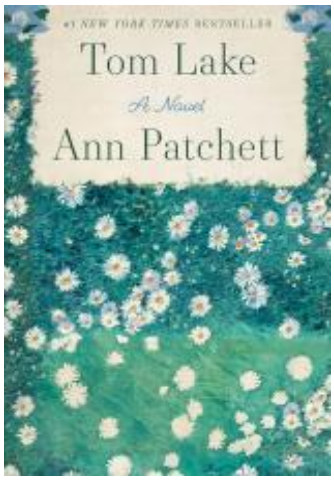
Tom Lake

by Ann Patchett



About the Book

In this beautiful and moving novel about family, love and growing up, Ann Patchett once again proves herself to be one of America?s finest writers.

In the spring of 2020, Lara?s three daughters return to the family's orchard in Northern Michigan. While picking cherries, they beg their mother to tell them the story of Peter Duke, a famous actor with whom she shared both a stage and a romance years before at a theater company called Tom Lake. As Lara recalls the past, her daughters examine their own lives and relationship with their mother, and they are forced to reconsider the world and everything they thought they knew.

TOM LAKE is a meditation on youthful love, married love and the lives parents have led before their children were born. Both hopeful and elegiac, it explores what it means to be happy even when the world is falling apart. As in all of her novels, Ann Patchett combines compelling narrative artistry with piercing insights into family dynamics. The result is a rich and luminous story, told with profound intelligence and emotional subtlety, that demonstrates once again why she is one of the most revered and acclaimed literary talents working today.

Discussion Guide

1. For what reasons is "Our Town," the play by Thornton Wilder, significant and lasting? What about the play made Lara say that it ?spoke to us, made us feel special and seen?? When Lara says, ?ours was that kind of town,? what might she mean?

2. What issues explored in "Our Town" are particularly relevant to this novel, TOM LAKE?

3. Consider Lara?s three daughters: Emily, Maisie and Nell. What qualities and characteristics most define each of

them? What does each care about? What does each of their intended professions suggest about who they are?

4. Why does Lara decide to tell her daughters the story of her relationship with Peter Duke? What concerns her about doing so? Generally speaking, what are the potential benefits or harms of parents sharing their personal life stories, their successes and failures with their children?

5. In what various ways is the environment of Tom Lake strikingly different for Lara? How might such a landscape have influenced her? What does she mean that her ?unremarkable room with the remarkable view of Middle-of-Nowhere, Michigan, was everything that had ever been written about freedom and possibility??

6. What is so powerful about the Nelsons' cherry farm when the young actors all visit for the first time? What is particularly valuable about such a landscape for Lara, even decades later, when she tells of it as her happiest day at Tom Lake?

7. Lara admits to Maisie?s dog, Hazel, that her acting career fell apart not because she wasn?t very good, but because she ?had ceased to be brave.? What might this mean? Why does Lara not only not feel regret about the end of acting, but feel like she ?just missed getting hit by a train??

8. What are the implications of Lara?s ?simple truth about life: you will forget much of it??

9. What does Lara mean when she says, ?good marriages are never as interesting as bad affairs?? What?s important about this idea? What are the many and particular qualities of Joe and Lara?s relationship that make it so solid and enduring?

10. Lara comes to realize that "Our Town" taught her that ?the beauty and the suffering are equally true.? What does she mean? Why is this such a valuable lesson? What is the relationship between beauty and suffering? What are the implications of this regarding how to live life well?

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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