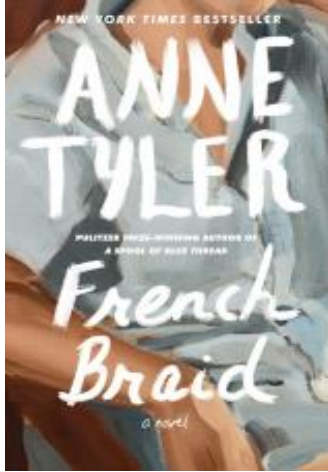


French Braid

by Anne Tyler



About the Book

From beloved Pulitzer Prize-winning author Anne Tyler comes a funny, joyful and brilliantly perceptive journey deep into one Baltimore family's foibles --- from a boyfriend with a red Chevy in the 1950s up to a longed-for reunion with a grandchild in our pandemic present.

The Garretts take their first and last family vacation in the summer of 1959. They hardly ever leave home, but in some ways they have never been farther apart. Mercy has trouble resisting the siren call of her aspirations to be a painter, which means less time keeping house for her husband, Robin. Their teenage daughters, steady Alice and boy-crazy Lily, could not have less in common. Their youngest, David, is already intent on escaping his family's orbit, for reasons none of them understand. Yet, as these lives advance across decades, the Garretts' influences on one another ripple ineffably but unmistakably through each generation.

Full of heartbreak and hilarity, FRENCH BRAID is classic Anne Tyler: a stirring, uncannily insightful novel of tremendous warmth and humor that illuminates the kindnesses and cruelties of our daily lives, the impossibility of breaking free from those who love us, and how close --- yet how unknowable --- every family is to itself.

Discussion Guide

1. Revisit the novel's first chapter, now that you know the full story. What did you originally predict for Serena? What were your notions about why her family was so disconnected?
2. Which images stand out most clearly to you from the Garretts' summer vacation? What lifelong pursuits were set in motion for Alice, Lily and David during their time at the lakeside cabin? Share your defining memories from a childhood trip.

3. How did your perceptions of Mercy and Robin shift as the details of their marriage unfolded? Though Robin's proposal included the plea, "If you can imagine us ever, ever divorcing, then I don't want you to accept" (page 146), was there ever a time when he felt truly secure with Mercy, and with his in-laws?
4. Anne Tyler explores the nature of time and memory in much of her fiction. How did the timeline in *FRENCH BRAID* amplify the realism of the characters? How did cultural expectations for women evolve between Mercy's generation and her children's? What stayed the same, even in a new millennium?
5. How did you react to the story of Desmond, the Motts' cat?
6. Are the cousins a reflection of their parents' and grandparents' legacies and personalities, or do they create a series of new beginnings? Ultimately, why don't the cousins know one another very well?
7. A recurring element in *FRENCH BRAID* is the ritual of bringing home a romantic partner to meet the family. How do those encounters play out for the Garretts, and in your own family lore? In the novel, what is at the root of this quest for approval, and what motivates the naysaying?
8. Alice and Lily embody two very different versions of womanhood and motherhood. Does temperament alone account for these differences? What did they learn from Mercy about how to find fulfillment in life?
9. Do you think it's true that Robin didn't like his son, as David asserts on page 241?
10. Mercy's studio is free of clutter. If you were to set up a room of your own, what would it look like? How would you pass the time there?
11. How would you characterize the surprise 50th anniversary party and its aftermath? Heartbreaking? Humorous? Some of each? What does it cost the Garrett family emotionally to perpetuate the open secret of Robin and Mercy's separation? What other aspects of their family life require the ability to pretend?
12. Is Mercy a merciful person, including being merciful with herself? What do her paintings reveal about the aspects of home, and homemaking, that intrigue her? What was it like to watch her in Manhattan, accompanied by Kendall?
13. When David and Greta describe the crimped "ripples" that keep us from ever being free of our families (page 234), what are they saying about the fundamental differences in their upbringing? Is the interwoven nature of family a source of comfort or confinement to you?
14. In the novel's closing scene, what truths are distilled as we observe David's fierce love for Benny?
15. How does *FRENCH BRAID* enhance the sketches of humanity that emerged in previous books by Anne Tyler that you have read? What new insight does *FRENCH BRAID* offer in the wake of the pandemic?

Author Bio

Anne Tyler was born in Minneapolis, Minnesota, in 1941 and grew up in Raleigh, North Carolina. She is the author of more than 20 novels. Her 20th novel, *A SPOOL OF BLUE THREAD*, was shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize in 2015. Her 11th novel, *BREATHING LESSONS*, was awarded the Pulitzer Prize in 1989. She is a member of the American Academy of Arts and Letters. She lives in Baltimore, Maryland.

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