

Interviews ⇨



AN INTERVIEW WITH ANNE TYLER

Wendy Lamb

ANNE TYLER is the author of seven novels and numerous short stories. Her first novel, *If Morning Ever Comes*, was published in 1964; her most recent books are *Earthly Possessions* (1977), *Searching for Caleb* (1976), *Celestial Navigation* (1974), and *The Clock Winder* (1972). In 1977 she received the Award for Literature of the American Academy Institute of Arts and Letters.

Anne Tyler was born in Minneapolis, but grew up in Raleigh, North Carolina, and considers herself a southerner. She graduated from Duke University at 19, where she twice won the Anne Flexner Award for creative writing, and was elected to Phi Beta Kappa. She has done graduate work in Russian Studies. She and her husband, Taghi Mohammad Modarresi, a child psychiatrist, live in Baltimore with their two daughters.

The following interview took place in a car en route to the Cedar Rapids airport, concluding Ms. Tyler's 18 hours in Iowa City, during which she gave a reading, attended a party, held a special workshop for fiction students, and discussed *Earthly Possessions* with an undergraduate seminar.

The night before, she had read the fourth chapter of a novel about a middle-aged man with a large family, Morgan, who "gets into his clothes every morning as if they are costumes, and who has a terrible tendency to step into other people's lives—which you might also say, in a way, about writers. This Morgan and I have been wrestling together for so long that I'm not sure the novel is ever going to see the light of day."

Morgan, a man who "must get out of his life sometimes," reflects a theme common to much of Ms. Tyler's work. *Earthly Possessions* is the story of Charlotte, a woman in her thirties who decides—not for the first time—to leave her husband, her family, the house where she grew up. She goes to the bank to withdraw money for the trip and is taken hostage by a bank robber who forces her to accompany him on his flight south. In *The Clock Winder*, Elizabeth Abbott takes some time off from school, accepts a job as a handyman with an eccentric family, and finds their dependence on her not only overwhelming but tragic. Though she leaves, she finds she cannot escape the relentless affections and energies of the Emerson family. Jeremy Pauling, the central character of *Celestial Navigation*, is a sculptor of "simple humanity," though he himself cannot bear to venture outside his Baltimore boarding house to confront "real" humanity. In *Searching for Caleb*, Justine, a fortuneteller, accompanies her 90-year-old grandfather on forays in his search for his brother Caleb, who disappeared in 1912. Justine and her grandfather Peck take well to travel, since Justine's husband, her first cousin Duncan Peck, finds a new job and home every year—seeking, in one sense, to escape the looming presence of the Peck family compound in Baltimore. In her review of *Searching for Caleb*,

Edna Stumpf (*The Philadelphia Inquirer*) defines this central concern of Ms. Tyler's books: "It's about the simultaneous lust to wander and to take root, to move and to stay. It's about trying, up till the moment of death, to discover what it was we rebelled against, what it was we adjusted to, what we loved and what we lost. Anne Tyler has made something magical out of common life, fulfilling our belief that it can be magical."

LAMB: In your article on writing in *The Washington Post* (8/15/76) you said that it "seems to be a job where the actual doing matters more than the results." Since you've just been in the midst of a writers' workshop, it seems fitting to begin by talking about the process of writing, and then, perhaps, a bit about the role of a writer. In other interviews and articles one reads, you give the impression of being an extremely confident writer; for example, you've said, "What comes, comes once," and that if you are in the middle of an idea and you want to get up and have coffee, you have to choose between coffee and the idea; and that now, more and more, you find yourself choosing the coffee, because you realize that ideas are limitless, you'll always have another. Was that something you had to learn—possibly by regretting crucial "lost" thoughts along the way? How did you develop this confidence?

TYLER: I hesitate to answer that because I'm in a different state from the one I was in when I wrote all that. I'm more concerned about losing ideas—I'm not getting up for coffee as often. This new novel, Morgan's, is giving me a hell of a time. I'm not as confident now.

LAMB: How did you lose your confidence?

TYLER: After *Earthly Possessions*, I wrote a novel that I ditched. A year's work, out the door.

LAMB: What made you decide to ditch it?

TYLER: Well, I sent it to my agent, who didn't like it; so I said, don't send it out. Now if I had really liked it myself, nothing would have stopped me. The problem was that it was boring. I've never gone back and read it, from a distance, though.

LAMB: But you do seem very confident about your characters.

TYLER: I'm always confident about my characters—that doesn't change. I'm not confident about plots. I always feel very fond of my characters. Before I start anything I spend about a month just thinking about them, and I end up knowing an awful lot about them, much more than I put in the book.

LAMB: You've also said that you have "an automatic pilot" that works while you sleep, solving the problems in your plot—implying that your characters, somehow, keep going without you, and that sometimes, when you have an event in mind, your characters will take over. They'll refuse to

do something, and you'll have to "let the plot go their way. And when I do, everything falls into place." How? Do you sit back and "let go?" I imagine that must be painful, if you just sit there with your pen clicking in and out.

TYLER: I haven't always known how to let my characters go. But if I have something in mind and they're going to make it impossible to do it, I find it out pretty early. I've had several angry letters and calls from people who've wanted a happy ending for *Celestial Navigation*—they wanted the man and woman to stay together. All along I wanted that ending, too, and I was sure I'd be able to work out a way. I kept pushing toward it, but that writing felt wooden: my sentences were jerky when I looked back at them. In a way I felt I was trying to cover up a lie, and then I thought, I may as well tell the truth: the woman leaves the man. The problem in *Celestial Navigation* was that those characters were two absolutely separate people, and they couldn't possibly have stayed together.

LAMB: Did you ever have a character who refused to do what you had planned, and then wouldn't work it out on his own, either?

TYLER: No—because of all the thinking that comes before, I would have ditched such a character long before I began the book. I like every one of my characters; this is very important to me. My mother is shocked by this. She says, "How can you *like* someone like Jake (the bank robber in *Earthly Possessions*)?" But what I like is a sense of character, however spiky or difficult the person may be.

LAMB: Speaking of difficult characters, I'm curious about the way you portray ministers. Meg's husband in *Searching for Caleb*, Elizabeth's father in *The Clock Winder*, Charlotte's "Frankenstein" husband in *Earthly Possessions*—all of them seem to be portrayed as something that makes other characters shudder, as something to escape. Why is this? Is there a personal reason behind it?

TYLER: No real reason. The fact is I'm very fond of Saul, Charlotte's husband. I don't think of him as a horrible character at all. It's not that I have anything against ministers, but that I'm particularly concerned with how much right anyone has to change someone, and ministers are people who feel they have that right.

LAMB: This confidence you have in your characters would seem to contradict your remark in *The New York Times Book Review* last June—when asked to comment on your summer plans, you said you'd go off on vacation, return to your characters, and "hope they will not, after all, have crumbled away, as I always fear they will."

TYLER: I don't *really* fear for them—the fact that I'm willing to leave them means that I trust them. I know they'll be OK. But it's true that events threaten your characters. What's difficult is any day that a child stays home sick, when I've just gotten someone where he's starting to go somewhere. You know, you'll have a rusty day, where nothing happens,

and then a character will flower suddenly, and you don't want to leave him.

LAMB: Actually, from your description of your working environment in the *Post* article, "There is only one room I can work in—a stern white cubicle. I hate to travel away from here. I hate to even rearrange the furniture, or start writing at an unaccustomed time," I'm surprised that you can let yourself take vacations at all. *Can* you just quit for awhile?

TYLER: I quit for a month sometimes. Sometimes longer. After a month, of course, it takes a while before my characters come back. But there's nothing I can do about it, with children. Most of the summer revolves around getting them to camp. One summer, when I was working on Morgan, carrying him around, it just seemed there was one emergency after another, one child or the other, it was always something happening, and I could see Morgan in his broad-brimmed hat, fading away. It took me a week's work to get him back, but then he perked up. This probably sounds crazy, talking about these people I "carry around with me," as if they were real.

LAMB: Oh, no. Do you ever find new characters trying to push up while you're in the middle of a book? And that you have to say, go away, I can't do you yet?

TYLER: Oh, yes. Sometimes at the end of a book—I suppose it's a protective device, when I'm feeling panicky about having nothing more to work on—I hear a new voice saying, "Well, I was born in so-and-so," and I say, "Will you shut up? I'll get to you."

LAMB: Last night, when we were talking after the reading, you said your family thinks of you, most likely, as the author of *Searching for Caleb*, because the grandfather is your grandfather, but you think of yourself as the author of *Celestial Navigation*, because Jeremy is closer to your own personality—which describes you as a recluse.

TYLER: I'm afraid that is so. Last year, the paper reported an award, some small award, and it said, "Award given to Cynthia Somebody, poet, and Anne Tyler, recluse." I find this is more and more true. It didn't used to be that way. Before I was married, it seemed I was always on a train. I do agree with Jeremy, though—you know, in the beginning of the book he has this quote, of Emerson's I think, which says that a man could develop character by doing one thing he disliked every day of his life. Jeremy starts out thinking that this would be a good thing to try. But then he finds that even getting out of bed is difficult, for him. He's already done something he disliked before his day is even begun. But I'm outwardly more balanced than Jeremy. I do manage to cope and get things done—though I can't imagine driving on the Beltway, as we're doing now. I can't merge. I feel that I've become increasingly closed down, self-protective. There are things I just refuse to do. I wouldn't go out and give some sort of talk. Not

only because I'm nervous in public but because I feel that kind of thing is a drain. I'm very involved with my children, yet I've never been to a PTA meeting in my life. I feel, well, the PTA can get along without me.

LAMB: You do seem to be an author who survives quite well without the "literary community," conferences like Bread Loaf, teaching at workshops like Iowa. Have you ever participated in something like that?

TYLER: I feel a little scared about constant involvement with other writers—I don't like to talk about writing. It makes me nervous. There are times, though, when I'm having trouble, when nothing will go, and I'd like to have someone to call and say what a rotten time I'm having. But then, that person would be a writer, and I couldn't call her in the middle of the day because she'd be writing too. I have thought that it must be nice to go to one of those places, like Yaddo, where you have no responsibilities, they hang your lunch on the door and you don't see anyone until supper, when you have some sort of conversation. But I'm afraid that everyone would talk about what they had done that day, which would be writing. My husband is a Persian novelist, and when he talks about how it's going, it makes me very nervous. I'm afraid that it's going to evaporate; he might just fritter it away.

LAMB: When you'd like to have someone to call—would you ever call your editor?

TYLER: No.

LAMB: What role does your editor play in the process of your novel?

TYLER: As little as possible. I don't want to know about anything that goes on in New York. I feel totally out of it. People don't believe me when someone will call and say, I have this novel, where should I send it, and I tell them I don't know anything, I don't have any list of addresses.

LAMB: Would you ever consider teaching?

TYLER: I think if I had to make other money I'd do something more physical, less mental—maybe a carpenter. Just not something that took a lot out of my mind.

LAMB: How do you feel about reviews?

TYLER: Ideally, you shouldn't read reviews, but of course you do. A bad review is bad for your writing; a good one is very bad for your writing, because you keep those opinions in mind when you work.

LAMB: In a way, your sense of your own detachment, reclusiveness, seems contradictory, because anyone who writes and publishes imposes himself on the outside world—it's an aggressive act, in some ways. Can you really ignore your audience when you write, work in a vacuum?

TYLER: I try to write everything as if no one was ever going to read it. Then at the end when I go back to polish, I see if a reader could make

sense of it. But it's hard to escape the sense of someone looking over your shoulder—the self-consciousness. *Celestial Navigation* was the most difficult book to write. It took two years and it made me sick all the way through. I'd go into my study and think, I really need shoelaces. Then I'd get in the car and drive five miles to get those shoelaces. *Searching for Caleb* was the most fun. I loved writing about a huge family.

LAMB: But you know, not all those characters are lovable—Justin, the patriarch, or Caroline, Justin's mother—I didn't really like them. What is it that makes you feel this affection toward your characters? Does it spring out of some enormous tolerance? Or curiosity?

TYLER: They don't seem unpleasant to me. I think that what I most fear in people is intrusion, but it doesn't happen with those characters because on paper you control them, you guard against that intrusion. I can feel quite affectionate toward people on paper, whom I couldn't stand to be in a room with.

LAMB: I've just been reading *The Tin Can Tree*—

TYLER: Don't read that book. Stop. *The Tin Can Tree* and *If Morning Ever Comes* should be burned.

LAMB: Can I quote that?

TYLER: Please. They were formless and wandering and should never have been published.

LAMB: Why were they published?

TYLER: I really don't know. That was a lucky time for young writers—not like now. Publishers were actually soliciting work from young writers.

LAMB: You don't have any fondness for those first two books at all?

TYLER: No. I suppose they have the same problem as I saw in the book that I ditched just recently; I never analyzed whatever the faults were, except that I knew that I wanted to write something, but I didn't have anything to write with. I didn't have a pressing urge. When you finish a book, it feels like you've used up all your ideas—like cleaning out your drawers; then, slowly, it all fills up again.

LAMB: So you're saying you never feel that there's *nothing* you want to write—you always have a next something to go on to?

TYLER: Oh, once a week I feel I have nothing to write. But that's a different feeling, all clogged up, than the one you have when you've used up all your ideas on something, finished—all cleaned out.

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