, California, USA
- Raised—Nashville, Tennessee
- Education—B.A., Sarah Lawrence College; M.F.A., University of Iowa
- Awards—Guggenheim Fellowship; PEN/Faulkner Award; Orange Prize
- Currently—lives in Nashville, Tennessee

Ann Patchett is an American author of both fiction and nonfiction. She is perhaps best known for her 2001 novel, *Bel Canto*, which won her the Orange Prize and PEN/Faulkner Award and brought her nationwide fame.

Patchett was born in Los Angeles, California, and raised in Nashville, Tennessee. Her mother is the novelist Jeanne Ray. Her father, Frank Patchett, who died in 2012 and had been long divorced from her mother, served as a Los Angeles police officer for 33 years, and participated in the arrests of both Charles Manson and Sirhan Sirhan. The story of Patchett's own family is the basis for her 2016 novel, *Commonwealth*, about the individual lives of a blended family spanning five decades.

## Education and career

Patchett attended St. Bernard Academy, a private Catholic school for girls run by the Sisters of Mercy. Following graduation, she attended Sarah Lawrence College and took fiction writing classes with Allan Gurganus, Russell Banks, and Grace Paley. She managed to publish her first story in *The Paris Review* before she graduated. After college, she went on to the Iowa Writers' Workshop at the University of Iowa

For nine years, Patchett worked at *Seventeen magazine*, writing primarily non-fiction; the magazine published one of every five articles she wrote. She said that the magazine's editors could be cruel, but she eventually stopped taking criticism personally. She ended her relationship with the magazine following a dispute with one editor, exclaiming, "I'll never darken your door again!"

In 1990-91, Patchett attended the Fine Arts Work Center in Provincetown, Massachusetts. It was there she wrote *The Patron Saint of Liars*, which was published in 1992 (becoming a 1998 TV movie). It was where she also met longtime friend Elizabeth McCracken—whom Patchett refers to as her editor and the only person to read her manuscripts as she is writing.

Although Patchett's second novel *Taft* won the Janet Heidinger Kafka Prize in fiction in 1994, her fourth book, *Bel Canto*, was her breakthrough novel. Published in 2001, it was a National Book Critics Circle Award Finalist and won the PEN/Faulkner Award and Britain's Orange Prize.

In addition to her other novels and memoirs, Patchett has written for publications such as *The New York Times Magazine*, *Washington Post*, *Oprah Magazine*, *ELLE*, *GQ*, *Gourmet*, and *Vogue*. She is the editor of the 2006 volume of the anthology series *The Best American Short Stories*.

## Personal

Patchett was only six when she moved to Nashville, Tennessee, and she lives there still. She is particularly enamored of her beautiful pink brick home on Whitland Avenue where she has lived since 2004 with her husband and dog. When asked by the *New York Times* where would she go if she could travel anywhere, Patchett responded...

*I've done a lot of travel writing, and people like to ask me where I would go if I could go anyplace. My answer is always the same: I would go home. I am away more than I would like, giving talks, selling books, and I never walk through my own front door without thinking: thank-you-thank-you-thank-you.... [Home is] the stable window that opens out into the imagination.*

In 2010, when she found that her hometown of Nashville no longer had a good book store, she co-founded Parnassus Books with Karen Hayes; the store opened in November 2011. In 2012, Patchett was on *Time* magazine's list of the 100 most influential people in the world. She is a vegan for "both moral and health reasons."

In an interview, she once told Barnes and Noble that the book that influenced her writing more than any other was *Humboldt's Gift* by Saul Bellow.

*I think I read it in the tenth grade. My mother was reading it. It was the first truly adult literary novel I had read outside of school, and I read it probably half a dozen times. I found Bellow's directness very moving. The book seemed so intelligent and unpretentious. I wanted to write like that book.*

### **Books**

1992 - *The Patron Saint of Liars*

1994 - *Taft*

1997 - *The Magician's Assistant*

2004 - *Truth and Beauty: A Friendship*

2001 - *Bel Canto*

2007 - *Run*

2008 - *What Now?*

2011 - *State of Wonder; The Getaway Car: A Practical Memoir About Writing and Life*

2013 - *This Is the Story of a Happy Marriage*

2016 - *Commonwealth*

(Author bio adapted from Wikipedia. Retrieved 9/5/2016.)

### **Discussion Questions**

1. How is each child—Cal, Caroline, Holly, Jeanette, Franny, and Albie—affected by the divorce and neglect that results?

2. What does it mean to become a family again in the wake of divorce? How does each child grow to respond to the family difficulties?

3. In what ways are the siblings good for and to each other?

4. Bert believes that his divorce, all the difficulties for the children, and his marriage to Beverly were inevitable.

"We're magic," he says to her. In what ways might this be true? To what extent does romantic love justify their decision?

5. What influence did the time periods, especially the '60s and '70s, have on the behavior and decisions of the characters?

6. What's added to the novel by the presence of Lomer, Fix's first partner on the police force?
7. How does the ageing of the four parents—Beverly, Fix, Teresa, and Bert—affect their feelings and behavior regarding each other and the children?
8. Franny falls for Leon Posen because of "the brightness in him." What might this mean? Why do you think Franny and Leo were willing to overlook their age difference?
9. As adults, Jeanette suggests to Albie, perhaps in jest, that they create a family therapy plan for Holly and their mother. What does it take to repair and rebuild family relationships after so much division and tragedy?
10. What do the various literary allusions (*David Copperfield*, *The Return of the Native*, *The English Patient*, T. S. Eliot's *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*) bring to the novel?
11. After writing his novel based on the life stories of the siblings, Leon Posen says "it's my book," while Albie asks, "how did he end up with my life?" What are the ethical and legal issues of the situation? Should there be regulations for writing about others without their consent?
12. Fix believes, "There's no protecting anyone...keeping people safe...is a story." To what extent is this true? Why does he believe this?
13. Holly chooses meditation over medication as a way of dealing with her suffering and stress. In what ways is this a healthy response to her life? What of her mother's question of whether it's "a real life"?
14. Among other things, Holly is attempting to find inner peace. To what extent does childhood experience determine who we become? How can an unsatisfying or unhealthy self be transformed?
15. Beverly admits late in her life that "other people's children are too hard." What does she mean? In what ways is this true or not?
16. Discussing their difficult past, Holly says to Teresa, "you got through it." What's the value of this? In what ways does each character go beyond this to remake his or her life?
17. Bert and Beverly's kiss sets everything in motion for a lot of people who had no choice in the matter. How does that single decision shape everyone else's life?  
(Questions issued by the publisher.)

## Book Reviews

In her gorgeous, masterly new novel, Ann Patchett examines how the heavy weight of the past hangs on the present—the effect of a single action barreling down the decades, shaping lives for better or worse. The event might be as innocent as dancing with a priest at a party, simply because no other man is available. Or it might be far less innocent but no less surprising—a stolen kiss between two otherwise married people. It's that stolen kiss we're concerned with... [READ MORE](#)

### **Molly Lundquist - LitLovers**

Patchett's language is generally plain but occasionally soars satisfyingly; her observations about people and life are insightful; and her underlying tone is one of compassion and amusement. If *Commonwealth* lacks the foreign intrigue of *Bel Canto* or *State of Wonder*, both of which took place in South America and contained more suspense, this novel, much of which unfolds in American suburbs, recognizes that the

passage of time is actually the ultimate plot.... Patchett also skillfully illustrates the way that seemingly minor, even arbitrary decisions can have long-lasting consequences and the way that we often fear the wrong things.

***Curtis Sittenfeld - New York Times Book Review***

*Commonwealth* bursts with keen insights into faithfulness, memory and mortality.... [An] ambitious American epic.

***Atlanta Journal-Constitution***

(*Starred review.*) [A] funny, sad, and ultimately heart-wrenching family portrait: a collage of parents, children, stepchildren, siblings, and stepsiblings.... Patchett elegantly manages a varied cast of characters....[showing] her at her peak in humor, humanity, and understanding.

***Publishers Weekly***

In this new novel by the beloved New York Times best-selling Patchett, Bert Cousins arrives uninvited at Franny Keating's christening party, recalling *Sleeping Beauty's* bad fairy and wreaking just as much havoc.

***Library Journal***

Indeed, this is Patchett's most autobiographical novel, a sharply funny, chilling, entrancing, and profoundly affecting look into one family's "commonwealth," its shared affinities, conflicts, loss, and love.

***Booklist***

(*Starred review.*) The prose is lean and inviting, but the constant shifts in point of view, the peripatetic chronology, and the ever growing cast of characters will keep you on your toes. A satisfying meat-and-potatoes domestic novel from one of our finest writers.

***Kirkus Reviews***