

Vinegar Girl by Anne Tyler

Author Bio

- Birth—October 25, 1941
- Where—Minneapolis, Minnesota, USA
- Education—B.A., Duke University
- Awards—Pulitzer Prize (*see below*)
- Currently—lives in Baltimore, Maryland

Anne Tyler is a Pulitzer Prize-winning American novelist, short story writer, and literary critic. She has published 20 novels, the best known of which are *Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant* (1983), *The Accidental Tourist* (1985), and *Breathing Lessons* (1988). All three were nominated for the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction and the third won it.

She has also won the Janet Heidinger Kafka Prize, the Ambassador Book Award, and the National Book Critics Circle Award. In 2012 she was awarded The *Sunday Times* Award for Literary Excellence. She is recognized for her fully developed characters, her "brilliantly imagined and absolutely accurate detail" (*New York Times*), and her "rigorous and artful style" and "astute and open language" (also, *New York Times*). While many of her characters have been described as quirky or eccentric, she has managed to make them seem real through skillfully fleshing out their inner lives in great depth.

Her subject in all her novels has been the American family and marriage: the boredom and exasperating irritants endured by partners, children, siblings, parents; the desire for freedom pulling against the tethers of attachments and conflicted love; the evolution over time of familial love and sense of duty. Tyler celebrates unremarkable Americans and the ordinary details of their everyday lives. Because of her style and subject matter, she has been compared to John Updike, Jane Austen, and Eudora Welty, among others.

Childhood

The eldest of four children, she was born in Minneapolis, Minnesota. Her father, Lloyd Parry Tyler, was an industrial chemist and her mother, Phyllis Mahon Tyler, a social worker. Both her parents were Quakers who were very active with social causes in the Midwest and the South. Her family lived in a succession of Quaker communities in the South until they settled in 1948 in a Quaker commune in Celo, in the mountains of North Carolina near Burnsville.

The Celo Community settlement was founded by conscientious objectors and members of the liberal Hicksite branch of the Society of Friends, with community labor needs shared by the residents. Tyler lived there from age 7 through 11 and helped her parents and others with caring for livestock and organic farming. While she did not attend formal public school in Celo, lessons were taught in art, carpentry, and cooking in homes and in other subjects in a tiny school house. Her early informal training was supplemented by correspondence school.

Her first memory of her own creative story-telling was of crawling under the bed covers at age 3 and "telling myself stories in order to get to sleep at night." Her first book at age 7 was a collection of drawings and stories about "lucky girls...who got to go west in covered wagons." Her favorite book as a child was *The Little House* by Virginia Lee Burton. Tyler acknowledges that this book, which she read many times during this period of limited access to books, had a profound influence on her, showing how the years flowed by, people altered, and nothing could ever stay the same."

This early perception of changes over time is a theme that reappears in many of her novels decades later, just as *The Little House* itself appears in her novel *Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant*. Tyler also describes reading *Little Women* 22 times as a child. When the Tyler family left Celo after four years to move to Raleigh, NC, 11-year-old Anne had never attended public school and never used a telephone. This unorthodox upbringing enabled her to view "the normal world with a certain amount of distance and surprise."

Raleigh, North Carolina

It also meant that Tyler felt herself to be an outsider in the public schools she attended in Raleigh, a feeling that has followed her most of her life. She believes that this sense of being an outsider has contributed to her becoming a writer:

I believe that any kind of setting-apart situation will do [to become a writer]. In my case, it was emerging from the commune...and trying to fit into the outside world.

Despite her lack of public schooling prior to age 11, Anne entered school academically well ahead of most of her classmates in Raleigh. With access now to libraries, she discovered Eudora Welty, Gabriel

García Márquez, F. Scott Fitzgerald, and many others. Welty remains one of her favorite writers, and she credits Welty with showing her that books could be about the everyday details of life, not just about major events.

During her years at N. B. Broughton High School in Raleigh, she was inspired and encouraged by a remarkable English teacher, Phyllis Peacock. Peacock had previously taught the writer Reynolds Price, under whom Tyler would later study at Duke University. She would also later teach the writer Armistead Maupin. Seven years after high school, Tyler would dedicate her first published novel to "Mrs. Peacock, for everything you've done."

Education

Tyler won a full scholarship to Duke University, which her parents urged her to go accept it because they also needed money for the education of her three younger brothers. At Duke, Tyler enrolled in Reynolds Price's first creative writing class, which also included a future poet, Fred Chappell. Price was most impressed with the sixteen-year-old Tyler, describing her as "frighteningly mature for 16," "wide-eyed," and "an outsider." Years later Price would describe Tyler as "one of the best novelists alive in the world,... who was almost as good a writer at 16 as she is now."

While an undergraduate, Tyler published her short story "Laura" in the Duke literary journal *Archive*, for which she won the newly created Anne Flexner award for creative writing. She wrote many short stories, one of which impressed Reynolds Price so that he later stated that it was the "most finished, most accomplished short story I have ever received from an undergraduate in my thirty years of teaching." "The Saints in Caesar's Household" was published in *Archive* also and won her a second Anne Flexner award. This short story led to her meeting Diarmuid Russell, to whom Price had sent it with kudos. Russell, who was an agent for both Reynolds Price and for Tyler's "crowning influence" Eudora Welty, later became Tyler's agent.

Tyler majored in Russian Literature at Duke—not English—and graduated in 1961, at age 19, having been inducted into Phi Beta Kappa. With her Russian Literature background she received a fellowship to graduate school in Slavic Studies at Columbia University although she left after a year without her master's degree. She returned to Duke where she got a job in the library as a Russian bibliographer. It was there that she met Taghi Modarressi, a resident in child psychiatry in Duke Medical School and a writer himself, and they were married a year later (1963).

Early writing

While working at the Duke library—before and after marrying Modarressi—Tyler continued to write short stories, which appeared in *The New Yorker*, *Saturday Evening Post*, and *Harpers*. She also started work on her first novel, *If Morning Ever Comes*, eventually published 1964, followed by *The Tin Can Tree* in 1965. Years later she disowned both of these novels, as well as many of the short stories she wrote during this period, going so far as to say she "would like to burn them." She feels that most of this early work suffers from the lack of thorough character development and her failure to rework material repeatedly.

After the birth of two children (1965 and 1967), followed by a move from Montreal, Canada, to Baltimore in the U.S., Tyler had little time or energy for writing. She published nothing from 1965 to 1970. By 1970, however, she began writing again and published three more novels by 1974—*A Slipping-Down Life*, *The*

Clock Winder, and *Celestial Navigation*. In her own opinion, her writing improved considerably during this period; with her children entering school, she was able to devote more time—and focus more intensely—than at any time since her undergraduate days.

National recognition

With *Celestial Navigation*, Tyler began to get wider recognition. *Morgan's Passing* (1980) won her the Janet Heidinger Kafka Prize for Fiction and was nominated for both the American Book Awards and the National Book Critics Circle Award.

With her next novel (her ninth), *Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant*, Tyler truly arrived as a recognized artist in the literary world. (She considers *Homesick* her best work.) Her tenth novel, *The Accidental Tourist*, was awarded the National Book Critics Circle Award for Fiction in 1985. It was also made into a 1988 movie starring William Hurt and Geena Davis. The popularity of this well-received film further increased the growing public awareness of her work. Her 11th novel, *Breathing Lessons*, received the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in 1989 and was *Time* magazine's "Book of the Year." It was adapted into a 1994 TV movie, as eventually were four other of her novels.

Since her Pulitzer Prize with *Breathing Lessons*, Tyler has written 9 more novels, all of favorably reviewed, many Book of the Month Club Main Selections and *New York Times* Bestsellers.

Analysis

In Tyler's own words, the characters are the driving forces behind the stories and the starting point for her writing:

I do make a point of writing down every imaginable facet of my characters before I begin a book, trying to get to know them so I can figure out how they'll react in any situation....My reason for writing now is to live lives other than my own, and I do that by burrowing deeper and deeper....till I reach the center of those lives.

The magic of her novels starts with her ability to create those characters in the reader's mind through the use of remarkably realistic details. The late Canadian author Carol Shields, writing about Tyler's characters, observes:

Tyler has always put her characters to work. Their often humble or eccentric occupations, carefully observed and threaded with humor, are tightly sewn to the other parts of their lives, offering them the mixed benefit of tedium and consolation, as well as a lighted stage for the unfolding of their dramatic selves. She also allows her men and women an opportunity for redemption.

Tyler has clearly spelled out the importance of her characters to her stories: "As far as I'm concerned, character is everything. I never did see why I have to throw in a plot, too."

Stylistically, Tyler's writing is difficult to categorize or label. Novelist Cathleen Schine describes how her "style without a style" manages to pull the reader into the story:

So rigorous and artful is the style without a style, so measured and delicate is each observation, so complex is the structure and so astute and open the

language, that the reader can relax, feel secure writing now is to live lives other than my own, and I do that by burrowing deeper and deeper...till I reach the center of those lives.

The magic of her novels starts with her ability to create those characters in the reader's mind through the use of remarkably realistic details. The late Canadian author Carol Shields, writing about Tyler's characters, observes:

Tyler has always put her characters to work. Their often humble or eccentric occupations, carefully observed and threaded with humor, are tightly sewn to the other parts of their lives, offering them the mixed benefit of tedium and consolation, as well as a lighted stage for the unfolding of their dramatic selves. She also allows her men and women an opportunity for redemption.

Tyler has clearly spelled out the importance of her characters to her stories: "As far as I'm concerned, character is everything. I never did see why I have to throw in a plot, too."

Stylistically, Tyler's writing is difficult to categorize or label. Novelist Cathleen Schine describes how her "style without a style" manages to pull the reader into the story:

So rigorous and artful is the style without a style, so measured and delicate is each observation, so complex is the structure and so astute and open the language, that the reader can relax, feel secure in the narrative and experience the work as something real and natural.

The *San Francisco Chronicle* made a similar point: "One does not so much read a Tyler novel as visit it.

While Tyler herself does not like to think of her novels in terms of themes, numerous reviewers and scholars have noted the importance of family and marriage relationships to her characters and stories. Reviewing *Noah's Compass*, *New York Times*' Mitchiko Kakutani noted that

The central concern of most of this author's characters has always been their need to define themselves in terms of family—the degree to which they see themselves as creatures shaped by genetics, childhood memories and parental and spousal expectations, and the degree to which they are driven to embrace independent identities of their own.

Tyler is not without her critics. The most common criticism is that her works are "sentimental," "sweet," and "charming and cosy." Even Kakutani has also occasionally bemoaned a "cloying cuteness," noting that "her novels—with their eccentric heroes, their homespun details, their improbable, often heartwarming plots—have often flirted with cuteness." In her own defense, Tyler has said,

For one thing I think it is sort of true. I would say piss and vinegar for [Philip] Roth and for me milk and cookies. I can't deny it... [However] there's more edge under some of my soft language than people realize.

Also, because almost all of Tyler's work covers the same territory—family and marriage relationships—and are located in the same setting, she has come under criticism for being repetitive and formulaic.

Tyler's advice to beginning writers:

They should run out and buy the works of Erving Goffman, the sociologist who studied the meaning of gesture in personal interactions. I have cause to think about Erving Goffman nearly every day of my life, every time I see people do something unconscious that reveals more than they'll ever know about their interiors. Aren't human beings intriguing? I could go on writing about them forever."

Author bio adapted from Wikipedia. Retrieved 2/10/2015.)

Discussion Questions

*We'll add specific questions when they're made available by the publisher. In the meantime, consider these LitLovers talking points for *Vinegar Girl*...then take off on your own:*

1. Of course, the best place to start is to read Shakespeare's original *The Taming of the Shrew* and compare it with Anne Tyler's updated version, *Vinegar Girl*.
2. How do the two Kate's—Anne Tyler's and Shakespeare's—differ in temperament? Both women are sharp-tongued, but what are there nuances which distinguish one from the other? Do you prefer one Kate over the other? If you haven't (yet) read Shakespeare, then just talk about the modern Kate. Do you find her grumpy and unpleasant...or sympathetic? Does your view of her change during the course of the novel?
3. In what way might it be said that the modern-day Kate brings about her own taming?
4. What about the other characters: fathers and eventual husbands? Talk, especially, about the differences between Petruchio and Pytor.
5. Is the arranged marriage in Tyler's version of *Taming of the Shrew* plausible? Does Tyler pull it off? (Hints of *Green Card*?)
6. Critics, for years have been divided over the meaning of Shakespeare Kate's speech in which she submits to her husband. Is it done with a wink (ironic) or spoken in earnest? What about Tyler's Kate? How do the emphases of the two final speeches differ?
- 7.. Finally, of course, which version do you prefer? Does Tyler's have the fireworks and passion of the original? Or does it strive for a different aesthetic?

(Questions by LitLovers. Please feel free to use them, online or off, with attribution. Thanks.)

Book Reviews

Anne Tyler's *Vinegar Girl* is a retelling of *The Taming of the Shrew*, set in Baltimore, not far from Johns Hopkins. It is full of Tyler's signature virtues—domestic details, familial conflict, emotional ambivalence, a sharp sense of place..... Tyler works around the arranged-

marriage setup brilliantly by making the suitor formerly known as Petruchio a Russian research assistant on a special visa for people with "extraordinary ability," who is working for Kate's father. He needs to marry to stay in the country, and the obvious choice is not Bunny, who is only 15, but the difficult, plain, hopeless one, Kate.... *Vinegar Girl* is...lively and thoughtful.

Jane Smiley - New York Times Book Review

An effective retelling, while nodding to the original text, stands on its own as a story in the way Iris Murdoch's *The Black Prince* responds to *Hamlet* and Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* plays with *The Tempest*. Tyler succeeds in creating a world we believe in...Charming...Clever

Boston Globe

This modern adaptation of *The Taming of the Shrew* is vintage Tyler—crisp and funny, with quirky but believable characters...set, of course, in Tyler's beloved Baltimore.

Minneapolis Star-Tribune

Family drama meets rom-com in a modern version of *The Taming of the Shrew*. Pushy dad plus entitled little sister, cute but clueless suitor, and Pulitzer Prize-winning author equals must-read.

Cosmopolitan

A quirky tale that transports Shakespeare's *The Taming of the Shrew* to Tyler's modern-day Baltimore, where a father's attempt to shoehorn his daughter into a green-card marriage has, of course, an unintentionally happy ending.

W Magazine

Tyler's smooth prose makes *Vinegar Girl*, one of a series of renowned authors' Shakespearean updates, a light, summer read.

Baltimore Magazine

Boston Globe

This modern adaptation of *The Taming of the Shrew* is vintage Tyler—crisp and funny, with quirky but believable characters...set, of course, in Tyler's beloved Baltimore.

Minneapolis Star-Tribune

Family drama meets rom-com in a modern version of *The Taming of the Shrew*. Pushy dad plus entitled little sister, cute but clueless suitor, and Pulitzer Prize-winning author equals must-read.

Cosmopolitan

A quirky tale that transports Shakespeare's *The Taming of the Shrew* to Tyler's modern-day Baltimore, where a father's attempt to shoehorn his daughter into a green-card marriage has, of course, an unintentionally happy ending.

W Magazine

Tyler's smooth prose makes *Vinegar Girl*, one of a series of renowned authors' Shakespearean updates, a light, summer read.

Baltimore Magazine

Tyler can't help but invest this mishmash with a good deal of her own rueful humor..., but her special qualities as a writer don't make a very good fit with the original. Neither a faithful retelling nor a trenchant countertale, though agreeable enough as an afternoon's entertainment.

Kirkus Reviews