

Anne Tyler -- Biographical

Karen Peter

Anne Tyler (born October 25, 1941) is an American novelist, short story writer, and literary critic whose comedies of manners are marked by wit and precise details of domestic middleclass life – often in Baltimore. They are the stuff of family life – love, disappointments, estranged children, loss. “I start every book thinking, ‘This one will be different’ and it’s not,” Tyler says. “I have my limitations. I am fascinated by how families work, endurance, how do we get through life?”¹ Tyler has published twenty-four novels, including [*Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant*](#) (1982), [*The Accidental Tourist*](#) (1985), and [*Breathing Lessons*](#) (1988) which were all finalists for the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction. [*Breathing Lessons*](#) won the prize in 1989. [*The Accidental Tourist*](#) was made into a Hollywood movie starring William Hurt and Gena Davis. She has also won the Janet Heidinger Kafka Prize, the Ambassador Book Award, and the National Book Critics Circle Award. In 2012 she was awarded The Sunday Times Award for Literary Excellence. Tyler's twentieth novel, [*A Spool of Blue Thread*](#), was shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize in 2015, and [*Redhead By the Side of the Road*](#) was longlisted for the same award in 2020. Her most recent novel, [*French Braid*](#), is again set in Baltimore. It was recently reviewed in the New York Times Book Review.

Early childhood

Anne Tyler was born in Minneapolis, Minnesota the oldest of four children. Her father, Lloyd Parry Tyler, was an industrial chemist and her mother, Phyllis Mahon Tyler, a social worker. Both her parents were Quakers who were very active with social causes in the Midwest and the South. Her family lived in a succession of Quaker communities in the South until they settled in 1948 in a Quaker commune in Celo, in the mountains of North Carolina. The Celo Community settlement was populated largely by conscientious objectors and members of the liberal branch of the Society of Friends. Tyler lived there from age seven through eleven and helped her parents and others care for livestock and organic farming. She did not attend formal public school, but had lessons in art, carpentry, and cooking. Her early informal training was supplemented by correspondence school.

Tyler's first book at age seven was a collection of drawings and stories about “lucky” girls who got to go west in covered wagons. Her favorite book as a child was [*The Little House*](#) by Virginia Lee Burton. She acknowledges that [*The Little House*](#), which she read many times had a profound influence on her. She recognized that time flowed by quickly, people changed, and nothing could ever remain the same. This early perception of changes over time is a theme that reappears in many of her novels decades later. Tyler also describes reading [*Little Women*](#) twenty-two times as a child. This was at a time when books for her were scarce. When the Tyler family left Celo to move to Raleigh, NC, Tyler had never attended public school or used a telephone. This unorthodox upbringing enabled her to view a more conventional upbringing with some surprise and as an observer.

Raleigh, North Carolina

Tyler felt herself to be an outsider in the public schools she attended in Raleigh. This became a theme in most of her life. She believes that this sense of being an outsider has contributed to her becoming a writer. In Tyler's case, it was trying to fit into the outside world after leaving the commune in Celo. Despite her lack of public schooling prior to age eleven, Tyler was academically advanced when entering public school in Raleigh. With access now to libraries, she discovered Eudora Welty, Gabriel García Márquez, F. Scott Fitzgerald, and many others. Eudora Welty remains one of her favorite writers, and [*The Wide Net and Other Stories*](#) is one of her favorite books. She credits Welty with showing her that books could be about the everyday details of life,

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not just about major events. During her years at High School in Raleigh, she was inspired and encouraged by a remarkable English teacher, Phyllis Peacock. Mrs. Peacock had previously taught the writer Reynolds Price, under whom Tyler would later study at Duke University. Seven years after high school, Tyler would dedicate her first published novel to "Mrs. Peacock, for everything you've done."

College

When Tyler graduated from high school at age sixteen, she wanted to attend Swarthmore College, which was founded in 1860 by the Hicksite branch of the Society of Friends. However, she had won a full scholarship to Duke University, and her parents pressured her to go to Duke because they needed to save money for the education of her three younger brothers. At Duke, Tyler enrolled in Reynolds Price's first creative writing class. Price was greatly impressed with the sixteen-year-old Tyler. Years later Price would describe Tyler as one of the best novelists alive in the world, who was almost as good a writer at 16 as she is now.

As a college student, Tyler had not yet decided she wanted to become a writer. She loved painting and the visual arts. She also was involved in the drama society in high school and at Duke. She majored in Russian Literature at Duke and graduated in 1961 Phi Beta Kappa, at age nineteen. Due to her Russian Literature background, she received a fellowship to graduate school in Slavic Studies at Columbia University.

Living in New York City was an adjustment for her and writing was the only way to express her observations. Tyler left Columbia graduate school after a year, having completed course work but not her master's thesis. She returned to Duke, where she got a job in the library as a Russian bibliographer. It was there that she met Taghi Modarressi, a resident in child psychiatry in Duke Medical School who was also a writer. They were married a year later in 1963. While working at the Duke library, Tyler continued to write short stories and started work on her first novel, [*If Morning Ever Comes*](#). During this period her short stories appeared in The New Yorker, The Saturday Evening Post, and Harpers.

Hiatus from Writing

In 1965 (age 24), Tyler had her first child, a daughter they named Tezh. Two years later a second daughter, Mitra, was born. About this time, the couple moved to Baltimore, MD as her husband had finished his residency and obtained a position at the University of Maryland Medical School. With the moves, the changes in jobs, and the raising of two young children, Tyler had little time or energy for writing and published nothing between 1965 and 1970. Baltimore is generally considered to have a true mix of Southern and Northern culture. It also is set in area of considerable Quaker presence. The Tyler children were eventually enrolled in a local Friends school. During this time she began writing literary reviews for journals, newspapers, etc. to provide the family with additional income. She would continue this employment until the late 1980s writing approximately 250 reviews in total. Tyler felt like this time away from novels enriched her experience and in turn gave her writing greater depth.

National Recognition

Tyler began writing again in 1970 and had published three more novels by 1974. In her own opinion, her writing improved considerably during this period; with her children entering school, she was able to devote a great deal more focus to it than had been possible since she graduated from Duke. With the book [*Celestial Navigation*](#), Tyler began to get national recognition: Gail Godwin, gave it a very favorable review in the New York Times Review of Books. While she is not proud of her first four novels, Tyler considers this fifth novel one of her favorites. It was a difficult book to write she notes, since it required rewriting draft after draft to truly develop her understanding of the characters. John Updike gave a favorable review to her next novel, [*Searching for Caleb*](#),

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calling her writing wickedly good. Afterward he took an interest in her work and reviewed her next four novels as well.

With her next novel, Tyler truly arrived as a recognized artist in the literary world. Tyler's ninth novel, [*Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant*](#), which she considers her best work, was a finalist for the [Pulitzer Prize](#), [PEN/Faulkner Award](#), and the American Book Award for Fiction in 1983. Her tenth novel, [*The Accidental Tourist*](#), was awarded the [National Book Critics Circle Award](#) for Fiction in 1985, the [Ambassador Book Award](#) for Fiction in 1986, and was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize in 1986. It was also made into a 1988 movie as mentioned above. The popularity of the film increased the public awareness of her work. Her 11th novel, [*Breathing Lessons*](#), received the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in 1989 and was Time magazine's Book of the Year. It was adapted into a 1994 TV movie, as eventually were four other of her novels.

Since *Breathing Lessons*, Tyler has written additional novels, all of which have received favorable reviews. Many have been Book of the Month Club Main Selections and have become New York Times Bestsellers. [*Ladder of Years*](#) was chosen by *Time* as one of the ten best books of 1995. [*A Patchwork Planet*](#) was a *New York Times* Notable Book (1999). [*Saint Maybe*](#) (1991) and [*Back When We Were Grownups*](#) (2001) were adapted into TV movies in 1998 and 2004

In addition to her novels, Tyler has published short stories in *The New Yorker*, *The Saturday Evening Post*, *Redbook*, *McCall's*, and *Harper's*, but they have never been published as a collection.

Current Situation

Tyler's husband died at 65 over 25 years ago. Famous for her seeming reclusiveness and avoiding of interviews was more about protecting her work. She would become self-conscious discussing her work with interviews as it would impact writing she was doing at the time.

Retirement is not an option for Tyler. "I'll carry on writing because that is what I do," Tyler says. But she is not on autopilot. "When I finish one book I never think, 'Oh, there's another one.' It takes a little while to refill. My happiest moment is to be in the middle of a book. The characters are talking to me. Sometimes, one will make a joke I haven't thought of and I'll laugh."²

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