

## AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY



Anne Tyler was born in Minneapolis, Minnesota, in 1941 and grew up in Raleigh, North Carolina. She is the author of more than twenty novels. Her twentieth novel, *A Spool of Blue Thread*, was short-listed for the Man Booker Prize in 2015. Her eleventh 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.

[Author's Website.](#)

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Revisit the novel's first chapter, now that you know the full story. What did you originally predict for Serena? What were your notions about why her family was so disconnected?
2. Which images stand out most clearly to you from the Garretts' summer vacation? What lifelong pursuits were set in motion for Alice, Lily and David during their time at the lakeside cabin? Share your defining memories from a childhood trip.
3. How did your perceptions of Mercy and Robin shift as the details of their marriage unfolded? Though Robin's proposal included the plea, "If you can imagine us ever, ever divorcing, then I don't want you to accept" (page 146), was there ever a time when he felt truly secure with Mercy, and with his in-laws?
4. Anne Tyler explores the nature of time and memory in much of her fiction. How did the timeline in *FRENCH BRAID* amplify the realism of the characters? How did cultural expectations for women evolve between Mercy's generation and her children's? What stayed the same, even in a new millennium?
5. How did you react to the story of Desmond, the Motts' cat?

6. Are the cousins a reflection of their parents' and grandparents' legacies and personalities, or do they create a series of new beginnings? Ultimately, why don't the cousins know one another very well?
7. A recurring element in FRENCH BRAID is the ritual of bringing home a romantic partner to meet the family. How do those encounters play out for the Garretts, and in your own family lore? In the novel, what is at the root of this quest for approval, and what motivates the naysaying?
8. Alice and Lily embody two very different versions of womanhood and motherhood. Does temperament alone account for these differences? What did they learn from Mercy about how to find fulfillment in life?
9. Mercy's studio is free of clutter. If you were to set up a room of your own, what would it look like? How would you pass the time there?
10. Mercy's studio is free of clutter. If you were to set up a room of your own, what would it look like? How would you pass the time there?
11. How would you characterize the surprise 50th anniversary party and its aftermath? Heartbreaking? Humorous? Some of each? What does it cost the Garrett family emotionally to perpetuate the open secret of Robin and Mercy's separation? What other aspects of their family life require the ability to pretend?
12. Is Mercy a merciful person, including being merciful with herself? What do her paintings reveal about the aspects of home, and homemaking, that intrigue her? What was it like to watch her in Manhattan, accompanied by Kendall?
13. When David and Greta describe the crimped "ripples" that keep us from ever being free of our families (page 234), what are they saying about the fundamental differences in their upbringing? Is the interwoven nature of family a source of comfort or confinement to you?
14. In the novel's closing scene, what truths are distilled as we observe David's fierce love for Benny?
15. How does FRENCH BRAID enhance the sketches of humanity that emerged in previous books by Anne Tyler that you have read? What new insight does FRENCH BRAID offer in the wake of the pandemic?

ReadingGroupGuides.

## BOOK REVIEWS

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### Booklist

In the Garrett family, each person is an island, mysterious and self-contained, yet, as Tyler reveals so deftly, all are inextricably connected. Her latest Baltimore-anchored, lushly imagined, psychologically intricate, virtually inhalable novel is a stepping-stone tale, with each finely composed section (after the opening scene) jumping forward in time, generation by generation. In 1959, Mercy is the wife of a stalwart plumber turned manager of her family's hardware store, the mother of temperamentally opposite teen daughters and a younger, dreamy son, and the story's heart and

core enigma. All Mercy, who can be merciless, wants to do is paint in solitude, and her house portraits, which feature soft-focused interiors in which one object is rendered in hyper detail, parallel Tyler's zeroing in on characters at key moments. Bossy Alice is forever baffled by Lily, her more passionate sister. David, a high-school drama and English teacher, surprises everyone by marrying the seemingly austere school nurse. One granddaughter inherits Mercy's artistic talent; a grandson thinks no one knows he's gay; and Mercy's long-suffering husband is a font of unshakable love. In closing, the pandemic brings together a household of Garretts and their neighbors in new, rejuvenating ways. At every leap, Tyler balances gracefully between tenderness and piquant humor, her insights into human nature luminous. HIGH-DEMAND BACKSTORY: Tyler is a phenomenon, each of her novels fresh and incisive, and this charming family tale will be honey for her fans.

### **Publisher's Weekly**

Tyler (*Redhead by the Side of the Road*) returns with a dry and well-crafted look at a family that inexplicably comes apart over several decades. Serena Drew, a 20-something Baltimore grad student traveling with her boyfriend, James, thinks she recognizes her cousin, Nicholas Garrett, in the crowd at a Philadelphia train station in 2010, but she can't say for sure because she hasn't seen him for years. "You guys give a whole new meaning to the phrase 'once removed,' " James says, and wonders if "some deep dark secret" might explain why Serena rarely sees her aunt Alice or her uncle David, Nicholas's father. But the explanation, as it happens, is not so simple. This also turns out not to be Serena's story, as Tyler leaves the young couple for late 1950s Baltimore, where Alice; Serena's mother, Lily; and David are raised by their mismatched parents, a socially awkward plumber named Robin and begrudging housewife Mercy, who wants to be an artist. Once the parents become empty nesters, Mercy spends most of her days and nights in her neighboring studio. There are no big reveals, but Tyler's focus on character development proves fruitful; a reunion organized by the wistful Robin in the '90s is particularly affecting, as is a coda with David during the Covid-19 pandemic. As always, Tyler offers both comfort and surprise. (Mar.)

### **Library Journal**

Author of the Pulitzer Prize-winning *Breathing Lessons* and the recent Man Booker Prize finalist *Redhead by the Side of the Road*, Tyler has always had a way with families. Her protagonists here are the Garretts, who don't necessarily seem that close. Mercy is more invested in creating artwork than tending to husband Robin or their three children--dependable Alice, wild-eyed Lily, and the youngest, David, who appears more than a little eager to forge his own way far from the homestead. In fact, the Garretts have only taken one vacation together, way back in 1959. Yet they clearly influence one another powerfully over the decades depicted here.

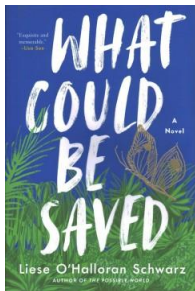
### **Kirkus Reviews**

In her 24th novel, Tyler once again unravels the tangled threads of family life. This familiar subject always seems fresh in her hands because Tyler draws her characters and their interactions in such specific and revealing detail. Robin and Mercy Garrett and their three children seem oddly distanced from each other when we meet them during a 1959 summer vacation. Robin talks a lot about what everything costs, and Mercy is frequently absent painting the local landscape. Fifteen-year-old Lily is also not around much; deprived of her Baltimore boyfriend, she's taken up with an older boy who bossy, judgmental older sister Alice is pleased to opine is only using her. Seven-year-old David rejects Robin's attempts to get him in the water in favor of inventing elaborate storylines for the plastic GIs he's recast as veterinarians. As usual, Tyler deftly sets the scene and broadly outlines characters who will change and deepen over time as the Garretts traverse 60 years; individual chapters offer the perspective of each parent and sibling (plus three members of the third generation). We need to get inside their heads, because the Garretts seldom discuss what's really on their minds, the primary example being the fact that once David goes to college, Mercy gets a studio and eventually stops living with Robin altogether. All the children know, but since she appears for family

gatherings--including a weird but moving surprise 50th anniversary party Robin throws--no one ever mentions it. Tyler gives the final word to David, who, like his mother, has maintained tenuous family ties while deliberately keeping his distance. Families are like the French braids that left their daughter's hair in waves even after she undid them, he tells his wife: "You're never really free; the ripples are crimped in forever." It's a characteristically homely, resonant metaphor from a writer who understands that the domestic world can contain the universe. More lovely work from Tyler, still vital and creative at 80. Copyright (c) Kirkus Reviews, used with permission.

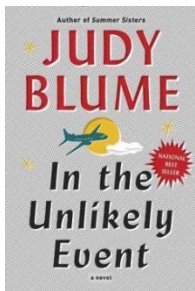
## READALIKES

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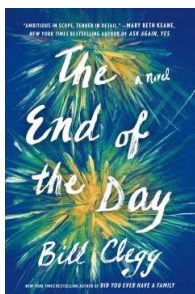
### ***What Could Be Saved* by Liese O'Halloran Schwarz**

Laura Preston is a reclusive artist at odds with her older sister Bea as their elegant, formidable mother slowly slides into dementia. When a stranger contacts Laura claiming to be her brother who disappeared forty years earlier when the family lived in Bangkok, Laura ignores Bea's warnings of a scam and flies to Thailand to see if it can be true. But meeting him in person leads to more questions than answers.



### ***In the Unlikely Event* by Judy Blume**

In 1987, Miri Ammerman returns to her hometown of Elizabeth, New Jersey, to attend a commemoration of the worst year of her life. Thirty-five years earlier, when Miri was fifteen, and in love for the first time, a succession of airplanes fell from the sky, leaving a community reeling. Against this backdrop of actual events that Blume experienced in the early 1950s, when airline travel was new and exciting and everyone dreamed of going somewhere, she paints a vivid portrait of a particular time and place--Nat King Cole singing "Unforgettable," Elizabeth Taylor haircuts, young (and not-so-young) love, explosive friendships, A-bomb hysteria, rumors of Communist threat. And a young journalist who makes his name reporting tragedy.



### ***The End of the Day* by Bill Clegg**

A retired widow in rural Connecticut wakes to an unexpected visit from her childhood best friend whom she hasn't seen in forty-nine years. A man arrives at a Pennsylvania hotel to introduce his estranged father to his newborn daughter and finds him collapsed on the floor of the lobby. A sixty-seven-year-old taxi driver in Kauai receives a phone call from the mainland that jars her back to a traumatic past. These seemingly disconnected lives come together as half-century-old secrets begin to surface.