ReadingGroupGuides
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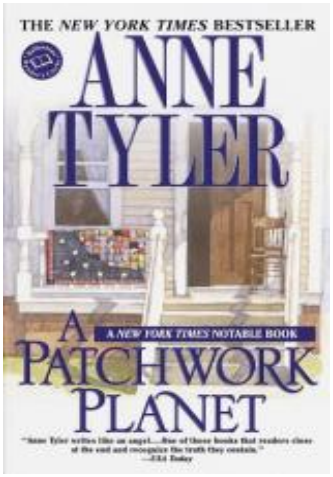
A Patchwork Planet

by Anne Tyler



About the Book

Anne Tyler's fourteenth novel presents Barnaby Gaitlin, the latest of her quirky characters trying to cope with a less-than-perfect life. Barnaby has been in trouble ever since adolescence. He had this habit of breaking into other people's houses, not so much to steal things, but because he liked to read other people's mail and pore over their photo albums. But for eleven years now, he's been working steadily for Rent-a-Back, renting his back to people who can't move thier own porch furniture or bring the Christmas tree down from the attic. Still, when the chips are down, he learns that his family and friends really don't trust him, and his world falls apart.

Discussion Guide

1. "I am a man you can trust." Barnaby begins and ends the novel with this statement. How has Barnaby's understanding of this characterization of himself changed over the course of this story?

2. "Just because we were related didn't mean we were any good at understanding each other," says Barnaby after yet another frustrating conversation with his mother. Communication problems abound within the families depicted in this novel. Discuss the nature and source of these problems. Why do we often have so much trouble talking to the people we love?

3. Even as adults, many of us, like Barnaby, still view our families through the eyes of a child. How does this blind us? How do we heal the old wounds? Can we?

4. During a family dinner for his birthday, Barnaby asks himself, "How come I always got the feeling that somebody was missing from our family table?" What do you think Barnaby was missing? And why is his mother so insistent upon including his childhood friend, Len Parrish, in the festivities?

5. How does Barnaby's understanding of and relationship with his daughter change over the course of this story? How does it mirror his relationship with his own parents?

6. Barnaby's daughter is upset upon meeting some of his clients, and Barnaby is criticized for this. Do you think he was wrong to bring Opal with him on his rounds?

7. While Barnaby tells us a great deal about his marriage to Natalie, we learn little about her views of things. How do you think Natalie would describe their relationship, and how would it differ from Barnaby's account?

8. "And I was beginning to suspect that it made no difference whether they'd married the right person. Finally, you're just with who you're with. You've signed on with her, put in half a century with her, grown to know her as well as you know yourself or even better, and she's become the right person." Discuss the meaning of this summary of marriage according to Barnaby. Do you agree or disagree?

9. Barnaby's brief career as a juvenile delinquent involves snooping in other people's personal effects and "collecting" their personal mementos. What do you think motivated him to do this? Have you ever felt the compulsion to look in other people's private things? Why or why not?

10. Have you ever encountered a stranger on a train who intrigued you as Sophia intrigued Barnaby? Have you ever done anything about it as Barnaby does?

11. Barnaby seems surrounded by smug and self-satisfied people--his mother, his ex-wife, his brother, to name a few--who he never seems to measure up to. Barnaby feels much less comfortable in his own skin. Do you think this is a trait only he possesses?

12. What motivates Barnaby to re-pay his parents, and why does his mother try to give the money back?

13. This novel explores the bittersweet struggles of older people to maintain their dignity and independence in the face of advancing age. What do you think about the fact that Barnaby knows more about the lives of his clients than many of their own families do? What does this novel suggest about the treatment and place of elderly people in our society?

14. Barnaby's clients deal with the indignities and problems associated with aging--e.g., failing health, isolation--in many different ways. How do their approaches vary, and what accounts for this?

15. Do you think Sophia was actually Barnaby's guardian angel? Why or why not?

16. Why is Barnaby able to overlook attributes in Sophia that infuriate him in other people for so long? How does his attitude change and why?

17. Which character(s) did you find to be the most compelling and why?

18. What is the significance of the title of this novel?

19. Why did your group choose to read this particular work? How does this novel compare with other works your group has read?

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

"Tyler's books get wiser, funnier and richer as they go."

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