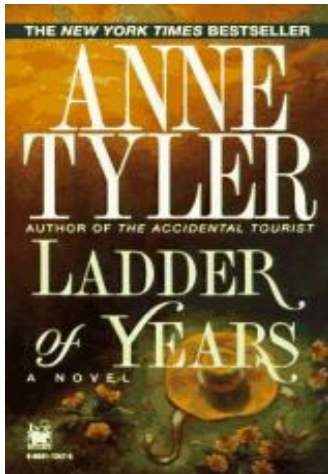


# Ladder of Years

by Anne Tyler

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## About the Book

BALTIMORE WOMAN DISAPPEARS DURING FAMILY VACATION, declares the headline. Forty-year-old Delia Grinstead is last seen strolling down the Delaware shore, wearing nothing more than a bathing suit and carrying a beach tote with five hundred dollars tucked inside. To her husband and three almost-grown children, she has vanished without trace or reason. But for Delia, who feels like a tiny gnat buzzing around her family's edges, "walking away from it all" is not a premeditated act but an impulse that will lead her into a new, exciting, and unimagined life. . . .

## Discussion Guide

1. Why did Delia walk away from her family on that Delaware beach? And why did she stay away for so long?
2. Delia has always lived in a very crowded house. Discuss the pressures and rewards of several generations living under one roof.
3. Why doesn't any member of Delia's family ask her to come home? Do you think it would have made a difference?
4. Discuss how the world Dr. Felson once inhabited changes after his death.
5. Do you think the father's death has freed the Felson sisters in some way?
6. Do you think Linda's relationship with Sam mirrors her relationship with her father?
7. Delia and Ellie are both judged harshly for their decision to leave their families. Do you think society judges mothers more harshly than fathers if they leave?

8. At the beginning of the novel, Delia sees herself as "a tiny gnat, whirring around her family's edges"? How does her perspective change over the course of the novel?
9. Eliza insists that Delia has memories of their mother and Delia is incensed that Sam does not remember their very first meeting. Discuss the conflict that arises in this novel over the individualistic and idiosyncratic nature of family history and memory.
10. At the end of the novel, Delia concludes that "the people she had left behind had actually traveled further, in some ways." What does she mean?
11. Delia concludes that "[u]nlike Nat's . . . hers had been a time trip that worked." Do you agree?
12. Do you think Nat and Binky will persevere despite all the obstacles in their path?
13. Delia has to learn how to dine out alone. What other kinds of public activities are awkward to do solo? Does it differ for men and for women?
14. Belle says, "[M]ost folks marry just because they decide they've reached that stage . . . *Then* they pick someone out." Do you agree?
15. Do you think Eliza has been pining for Sam for all those years?
16. Delia finds support in unexpected places and from unexpected people. Did Eleanor's support surprise you?
17. Eleanor tells Delia that after her husband's death reading the dictionary comforted and distracted her. Discuss rituals and habits that offer comfort in times of need.
18. What do you think of the ending of this novel? Does it make emotional sense to you?
19. Share your favorite description of a character with the group.
20. What would you ask the author if you could interview her?
21. Did your group enjoy this novel? How does it compare with other works your group has read?
22. What is your group reading next? How do you make your selections?

## 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.

## Critical Praise

"UTTERLY COMPELLING . . . WONDERFULLY SATISFYING . . . VIRTUALLY FLAWLESS."

*?Chicago Tribune*

"TYLER DETAILS DELIA'S ADVENTURE WITH GREAT SKILL. . . . As so often in her earlier fiction, [she] creates distinct characters caught in poignantly funny situations. . . . Tyler writes with a clarity that makes the commonplace seem fresh and the pathetic touching."

*?The New York Times*

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