

THE DYNAMICS OF FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS-A SELECT STUDY OF ANNE TYLER'S
SAINT MAYBE

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ABSTRACT

In the present study author explores the ambivalences of family relationships in Anne Tyler's *Saint Maybe*. Tyler reveals that her characters must at least be open to other perspectives and other modes of living. Her characters who are most successful in their own lives are those whose domestic arrangements combine. The opposing human needs for permanence and mobility ("Anne Tyler's Houses" 46). Sticking to her Baltimore home, Tyler then wrote *Saint Maybe*. Unusual for its attention to the subject of religion, *Saint Maybe* nevertheless maintains Tyler's interest in exploring the tension between an individual's conflicting needs for freedom and connection to others, especially family.

In *Saint Maybe*, Ian Bedloe plays parcheesi with his niece and nephew after the death of his brother. But the dice that roll in that game provide further evidence of the chanciness of life. Tyler's plot explores the ways ordinary people react to disastrous events with quietly heroic behavior. When seventeen-year-old Ian Bedloe confronts his older brother Danny with his belief that the latter's wife, Lucy, is having an affair, Danny commits suicide. Shortly after, Lucy dies of an overdose of sleeping pills, and responsibility for the care of the deceased couple's three children (two from their mother's previous marriage) falls to their grandparents. A profoundly guilty Ian receives spiritual guidance from Reverend Emmett of the storefront Church of the Second Chance, and he decides to drop out of college to become a carpenter and help his ailing parents with the children, until he eventually becomes their primary caretaker, sacrificing his own freedom to fulfil what he perceives to be a lifelong moral obligation.

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There was this about the Bedloes. They believed that every part of their lives was absolutely wonderful. It wasn't just an act, either. They really did believe it. Or at least Ian's mother did, and she was the one who set the tone. Her marriage was a great joy to her, her house made her happy every time she walked into it, and her children were attractive and kind and universally liked.(8)

Sometimes fiction can teach us truth that is seldom expressed with clarity in ordinary time. Such is the case in Anne Tyler's *Saint Maybe* (1991). Anne Tyler's stories are set in Baltimore, a city which many readers will neither know nor feel guilty about not knowing. That there will be many readers of *Saint Maybe*, however, is a certainty. It is Anne Tyler's twelfth novel, and she has a loyal and growing band of admirers. The bulk of *Saint Maybe* focuses on spiritual concerns like sin, atonement, and redemption—but social concerns of suicide, drug abuse, and single parenting appear peripherally. Ian Bedloe's brother, Danny, kills himself rather than confront the possibility that his wife has cheated on him and their new baby is not his. Left alone to rear three children, Danny's wife, Lucy, has no job skills and thus no source of income. She has lived by her looks and wits in the past but has little luck after Danny's death. To escape from her problems, she relies on sleeping pills and accidentally overdoses. Thus, Ian is left with the children, Agatha, Thomas, and Daphne. Even though his parents help out some, he, too, faces the never-ending task of being the single, primary caregiver for the children. Not only must Ian learn to love the children, he must care for them beyond infancy. When Daphne is a somewhat rebellious teenager, he must leave work each day to pick her up from school rather than leave her to her own devices in the afternoon.

Saint Maybe addresses most directly another important Tyler concern: "religion". Tyler is interested in the subject, as she told Patricia Rowe Willrich (1992) about the genesis of *Saint Maybe*: "all I knew at the start was that I wondered what it must feel like to be a born-again Christian, since that is a kind of life very different from mine" (1992:513). This emphasis on religion does not obscure the familiar Tyler issues—family, identity, marriage and children. Ian Bedloe, who is not born again until later in the novel, lives in his street's version of "the ideal, apple-pie household." (1) The particular thing about his family is that they "believed that every part of their lives was absolutely wonderful." This belief wavers when Danny, the oldest son, brings home Lucy, a divorced woman with children, as his fiancée; falters when their baby is born "premature"; and finally is shattered when Danny runs his car into a wall after hearing from Ian that he suspects Lucy has been having an affair and that the child, Daphne, is not Danny's. Lucy dies shortly afterward, overdosing on sleeping pills, and Ian's family is left with the children—Agatha and Thomas from her first marriage, and Daphne.

Ian has an immediate connection to Daphne: "It seemed she had reached out and pulled a string from somewhere deep inside him. It seemed she knew him."(24) Yet this feeling contrasts with his sense of "the monotony and irritation and confinement" of children. After he has taken over the child care, Ian feels that he is "travelling a treadmill, stuck with these querulous children night after night after night."(96) Yet he also realizes the dual nature of his responsibility for them—his role in the loss of their father and mother and their helplessness. "Why being a child at all was scary," he realizes, "Powerlessness, out siderness. Murmurs over your head about something everyone knows but you." The difficulties of both being a child and raising children have occupied Tyler at least since *Earthly Possessions* and continue to do so throughout her later novels.

One of Tyler's major themes is that love, and life itself, is composed of tiny everyday responsibilities and mundane tasks, rather than momentous events. To illustrate this theme, most of the "major events" or plot points of the novel take place off-stage. Tyler shows Ian reluctantly baby-sitting Agatha and Thomas when he has an important date, rather than the actual scene of Danny's death. Through Agatha's eyes, we see Lucy disappearing into drug dependence, rather than her being rushed to the hospital in an ambulance. One of Tyler's messages is that the truly momentous events in life are the baby needing a bottle and a fresh diaper, the children needing a story read to them, the Grandma needing to rest her arthritic knees, rather than the type of events reported in newspapers. Each chapter is named after a mundane object or event that is important to the character. Most of the deaths, weddings, funerals and births of the novel are not shown directly. Instead, Tyler focuses on specific scenes of everyday life that show the impact of these events on the characters, the Bedloe family, and their relationships with each other.

One of the most obvious omissions is the adoption ceremony. Although the adult Agatha and Daphne are intimately familiar with the adoption papers and consider them old friends, the ceremony itself is not shown in the novel. Tyler chooses this structure to show that the everyday occurrences in the Bedloe's lives are what constitute a family, rather than a piece of paper. The adoption document is important to Agatha and Daphne, because it solemnizes something they already are aware of - their Uncle Ian's love for and responsibility towards them.

Ian is, as the title proclaims, a modern saint (perhaps). His is the good life. But as he thinks when someone congratulates him: "There was no call to make such a fuss about it" (337). These are the novel's last words and one has to ask if it's worth making the fuss that a 337-page work of fiction represents. Does Ian merit this kind of attention? He has no obvious charm, no noteworthy characteristics of any kind. He never says anything interesting or thinks anything profound. He owns six books, all on self-improvement. He is not even a particularly competent carpenter (but then he wonders if Christ was—all that talking he did). As his fiancée tells a friend, he has only slept with two women in his life, "his high-school girlfriend before he joined the church and then a woman he dated a few years ago, but he felt terrible about that and vowed he wouldn't do it again." Ian himself does not want to be noticed—or at least not by the kind of woman Anne Tyler is, a smart writer of books. The *Accidental Tourist* is built round an analogous idea—a travel writer who hates travelling, and whose guides supply a kind of damage control system for those forced into it against their wishes. Ian, we may say, is the accidental hero of a novel—a character who implicitly upbraids his creator for making so much fuss about him.

As Tyler focuses more closely on the individuals involved, the residents of various houses on Waverly Street become less stereotypical and more endearing. The newlyweds have actually been married two years and will shortly have their first child. The foreigners are a revolving group of Middle Eastern students seeking advanced degrees in medicine or engineering from Johns Hopkins. They constantly engage in ill-fated home improvement projects, such as installing an intercom that starts a fire in the attic.

The Bedloe house is initially a cozy nest, if slightly disordered. Through Bee's illness and the ineffectual attempts to care for three children by Doug and Ian, the house increasingly falls into disorder. Eventually, Agatha contracts with Rita, the clutter counsellor, to organize the entire house, a decision that has fateful consequences for Ian.

Ian Bedloe is the youngest son in his Baltimore family. He is in high school, his older sister is married, and his older brother has just married the most beautiful woman. Danny is in love with Lucy even though she is divorced with two children. Danny, marries Lucy, a woman Ian does not approve of: their courtship is short, she has children from a previous relationship and after the wedding, Ian suspects that Lucy is fooling around behind Danny's back. Ian and his brother have an argument about Lucy, and after Danny slams out of the house, he has a car accident and dies.

From there life totally changes for the Bedloes. Ian knows that it is his fault. He is filled with guilt. Then he wanders into the Church of the Second Chance. Ian comes to term with himself and his relationship with God. Now, he needs to come to term with his family, and they with him. He needs to bring them back together.

In 1965, the happy Bedloe family is living an ideal, apple-pie existence in Baltimore. Then, in the blink of an eye, a single, tragic event occurs that will transform their lives forever — particularly that of seventeen-year-old Ian Bedloe, the youngest son, who blames himself for the sudden "accidental" death of his older brother. Depressed and depleted, Ian is almost crushed under the weight of an unbearable, secret guilt. Then one crisp January evening, he catches sight of a window with glowing yellow neon, the Church of the Second Chance. He enters and soon discovers that forgiveness must be earned, through a bit of sacrifice and a lot of love.

Saint Maybe, through its male protagonist, Ian Bedloe, focuses on the difficulties and responsibilities of single parenting. Doug Bedloe, Ian's father, has only once in his life changed a diaper. His son Ian's life will be more complicated—a mixture of the traditional male role of breadwinner and the traditional female role of nurturer for his dead brother's three children. At the age of nineteen, Ian quits college and becomes father and mother to Agatha, Tom, and Daphne. For the next twenty years, until 1988, when he is forty-one, he finds

himself locked into responsibilities that seem both of his own choosing and, at the same time, unfairly thrust upon him.

Ironically, at the outset of the novel, Ian has been unsympathetic to Lucy Dean Bedloe for not fulfilling the ideals of her roles as wife to his brother Danny and as mother of her three children. For one thing, Ian finds Lucy too attractive to be completely trustworthy. For another, she is divorced, bringing two small children into her marriage with Danny. Furthermore, after the birth of a third child only seven months into the marriage (when she has known Danny for only a few weeks), she burdens Ian with babysitting chores after school to escape from the baby and her other two children. Once, when she returns wearing a new dress, Ian concludes that the dress is a gift from a lover. When Ian tells Danny that Lucy has been unfaithful, Danny has a car accident and dies. Lucy succumbs soon afterward, the victim of an overdose of sleeping pills.

Now it is Ian, not Lucy, who will be held accountable for his actions and made to take on adult responsibilities. Overcome by guilt, Ian visits the Church of the Second Chance. The Reverend Emmett tells him to atone for his wrongdoing, face his obligations, and become responsible for his brother's children. Ian complies, drops out of college, becomes a carpenter, and parents Agatha, Tom, and Daphne. Ian's own parents are too tired, ill, and out-of-touch to take upon themselves full parental responsibility for their grandchildren.

Tyler uses her characters in *Saint Maybe* to examine the role of modern American family life. "Is the family an anchor in the storm?" asked Marilyn Gardner of the *Christian Science Monitor*. "Or is it a shackle? Do duty and devotion hold together the members who make up a family as well as the family itself? Or do families become, not support systems, but burdens of guilt, leading to damaging sacrifices of personal freedom?" (1991:13). *New York Times Book Review* contributor Jay Parini wrote of the novel: "In many ways it is Anne Tyler's most sophisticated work, a realistic chronicle that celebrates family life without erasing the pain and boredom that families almost necessarily inflict upon their members." (1991:1)

From 1968 to 1988, Ian sacrifices his own life for the sake of his brother's children. In six of the novel's ten chapters, the third person narrative focuses on Ian's conflicts in carrying out his role. He remains deeply religious, isolates himself from others in his work, and pushes away interested women in order to dedicate his life to the children's well-being. At the same time, he dreams of release, even hiring a private detective to look for Agatha and Tom's real father (only to learn he is deceased), lying to himself about his reasons for doing so. Four other chapters (also in the third person but told from the narrative perspectives of Agatha, Thomas, Doug, and Daphne) reveal family concern for the abnormal narrowness of Ian's life. Doug wishes his son would leave the Church of the Second Chance; the children want Ian to marry. Daphne labels Ian "Saint Maybe" for the way his virtue and cowardice intertwine. At the novel's end, Ian breaks out of his self-sacrificial pattern to marry risk-taking, sensual Rita di Carlo, only to find himself caught again in the familiar pattern of family responsibility as the father of a newborn son.

In *Saint Maybe*, Anne Tyler is concerned with the shifting roles of a changing society in the twentieth century United States. Ian Bedloe finds that he must become an androgynous figure, drawing on both his male and female characteristics in order to fulfill all the demands his family and society make upon him. Far from being liberated from responsibility and obligation, Ian finds that he must do even more than his father and forefathers before him. He must learn to be mother and father, breadwinner and nurturer, anchor and sail, for Danny and Lucy's orphaned children.

His sister-in-law Lucy, however, fails to transcend her traditional, dependent female role and survive. Poverty, lack of education, and responsibility for three small children pull her down and finally defeat her (a situation Ian comes to identify with more and more as he himself struggles to fulfill the role of single parent).

Ian's parents' (Doug and Bee Bedloe's) post-World War II optimism proves to be simplistic and outmoded (as are the separate spheres of their traditional marriage). More and more, they feel forced to retreat from present realities that do not fit their upbeat, worn-out philosophy. The foreigners down the street allow Doug to escape into their happy-go-lucky student world, playing with new American technology and complex American life. With them, Doug enjoys the luxury of suspending serious concern and everyday reality—which all must face when they return home.

In Tyler's *Saint Maybe*, characters must learn to survive, cope, and face life head-on in late-twentieth century American society. Those who succeed are most often androgynous figures such as the tall, bold, resourceful Rita di Carlo, Baltimore's resident Clutter Counselor; Ian's wards, Agatha and Daphne, who are

independent women who take on new roles without losing their care for others; and Ian himself, the solitary yet nurturing protagonist of the novel. They stand in contrast to other characters who retreat from life (such as Lucy, Bee, and Doug Bedloe), characters who are demoralized by not knowing all the answers, defeated by not being able to fly, and overwhelmed by having to face daily reality (as suggested by three of the novel's chapter titles).

Anne Tyler sympathizes with each of her characters, those who fail and those who survive. Through her third-person narrative perspective, she focuses closely on five different characters (Ian is given six chapters; Agatha, Tom, Daphne, and Doug, one apiece) to convey her characters' individual lives and concerns. As her readers learn to identify with her diverse characters, those same characters learn tolerance for one another. Her protagonist Ian, especially, comes to understand his dead sister-in-law Lucy and empathize with the difficulties of her mothering role. Tyler emphasizes, however, that Ian's tolerance is hardwon—the result of constant struggle with his own guilt and his determination to make reparation for his past wrongdoings. An ordinary man, he is torn between his desire to escape his responsibilities and his determination to fulfill them, his fear of making more mistakes and his need to lead a full life. *Saint Maybe* insists on the everyday sainthood of ordinary, imperfect, struggling humanity.

As the novel opens, Danny Bedloe introduces his family to Lucy, "the woman who's changed my life"; the novel concludes, more than twenty years later, as Ian Bedloe introduces his family to his infant son, Joshua, and contemplates that life-changing introductions actually are everyday occurrences. For Ian, most of these life changes result from what he considers his responsibility for the deaths of Danny and Lucy. After Ian accuses Lucy of marital infidelity, Danny drives into a wall, perhaps deliberately. Likewise, a few months later, when Lucy dies of a drug overdose, Ian again blames himself, though other members of the Bedloe family frustrate his redemption by insisting these deaths are accidents and thus denying him any role. Nevertheless, Ian feels an overpowering guilt.

Anne Tyler, whose twelve novels have illustrated and endorsed the worth and importance of intimacy and concern about relationships, has in her past few novels, taken some care to create male protagonists who are concerned about how they relate to intimacy, family life, and personal relationships well before the midlife. Tyler has carefully combined these masculine and feminine attributes and invested them in one of her most successful characters to date, Ian Bedloe. While Tyler has been reluctant to label herself a southern writer, Alice Petry comments: "Whether it is attributed to her Southern literary background or to her communal upbringing, from the outset of her career as a novelist Tyler has evinced a keen interest in the complicated relationship between the individual and the family. It is no surprise to find this interest culminate in a masterful gender blending in her 1991 novel in which a young male leaves his education behind to assume a parental role usually attributed to the female" (1991:23).

Jay Parini (1991: 26) states that Tyler's *Saint Maybe* is "a realistic chronicle that celebrates family life without erasing the pain and boredom that families almost necessarily inflict upon their members". One is used by now to Ms. Tyler's oddball families, which any self-respecting therapist would call "dysfunctional" but which Ms. Tyler's readers find endearing. There are, for instance, the Pecks of *Searching for Caleb*, the Tulls of *Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant*, the Learys of *The Accidental Tourist*. An inexplicable centripetal force hurls these relatives upon one another, catches them in a dizzying inward spiral of obligation, affection and old-fashioned guilt—as well as an inexpressible longing for some perfect or "normal" family in a distant past that never really was.

At the end of *Saint Maybe*, the reader is left with a touching picture of Ian holding his new son, but also with lingering doubts about the parenting abilities of this middle-aged father. Will he come to perceive his son as a burden as he did Danny's children, who devoured his youth? As he picks up the baby from the cradle, the child is described as "a burden so light it seemed almost buoyant; or maybe he was misled by the softness of the flannel" (372). Perhaps here Tyler is simply registering the realities of parenthood as she does for the family as a whole in her works—that it comes with inherent burdens as well as blessings. Even earth mother Mary Tell at one point in *Celestial Navigation* (126) describes her cherished children as tent poles holding her down. Nevertheless, the ending of *Saint Maybe*, with this final picture of father and son and Ian's flashbacks of Danny and the adulterous Lucy, is not an unqualifiedly happy one. Although Tyler leads the reader to believe

that Ian, Rita, and Joshua will have the happy family life that so tragically eluded Danny and Lucy, the ending is purposely left open-ended.

Finally it concluded each character in *Saint Maybe* has been fully rendered, fleshed out with a palpable interior life, and each has been fit, like a hand-sawed jigsaw-puzzle piece, into the matrix of family life. The result is a warm and generous novel, a novel that attests once again to Ms. Tyler's enormous gifts as a writer and her innate understanding of the mysteries of kinship and blood.

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