

Commonwealth by Ann Patchett

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Review by Melanie White

Storytelling is fundamental to human life, enabling us to connect, enlighten and entertain. Our narratives repeatedly churn familiar ground yet change in myriad small ways, depending on the speaker; they are a continually evolving, circular enterprise. So too is *Commonwealth*, the seventh novel by Ann Patchett.

The book is titled both for the association of two families who merge through divorce, as well as for what belongs to them all: their communal narrative. A lawyer, Bert, attends the christening of a cop's daughter in Los Angeles and falls in love with the other man's wife; this leads to separation and Bert moving his re-formed family east to Virginia. Already there is more personal resonance than in Patchett's previous work: she was born the daughter of a policeman in L.A. who divorced her mother and moved her to Nashville (near Virginia), where she still lives. And that's before addressing the writerly concerns at the book's core.

Although the ten characters of the families in *Commonwealth* (four adults and six children) are given fairly equal weight in the novel, the story is rooted above all in Franny Keating. While all the characters tell each other aspects of their shared story, Franny is the one who conveys it beyond the family, serving it up to a novelist, Leon Posen, who appropriates it for a book. (Later, it further transmogrifies into a movie.) It is this reframing of personal history that rattles and reverberates throughout the families. For Franny, allowing the personal to become public – even in a disguised form – is a matter of regret: “She knew exactly what it was she'd done, how serious and wrong it was to have given away what didn't belong to her.” Nevertheless, she told Leon because “There had been nothing in her life to equal the light of his attention.” People need to tell stories, not to the void but to a listening ear.

Patchett is a deft craftsman, but the book's effect is light. She stitches the narrative patchwork-style, with fabric cut from many characters' lives across five decades. The disparate pieces come together to form a complete picture, but the skill is to be found in the stitching more than the sum of the parts. She creates suspense by withholding key details, such as those surrounding the death of one character, but the fact that major dramatic events are reported glancingly years later rather than experienced as they happen in the novel diminishes their power. There is thematic resonance in that approach, but less emotional impact (unusually for Patchett, who constructed her most famous novel, *Bel Canto*, out of the immediacy and tension of a hostage crisis). *Commonwealth* is more about the telling than the story.

The book takes a good while to warm up. Patchett spends the first third of the narrative laying its foundation – a necessary evil, with so many characters to delineate – before she has built up enough material to be able to play on her central theme. This sense of delay before getting to the point of the story is exacerbated by a surfeit of unnecessary detail. We are told that Franny, working as a cocktail waitress, “had dropped out of law school in the middle (though closer to the beginning) of the first semester of her third year.” Patchett stops just short of crafting a chapter right out of her character's day planner. Her prose is clean but unadventurous and, in this first third, surprisingly careless for a typically elegant writer. Mixed metaphors stud the early chapters, along the lines of: “The minute she closed the door behind her she was underwater, the summer air hot and solid in her lungs.” On one laboured occasion, “Caroline and Franny lugged their luggage up the stairs. Luggage: that which is to be lugged.” The boys' bedroom “had a vaguely nutty smell reminiscent of socks and underwear and unwashed hair,” then, a few sentences later, the maternal character of Beverly is talking, in a repetitive echo, about how her ex-husband dislikes nuts in his brownies.

Patchett ultimately wins the reader over with her perceptive qualities, alluring characters and undertone of humour. Pleasingly, in one episode, the children sneak off on their own while their parents sleep in on holiday. Patchett plants all kinds of hazards that might foreshadow doom: a loaded gun, stolen gin, antihistamine pills popped like Tic Tacs, lack of water on a boiling day, jumping off rocks into a remote lake. There's a kind of literary in-joke in the fact that none of these dramatically cliché dangers harms the characters, but, on another occasion, something as prosaic as a bee sting does. In *Commonwealth*, Patchett's nimble storytelling floats like a butterfly and stings like a bee (to make an apt appropriation), but lacks the knockout punch.