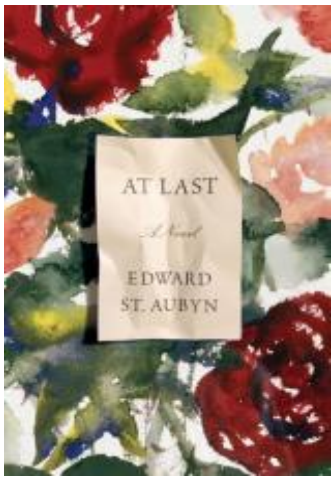
At Last

by Edward St. Aubyn



About the Book

There never was a mother quite like Eleanor Melrose, and there never was a funeral quite like hers, captured in the wickedly dark comedy **At Last**, Edward St. Aubyn?s novel of legacies lost and gained. As Eleanor?s son, Patrick, joins other family members and friends to pay final respects, a conflicting image of her emerges. For some, she was the noble heiress who gave up the grandeur of her upbringing to perform good works. For others, especially Patrick, she was an enigmatic, sometimes even heartless woman who restricted those good works to total strangers, leaving her supposed loved ones deprived. Her death is the culmination of Patrick?s contentious relationship with both his parents, and with his own destructive self-loathing. From the eulogies that ponder Eleanor?s correspondence with shamans to a rendition of ?I Got Plenty o? Nuttin?? on the organ (followed by a party filled with intrigue, of course), St. Aubyn delivers a hilarious portrait of one of humanity?s most mysterious transitions.

The fifth and final installment in the acclaimed Patrick Melrose novels, **At Last** offers an entertaining yet thought-provoking experience, even for those who have never read the previous books. We hope that the following topics will enhance your group?s discussion of this wise and witty novel.

Discussion Guide

1. Edward St. Aubyn describes Patrick as being torn between the lure of consolation and the lure of disappointment. Why does he find those options alluring? What aspects of a powerful, albeit masochistic, bond are captured in the fact that he mourns not the loss of his mother but the loss of longing for closeness to her?

2. Why does Nicholas derive pleasure from being snarky? In the book?s opening scenes, was it fun or annoying to see him creating tension, on what should have been a somber occasion? At the end of the novel, do people react to his closing chapter with phoniness or candor?

3. Discuss Eleanor?s marriage to David and what we learn about it in this novel. Why was she unable to choose between being his collaborator and his antagonist when it came to raising Patrick?

4. Patrick contemplates Eleanor?s emotional legacy throughout her funeral. What legacies will he leave for Robert and Thomas? How is he able to break the cycle of his family?s cruelty?

5. Discuss Annette?s observations about Eleanor?s spiritual side, delivered in a fairly lengthy eulogy. How does Annette?s depiction compare to other impressions of Eleanor? What would Eleanor have thought of these spiritual philosophies, and those that Erasmus continues to ponder throughout the service?

6. What does Nancy?s spending say about her memories of Jean, her stepfather? Why can?t Nancy simply accept the reality of her situation? Why is the myth of endless wealth important for her to uphold?

7. St. Aubyn has spoken candidly with interviewers about the horrific incidents from his own life that inspired aspects of Patrick?s story, including being brutalized by his father and recovering from drug addiction. How does it affect your reading to know that the plot is partially autobiographical?

8. What makes St. Aubyn a master of the art of gallows humor? Why are morbid subjects and despicable people often the best material for comedy?

9. On page 262, the author describes Patrick as getting comfortable with Keatsian mysteries, finally open to questions that can?t necessarily be answered. What questions in your life and legacy can?t really be answered? How could you make peace with this uncertainty?

10. Discuss the author?s notion that those who appear to deserve the most blame actually deserve the most help. When is this true in the novel, and in your own life?

11. Why was it easy for Eleanor to give charitably to strangers but not to her own family and staff? What does her generosity say about her personality? What were some of the most striking differences between her public and private personae?

12. How does the transatlantic connection enhance **At Last**? What is Patrick?s perspective on America, and how is his identity shaped by knowing about Eleanor?s grandfather Jonson? Why was Southern culture meaningful to Eleanor? Did her image of it extend very far beyond the stereotypes of *Porgy and Bess*?

13. In **At Last**, how do Patrick?s interactions with Mary, his wife, compare to his interactions with Julia, his former girlfriend? Is his attitude toward women different now that his mother is gone?

14. Discuss the transformations that Patrick has experienced in the Melrose novels you have read previously. He has evolved from anger and addiction to middle-age crises; what has he become in this final portrait?

Author Bio

Edward St. Aubyn was born in London. His acclaimed Patrick Melrose novels are NEVER MIND, BAD NEWS, SOME HOPE, MOTHER'S MILK (winner of the Prix Femina étranger and shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize), and AT LAST . The series was made into a BAFTA Award?winning Sky Atlantic TV series starring Benedict Cumberbatch. St. Aubyn is also the author of A CLUE TO THE EXIT, ON THE EDGE (shortlisted for the Guardian Fiction Prize), LOST FOR WORDS (winner of the Bollinger Everyman Wodehouse Prize), DUNAR, DOUBLE BLIND and PARALLEL LINES.

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