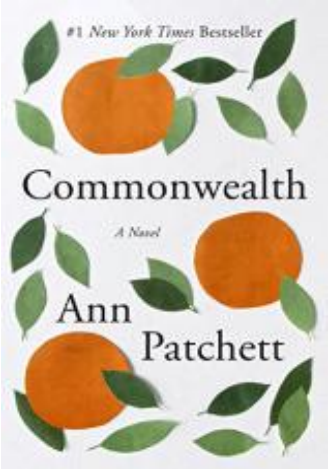
ReadingGroupGuides
The online community for reading groups

Commonwealth

by Ann Patchett



About the Book

The acclaimed, bestselling author --- winner of the PEN/Faulkner Award and the Orange Prize --- tells the enthralling story of how an unexpected romantic encounter irrevocably changes two families' lives.

One Sunday afternoon in Southern California, Bert Cousins shows up at Franny Keating's christening party uninvited. Before evening falls, he has kissed Franny's mother, Beverly --- thus setting in motion the dissolution of their marriages and the joining of two families.

Spanning five decades, COMMONWEALTH explores how this chance encounter reverberates through the lives of the four parents and six children involved. Spending summers together in Virginia, the Keating and Cousins children forge a lasting bond that is based on a shared disillusionment with their parents and the strange and genuine affection that grows up between them.

Discussion Guide

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?

Author Bio

Ann Patchett is the author of novels, works of nonfiction and children's books. She has been the recipient of numerous awards, including the PEN/Faulkner, the Women's Prize in the UK, and the Book Sense Book of the Year. Her novel, THE DUTCH HOUSE, was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize. Her work has been translated into more than 30 languages, and *Time* magazine named her one of the 100 Most Influential People in the World. President Biden awarded her the National Humanities Medal in recognition of her contributions to American culture. She lives in Nashville, Tennessee, where she is the owner of Parnassus Books.

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