

BOOK CLUB To Go!

Digging to America

By Anne Tyler

Introduction

Anne Tyler's richest, most deeply searching novel—a story about what it is to be an American, and about Iranian-born Maryam Yazdan, who, after 35 years in this country, must finally come to terms with her “outsiderness.”

Two families, who would otherwise never have come together, meet by chance at the Baltimore airport – the Donaldsons, a very American couple, and the Yazdans, Maryam's fully assimilated son and his attractive Iranian wife. Each couple is awaiting the arrival of an adopted infant daughter from Korea. After the instant babies from distant Asia are delivered, Bitsy Donaldson impulsively invites the Yazdans to celebrate: an “arrival party” that from then on is repeated every year as the two families become more and more deeply intertwined. Even Maryam is drawn in – up to a point. When she finds herself being courted by Bitsy Donaldson's recently widowed father, all the values she cherishes – her traditions, her privacy, her otherness—are suddenly threatened.

A luminous novel brimming with subtle, funny, and tender observations that immerse us in the challenges of both sides of the American story.

(barnesandnoble.com)

About the Author

Tyler, Anne, 1941–, American novelist, b. Minneapolis. Often set in the American South and frequently in and around Baltimore, Md., her fiction, which is marked by wit and perception, portrays vivid characters involved in ordinary human life, particularly family relationships. Among her novels are *A Slipping-Down Life* (1970), *Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant* (1982), *The Accidental Tourist* (1985), *Breathing Lessons* (1988; Pulitzer Prize), *Saint Maybe* (1991), *Ladder of Years* (1995), *The Amateur Marriage* (2004), and *Digging to America* (2006).

(referencecenter.com)

Author Interview by Jennifer Morgan Gray

Q: Gray: Was there a particular character, image, or idea that inspired the writing of *Digging to America*?

A: Tyler: In the summer of 1997, I drove my younger daughter to the Baltimore airport to pick up her husband-to-be, who was flying in from San Francisco for our annual beach trip. When we arrived, we found a gigantic, boisterous collection of strangers assembled, holding placards that made it clear they were waiting to welcome a baby. Of course we had to stay and watch what happened. (In fact, that's the two of us on page four—the mother and grown daughter.) The baby turned out to be a tiny, very serious Korean boy about six or eight months old, and seeing his new parents reach out to take him from the attendant was one of the most moving moments imaginable. It hung on in my mind for several years, germinating in the dark the way seeds for novels often do.

Q: Gray: I've actually had an "arrival day" experience myself: When my younger sister arrived from South Korea twenty-two years ago, my entire family gathered at the airport to welcome her (and we watch the video every year). You've captured the feeling of the day—anticipation and nervousness and joy—so perfectly. What prompted you to begin the book with this scene? How does the interaction of the two families give a good glimpse of what's to come?

A: Tyler: I wish I could see that video! One of the thoughts that occurred to me while I was watching the family at the airport was that some people seem by nature so exuberant and outgoing and celebratory, larger than life almost. That's why I came up with the idea of a second family whose style was the polar opposite—I've always been fascinated by inborn, dyed-in-the-wool character traits. And it was fun to set up that first scene as a microcosm of the two families' future interactions.

Q: Gray: The two families in the book are linked because of their experiences with adoption. Did you research adoptive families before reading the book, or did you have any personal experience with adoption?

A: Tyler: As with all my books, I relied on idle daydreams rather than research or personal experience. I thought for months and for years about that family I saw in the airport; I wondered how things were going with them; I entertained various "what-ifs" about how it must feel to take on a ready-made son or daughter. In time, I could almost believe I'd been through the experience myself.

(randomhouse.com)

Reviews

“Ms. Tyler deserves her reputation as a master of the fine threads of human relationships. The barely registered slights, fleeting intuitions and shivers of pity that pass between these characters are a pleasure to behold.” –Tara Gallagher - *The Wall Street Journal*

“Anne Tyler has written 17 novels and you only wish for more. Her newest, *Digging to America*, is wonderfully wry, yet intimately involving. There’s a definite sense of loss when it’s over and done.” –Sheryl Connelly - *New York Daily News*

“Tyler encompasses the collision of cultures without losing her sharp focus on the daily dramas of modern family life in her 17th novel . . . [A] touching, humorous story.”–
Publishers Weekly

(*randomhouse.com*)

Further Reading

The Ponder Heart by Eudora Welty

Practical Magic by Alice Hoffman

Things Invisible to See by Nancy Willard

A Virtuous Woman by Kaye Gibbons

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Possible Discussion Questions

1. In calling their baby Susan, the Yazdans "chose a name that resembled the name she had come with, Sooki, and also it was a comfortable sound for Iranians to pronounce" [p. 10]. The Donaldsons keep their baby's Korean name, Jin-Ho. What is the significance of these choices, both within the context of the novel and in the context of adoption in general? Is it important for an adoptive family to give children from another country or ethnic group a sense of their heritage? What insights does Ziba and Bitsy's fractious disagreement about "Americanization" [p. 46] offer into this question?
2. Right from the start, Maryam feels a deep connection with Susan -- "something around the eyes, some way of looking at things, some onlooker's look: that was what they shared. Neither one of them quite belonged" [p. 13]. Does Maryam's pleasure in bonding with Susan hint at needs or emotions that she is unable or unwilling to acknowledge? To what extent does her insistence that she is "Still and forever a guest, on her very best behavior" [p. 15] serve as a convenient excuse for remaining aloof from other people?
3. What aspects of her heritage does Maryam value most and why? Why is she so unsettled by her visit to Iran and her reactions to Iranians in the country [p. 39]? Why is she annoyed when her cousin's American husband sprinkles bits of Farsi into his conversation [p. 147]? Why has she raised Sami to be "more American than the Americans" [p. 83], even as she clings to her otherness?
4. Does Maryam's behavior show that she feels not only estranged from American society but also in some way superior to it? What specific incidents and conversations bring this aspect of her personality to light?
5. In addition to being a wonderfully amusing vignette, what is the import of Sami's "performance piece" [pp. 80-81]? Why does Tyler use humor and mockery to convey a serious point about Americans and how they appear to immigrants? Does the fact that Sami is American-born and-raised make his criticisms more credible (and perhaps more acceptable) than they would be if a newcomer to the country expressed them?

6. How does Maryam differ from Ziba's parents and her cousin Farah, the other Iranian immigrants depicted in the novel? What factors, both practical and psychological, influence the characters' desire and ability to make a place for themselves in American society? What do these varying portraits show about the process of assimilation? Are there inherent contradictions between accepting the culture of an adopted homeland and retaining one's ethnic identity?
7. Compare and contrast Ziba and Bitsy. How do they differ as women? As mothers? Which woman is more sympathetically drawn? How does Tyler use both negative and positive attributes to bring each woman to life? How do the women's individual approaches to motherhood influence the way they regard and evaluate each other? Is Ziba overly susceptible to Bitsy's criticism and suggestions? Does her friendship with Ziba, as well as her frequent encounters with Maryam, affect Bitsy's beliefs or behavior? Does the relationship between Ziba and Bitsy change over the course of the book?
8. How do the portraits of Sami and Brad compare to those of their wives? Are their personalities as richly described? Do they play parallel roles within their families? Is their behavior in relation to their children and wives a reflection of their personalities and the nature of their marriages, or do cultural patterns, expectations, and values also play a part?
9. Does the romance between Dave and Maryam unfold in a realistic way? In addition to Dave's moving reaction to Connie's death, what other events or conversations show that he contains a depth and a self-awareness that Maryam and the others seem oblivious to?
10. What does Maryam's description of her courtship and marriage [pp. 155-160] add to our image of her? Why has she chosen to keep the story to herself, not even sharing it with Sami?
11. Discuss Maryam's reaction to Dave's proposal [pp. 211-214]. What does her conversation with Sami and Ziba reveal about her difficulties in reconciling her prejudices about Americans and her affection for Dave? In what ways do her protests also bring to light her ambivalent feelings about who she is and what she is willing to give up at this stage of her life? Why do you think Maryam makes the decision she does at the end of the book?

(litlovers.com)