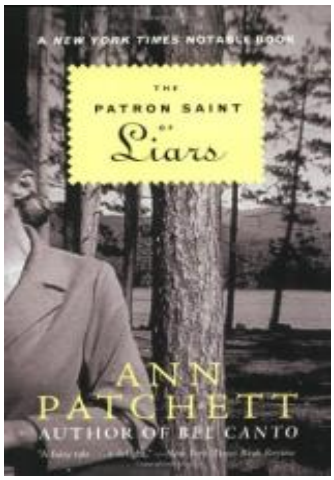
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The Patron Saint of Liars

by Ann Patchett



About the Book

In **The Patron Saint of Liars**, Rose is a young wife of three years who concludes she married by mistake, that she misinterpreted teenage lust as a sign from God. Newly pregnant and unable to continue a life with a man she doesn't love, Rose decides to leave. She abandons her quiet, inoffensive husband and their life at the southern California seaside of the 1960s.

Rose plots to give up the baby for adoption, never telling her husband. And to punish herself, she will also give up the mother she adores, the one person she really loves. Leaving without notice, she drives east to Kentucky and soon realizes that any new life will be a deception and she will be a liar for the rest of her life.

Rose's destination is the sanctuary of St. Elizabeth's Home for Unwed Mothers in Habit, Kentucky. St. Elizabeth's is a refuge but also a place of liars and "leavers," for all of the girls who come will leave, and most will lie about where they've been and what has happened. Unlike the other young women, Rose is married but chooses to tell no one. She plans to wait out her pregnancy, give over the baby to adoption, and then move on.

But St. Elizabeth's keeps Rose for years. In the once elegant Hotel Louisa, the home is near the site of a healing spring run dry, a spring that still exerts a little magic. Rose learns to cook for the girls who come and go and befriends the saintly Sister Evangeline, who knows people's troubles and sees their futures.

Rose decides to keep her baby and marries Son, the groundskeeper, and once again begins a small life with a man she doesn't love. Her daughter Cecelia, or Sissy, grows up at St. Elizabeth's among the nuns, a devoted father, and successive waves of unwed mothers. Sissy longs for her mother's love and attention and wonders about her past.

Most of the odd and troubled characters fascinate and confound us. In the end, Rose surprises us one more time, and Sissy grows up, showing herself neither a liar nor a "leaver."

Discussion Guide

1. In **The Patron Saint of Liars**, the author uses the voices of Rose, Son, and Cecelia (Sissy) to tell the story. How does each voice reveal a distinct and unique character? Is each voice believable? What are the advantages or disadvantages to building a novel through multiple voices?

2. Discuss the many references to "leaving," to breaking connections to home, family, and responsibilities. Who are the "leavers" and who are the ones left? Can you find evidence of what Rose, Son, and Sissy think about all the leaving? Finally, who turns out to be a "stayer," and why is that important?

3. When first pregnant, Rose looks for a place "where women had babies and left them behind, like pieces of furniture too heavy to move." Does her concept of a child evolve during her drive to Kentucky, upon her arrival at St. Elizabeth's, and during the months before her delivery? Is there evidence of a changing attitude after Cecelia is born?

4. Beginning with Rose's first lie of omission, discuss the lies and liars in the novel. Relate the last lie, Son's lie to Sissy, to the structure of the novel and to the cycle of lies. You might ask, "Are all lies equal?"

5. Contrast the picture of southern California with that of St. Elizabeth's in Habit, Kentucky. How does the author achieve the sense of place? Is one place more real than the other? Is one more allegorical?

6. How does the author use the search for signs to move the story forward? Compare Rose's sign to marry with her sign to keep her baby. What about Lorraine's sign? Do you prefer to read the signs as messages from an external source or as the subconscious wishes of the characters? Are Son's tattoos signs of a different sort?

7. Describe the mother/daughter relationship between Rose and her mother. Is there evidence that Rose's mother is a good and loving mother? How is the relationship Rose has with Cecelia different, and why?

8. "Driving is the most important thing you can learn," Rose tells Sissy. "It's the secret of the universe." Explain Rose's impulse to drive. How has it been important to her, and why should she recommend it to Sissy? Does it relate to depression, escape, pilgrimage, or something else?

9. Rose tells us, "I have always taken names very seriously, people or places." How does the author use names to enrich the novel? Consider the names St. Elizabeth, Habit, Rose, Son, among others. What do you think about the controversy over Cecelia as a name? Do you know Rose's mother's name? -- who uses it and who does not?

10. Discuss Sister Evangeline. Can you make a case that she is the model for motherhood? Think about her relationship to St. Elizabeth's, to Rose, to the girls who come and go, to the unborn, to her own mother. Is it significant that she is a seer? That her hands bleed?

11. Describe Sissy's evolution from child to greater maturity. How does she progress? What do you see for her future?

12. How would you evaluate Rose's treatment of her two husbands? Do you sympathize with Thomas Clinton and Son? Can you understand Rose's behavior? Is she emotionally detached, selfish, cruel, just an independent woman? Does she have any model for marriage?

13. Rose advises Billy, "You should do whatever you want to, whatever you can live with best." Does Rose apply this philosophy to her own decisions? What does "whatever you can live with best" really mean to her?

14. Some readers may find an orderly resolution to the story, perhaps in Sissy's last thoughts about staying at St. Elizabeth's or Son's certainty that "Sissy made everything worthwhile." Other readers see odd people and troubled relationships that are ambiguous. What do you think? Do you find order? Or, alternatively, do you accept equivocal characters and motivations?

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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Publication Date: March 1, 2003
Paperback: 352 pages
Publisher: Harper Perennial
ISBN-10: 0060540753
ISBN-13: 9780060540753