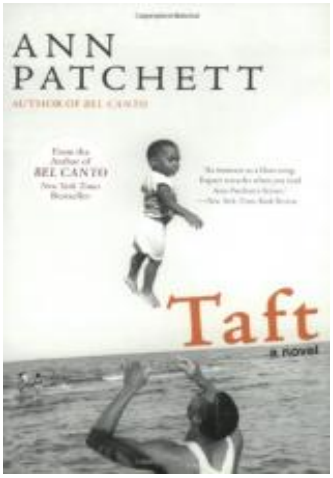
Taft: A Novel

by Ann Patchett



About the Book

A girl walked into the bar. I was hunched over, trying to open a box of Dewar's without my knife. I'd bent the blade the day before prying loose an old metal ice cube tray that had frozen solid to the side of the freezer. The box was sealed up tight with strapping tape. She waited there quietly, not asking for anything, not leaning on the bar. She held her purse with two hands and stood still.

John Nickel is a black ex-jazz musician who only wants to be a good father. But when his son is taken away from him, he's left with nothing but the Memphis bar he manages. Then he hires Fay, a young white waitress, who has a volatile brother named Carl in tow. Nickel finds himself consumed with the idea of Taft -- Fay and Carl's dead father -- and begins to reconstruct the life of a man he never met. But his sympathies for these lost souls soon take him down a twisting path into the lives of strangers ...

Discussion Guide

1. Do you think there was anything John could have done to repair his relationship with Marion? Why do you think Marion moved in with John after Franklin was born? Do you think their relationship ever had a chance?

2. Why did Marion move to Florida? For a new life? Or to hurt John?

3. Did you think it was strange that you didn't know what the main character's name was right away? Did you notice? What was the author's purpose?

4. Do you think because the author is a woman, John is a realistic character? Does he have any perspectives that the average male normally wouldn't?

5. Carl is a troubled person. Why do you think he turned to drugs? Is Fay helping or hurting him? Is John?

6. The characters seem to let their situation dictate their actions instead of making decisions. Do you think this is true? Do you think the characters had strong convictions that they acted on?

7. Why do you think story switches between the present and the past? What are the parallels between Taft and John? Why do you think we see the Taft family's past, but not John's? Why do you think John gets entangled with this family?

8. Do you think Carl had a good relationship with his father? Do you think John did with his? Does John with Franklin?

9. Do you think Fay loves John? Does John love Fay? Did you believe Fay's message from Mrs. Woodmoore?

10. Were you surprised by the ending? What do you think will happen between Fay and John? John and Marion? Carl and Fay?

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.

Critical Praise

"Patchett writes with remarkable conviction and attention to telling detail... [She] is excellent at portraying the steady love and interest that holds the family members together, even though that love and interest isn't always successful in preserving the members from danger."

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