The Accidental Tourist

When *The Accidental Tourist* was published in 1985, Anne Tyler was already a well-established and successful author. Her tenth novel soon became a bestseller and won the National Book Critics Circle Award. Most reviewers consider this to be her best work. The novel has also been made into a successful film starring William Hurt and Kathleen Turner. As in many of her previous works, *The Accidental Tourist* focuses on the complexities of family relationships. In this story, middle-aged travel writer Macon Leary finds himself alone and miserable after his son is murdered and his wife leaves him. As a result, he realizes that he is in danger of becoming "a dried up kernel of a man that nothing real penetrates." During the course of the novel, however, Macon confronts his suffering and carves out a new life for himself with the help of an energetic and eccentric young woman and her son. Tyler's intermingling of comedy and tragedy results in a bittersweet tale of loss and recovery. Critics applaud the novel's lovingly drawn and compelling characters and Tyler's insight into the complex inner workings of the American family.

Author Biography

At fourteen, Tyler discovered a writer who would have a significant impact on her own literary career. While reading Eudora Welty's short story "The Wide Net," Tyler noted that one of the characters reminded her of someone she knew. Per-
Anne Tyler

Previously, Tyler had questioned her desire to become a writer because she thought that to write well one needed to have extraordinary experiences; she thought that her life was too dull. Welty taught her that good literature can also be about ordinary people and events.

Tyler was born on October 25, 1941, to a chemist and a social worker in Minneapolis, Minnesota. She moved frequently with her father, a chemist, and her mother, a social worker, settling at different times in Pennsylvania, Chicago, Duluth, and Raleigh, North Carolina. At one point the family moved to Celio, a commune in the mountains of North Carolina. Tyler has admitted that her writing career began at age three when she used to make up stories to help herself fall asleep at night. By seven, she had written in a notebook her first book, illustrated with drawings. While growing up she toyed with the idea of becoming an artist, but she eventually decided she was a better writer.

At sixteen, Tyler entered Duke University and, three years later, earned her undergraduate degree in Russian language and literature. While at Duke, she had short stories published in the school’s literary magazine and won two awards for creative writing. She completed course work for a Ph.D. in Russian at Columbia University but did not finish the degree. After returning to Duke where she accepted a position as a Russian bibliographer, she married Iranian child psychologist Taghi Mohammed Modaressi and moved with him to Montreal. She now lives in Baltimore. Her first novel, If Morning Ever Comes, was published in 1964, shortly before the birth of her two daughters. While raising her family, Tyler maintained a strict writing schedule that enabled her to produce fourteen novels (including The Accidental Tourist), over fifty short stories, and numerous book reviews.

Plot Summary

Part I

In The Accidental Tourist, Anne Tyler presents an intimate portrait of Macon Leary, a middle-aged man coming to terms with the tragic death of his son. After his wife leaves him, Macon cuts himself off from the rest of the world. Almost against his will, he becomes involved with an unconventional woman who helps him cope with his loss and take control of his life.

On their way back from a vacation at the beach, Macon’s wife, Sarah, informs Macon she wants a divorce because he has not been “a comfort” to her since the death of their son Ethan. Initially shocked, he begins to see her departure as a chance “to reorganize” the house. He expresses his penchant for order in a series of guidebooks he writes under the title The Accidental Tourist for those people forced to travel on business. Like his readers, Macon hates traveling, and does so only “with his eyes shut and holding his breath and hanging on for dear life.” Yet he enjoys “the virtuous delights of organizing a disorganized country” and helping his readers “pretend they had never left home.”

As he prepares to leave for a trip to England to update his book, Macon boards his dog Edward at the Meow-Bow Animal Hospital. There he meets Muriel Pritchett, a young woman with “aggressively frizzy” hair. Muriel offers to train Edward, who bit a handler at the last place he boarded. She gives Macon her number and tells him that even if he doesn’t want to hire her, he can just call to talk. In London, Macon revisits hotels and restaurants and makes notes for his book.

When he returns, Macon admits he “couldn’t think of any period bleaker than this in his life.” He feels just as alienated at home as he does while traveling. Since contact with other people depresses him, he shuts himself up in his house, sometimes
never changing out of his bathrobe. Organizing the
house provides him with his only pleasure, because
"it gave him the sense of warding off a danger." Reduced to
wearing sweat suits every day and eating popcorn he
cooks in his bedroom, Macon approaches his breaking point. He recognizes that he
is in danger of "turning into one of those pathetic
creatures you see on the loose from time to time—
unwashed, unshaven, shapeless, talking to them-
selves, padding along in their institutional garb." Alarmed at the thought, he tries to return to a more
normal routine.

Part II

After breaking his leg in a fall down the basemat-
stairs, Macon moves in with his sister Rose
and brothers Porter and Charles. He soon finds a
sense of contentment with the house's organized
household rituals. The Learys "always had to have
everything just so ... always clamping down on the
world as if they really thought they could keep it
in line." Macon enjoys the sense of being "uncon-
ected" at Rose's. He tells nobody about his move,
and no one in the family answers the phone. He
also enjoys being pampered by Rose, a maternal
woman who has taken care of everyone in the fam-
ily at one time or another, including their grand-
parents and her brothers, who moved in with her
after their marriages failed.

As his leg heals, Macon recalls his childhood
in California and his mother, Alicia, a "giddy young
war widow" who always seemed to have a new
boyfriend. Her spurts of enthusiasm disturbed her
children, who thought she went too far with her
"violent zigzag of hobbies, friends, boyfriends, and
causes." When she remarried, she sent them to live
with their grandparents in Baltimore. Macon recalls
his childhood as a "glassed-in place with grown-
ups rushing past, talking at him, making changes,
while he himself stayed mute."

Macon decides to hire Muriel to train Edward,
who has been behaving erratically at Rose's. As
she teaches Edward how to sit, lie down, and heel,
she shares the story of her life with him. When Ma-
can feels that she is treating Edward too harshly,
he tells her not to return. Soon after, Sarah calls
and asks Macon to meet her for lunch. There she
tells him she will not come back to him because
she doesn't "have enough time left to waste it hol-
ing up in my shelf" as he does.

During a trip to New York, Macon experiences
an anxiety attack and calls Muriel, who comforts
him. When he returns, he begins a relationship with
her and eventually moves in with her and her young
son, Alexander. Macon admits he doesn't love her
but loves "the surprise of her, and also the surprise
of himself when he was with her.... He was an en-
tirely different person ... [one] who had never been
suspected of narrowness ... of chilliness ... and was anything but orderly.” When Charles tells him that Muriel is “not your type of woman” and “you’re not yourself these days,” Macon replies, “I’m more myself than I’ve been my whole life long.” Yet Macon admits to himself that he does not want to get “involved” in her life.

Part III

Macon develops a relationship with Alexander. He buys clothes for him, shows him how to fix things around the house, and protects him from the jeers of other children. However, when he and Muriel attend Rose’s wedding to Julian, he sees Sarah, which rekindles his feelings for her. Macon leaves Muriel and Alexander and moves back in with Sarah, but they soon fall into their old destructive patterns. Sarah tells him, “The trouble with you is that you think people should stay in their own sealed packages. You don’t believe in opening up. You don’t believe in trading back and forth.”

He decides to take a business trip to Paris, hoping it will take his mind off his situation. On the plane, Macon discovers Muriel has booked the same flight. When he asks her why she is following him, she tells him that he needs her. While in Paris, they eat a few meals together, and Macon begins to feel comfortable with her again. The next morning, however, Macon injures his back, and Sarah flies to Paris to take care of him. After Sarah discovers Muriel is staying in the same hotel, she and Macon discuss their relationship. Macon wonders whether he could learn to do things differently, and whether he could learn to make his own decisions. He decides to leave Sarah and go back to Muriel. On his way to the airport, he sees Muriel trying to hail a cab, and he tells his cabdriver to stop and pick her up.

Claire Dugan

Muriel’s teen-age sister. Claire often stays at Muriel’s when she fights with her parents. whom she considers too strict.

Lilian Dugan

Muriel’s mother. At Christmas she ignores Alexander and embarrasses Muriel by talking about her past relationships. She embarrasses Macon by asking him what his intentions are toward her daughter. She has apparently always been highly critical of Muriel, who tries to gain her approval.

Julian Edge

Julian publishes Macon’s books. Tyler reveals Julian through Macon’s point of view, which, based on Julian’s interactions with others, seems credible. Macon considers him to be “athletic-looking” and “younger ... brasher, [and] breezier” than he is: “Julian’s heart was not in the Businessman’s Press but out on the Chesapeake Bay someplace.” Macon decides Julian is not “entirely real,” that “he has never truly grown up” because he has “never had anything happen to him” including having children. Julian “never seem[s] to have a moment’s self doubt.” He appears to be open-minded when he readily accepts Macon’s relationship with Muriel. His one weakness, however, is his fear of being alone, which probably prompts him to become interested in Macon’s sister, Rose. After he and Rose marry, Julian begins to have things “happen to him” when Rose decides to move back in with her brothers so she can take care of them. Julian feels vulnerable and turns to Macon for advice.

Edward

Ethan’s dog. Macon keeps him when Sarah leaves. Edward figures prominently in Macon’s relationship with Muriel. First he causes them to meet at the Meow Bow where Muriel works; then his erratic behavior at Rose’s prompts Macon to hire Muriel to train him. Finally after Macon moves in with Muriel. Edward is the first to bond with her son, Alexander.

Alicia Leary

Macon’s mother. As a “giddy young war widow.” Alicia had little time for her children when they lived with her in California. When she did spend time with them, her enthusiasm disturbed them since it “came in spurts, a violent zigzag of hobbies, friends, boyfriends, causes. She always seemed about to fall over the brink of something. She was always going too far.... The faster she

Characters

Garner Bolt

Macon’s curious neighbor who comes to Rose’s house looking for Macon. He watches Macon’s house and reports back to him about Muriel coming over and his water pipes bursting.

Boyd Dugan

Muriel’s father. When Macon and Muriel spend Christmas with the Dugans, Boyd stays silent until the talk turns to cars.
talked and the brighter her eyes grew, the more fixedly her children stared at her, as if willing her to follow their example of steadiness and dependability.” After she remarried, she sent her children to live with their grandparents in Baltimore and saw them rarely after that. When she died “dart in and out of their lives,” like “some naughty, gleeful fairy,” the children considered her too “flashy” and too “vivid.”

**Charles Leary**

Charles is Macon’s brother, “a soft sweet-faced man who never seemed to move.” He and his brother Porter took over Grandfather Leary’s business when he died. Since Charles was “more mechanical,” he dealt with the production end of the business. After his marriage failed, he moved in with Rose and fell into the same comforting family routine they practiced as children. While he usually keeps to himself, when Macon moves in with Muriel, Charles interferes. He tells Macon that something must be wrong with him since Muriel is not his “type of woman” and that she is “not worth it.”

**Ethan Leary**

Macon’s and Sarah’s son who is seen only through their memories of him. He was shot and killed by a teenager at a fast-food restaurant while at summer camp. His loss profoundly affects both of his parents.

**Grandfather Leary**

Macon’s grandfather, seen only through flashbacks. He owned a manufacturing company that he passed down to his grandsons. He and Macon’s grandmother were “two thin, severe, distinguished people in dark clothes.” He helped raise the children after their mother remarried.

**Macon Leary**

The novel’s main character, a middle-aged man trying to cope with the death of his son and the subsequent shattering of his world. Macon writes a series of guidebooks for business people who, like him, hate to travel. When he is forced to, he does so “with his eyes shut and holding his breath and hanging on for dear life.” Yet Macon likes “the virtuous delights of organizing a disorganized country.” He also tries to organize his life in an effort to understand and to control it and to “ward off danger.” One such effort however, his invention of the Macon Leary Body Bag, comes to symbolize his growing isolation from the outside world. He admits that “gathering of any sort depressed him. Physical contact with people not related to him ... made him draw inward like a snail.” As a result, he has become “a fairly chilly man.” His wife, Sarah, notes his withdrawal, telling him he has given up on everything—“everything that might touch you or upset you or disrupt you.” She observes, “There’s something so muffled about the way you experience things... You’re encased. You’re like something in a capsule. You’re a dried up kernel of a man that nothing real penetrates.”

With Muriel’s and Alexander’s help, however, Macon gains the courage to come out of his protective shell. With her, he becomes “an entirely different person ... [one] who had never been suspected of narrowness ... of chilliness ... and was anything but orderly.” By the end of the novel, Macon takes control of his life and makes the decision to become an active participant in the world.

**Porter Leary**

Macon’s brother. Porter was considered the best looking of all the Learys. He was also “the most practical man Macon had ever known... He gave an impression of vitality and direction that his brothers lacked.” Like Macon and Charles, Porter “always had to have everything just so ... always clamping down on the world as if [he] really thought [he] could keep it in line.”

**Rose Leary**

Rose is Macon’s sister. She lives with and takes care of his two brothers. Rose is as organized as her brothers, as evidenced by her kitchen, which

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**Media Adaptations**

- *The Accidental Tourist* was adapted as a film released by Warner Brothers in 1988. It starred Kathleen Turner, Geena Davis, and William Hurt.
- The novel was also recorded as a book on tape by Recorded Books in 1991.
she has completely alphabetized. There seems to be "something vague about her that caused her brothers to act put-upon and needy whenever she chanced to focus on them." When she marries Julian, she appears to be finding a sense of self, but she soon moves back in with her brothers in order to return to her safe, orderly life. She and Julian eventually reunite when she takes over his office and reorganizes it.

**Sarah Leary**

Sarah, Macon’s wife, leaves him because he is not a “comfort” to her after the death of their son, Ethan. Feeling oppressed by Macon’s tendency to withdraw from the world, Sarah decides she needs a place of her own. Before Ethan died, she had been a social person, but now she “[doesn’t] like crowds anymore.” When Macon asks her to come back to him, she explains, “Ever since Ethan died I’ve had to admit that people are basically bad.” She decides to leave him because she knows that he has always believed this. This pessimism, along with the acknowledgment that she too is retreating from the world, scares her and prompts her decision to divorce Macon. She tells him, “I don’t have enough time left to waste it holing up in my shell.” When she and Macon reconcile, she continually finds fault with the same “little routines and rituals, depressing habits, day after day” that he exhibited before she left him.

**Susan Leary**

Porter’s daughter. Susan accompanies Macon on a trip to Philadelphia and reminisces with him about Ethan.

**Alexander Pritchett**

Alexander is Muriel’s son. When Macon first sees him he appears to be “small, white, [and] sickly … with a shaved-looking skull.” Alexander is a lonely boy, ostracized by his peers, due in part to Muriel’s overprotective mothering. She determines that he has allergies to just about everything and so restricts his diet and activities. Macon decides that “school never went very well” for Alexander, since he often comes home with his face more pinched than ever, his glasses thick with fingerprints.” Alexander, however, thrives under Macon’s care.

**Muriel Pritchett**

Macon begins a relationship with Muriel after Sarah leaves him. Tyler presents Muriel through Macon’s point of view, which ultimately reveals all aspects of her personality, since his opinion of her continually changes. Muriel detects his fickleness when she tells him: “One minute you like me and the next you don’t. One minute you’re ashamed to be seen with me and the next you think I’m the best thing that ever happened to you.” Muriel has “a voice that wander[s] too far in all directions” and she “talks nonstop.” Macon notes her “long, narrow nose, and sallow skin, and two freckled knobs of collarbone that promised an unluxurious body.” Muriel has on occasion a “nasty temper, a shrewish tongue, and a tendency to fall into spells of self-disgust from which no one could rouse her for hours.” Finally, her parenting skills are inconsistent: “One minute overprotective, the next callous and offhand.”

She is obviously intelligent. The quality Macon admires the most is “her fierceness, her spiky, pugnacious fierceness as she fought her way toward the camera with her chin set awry and her eyes bright slits of determination.” Muriel fights for everything she wants, including Macon. Unlike Sarah, Muriel does not try to change Macon, yet her openness and acceptance enables him to emerge from his protective shell.

**Dominick Saddler**

A teenager who lives in Muriel’s neighborhood. He fixes her car and baby-sits Alexander. He dies suddenly in an accident while driving Muriel’s car.

**Themes**

**Death**

Ethan’s death triggers the novel’s initial conflict. At first it leads to the dissolution of Sarah and Macon’s marriage. The past year had been “miserable” for both of them, with “months when everything either of them said was wrong.” When Sarah admits, “Now that Ethan’s dead I sometimes wonder if there’s any point to life,” Macon responds, “It never seemed to me there was all that much point to begin with.” This pessimism spurs Sarah’s decision to leave Macon. She feels he is not grieving as much as she, nor is he providing her with the comfort she requires. Macon looks for someone to blame for Ethan’s death, including Sarah and himself.
Order and Disorder

Ethan's death coupled with Sarah's departure throws Macon into a state of disorder that he desperately tries to remedy with an obsessive search for order. This need for organization is a consistent theme in Macon's life, evidenced by the pleasure he takes “organizing a disorganized country” for the readers of his guidebooks. After the death of his son, it provides him with his only pleasure, since it gives him "the sense of warding off a danger." Ultimately, though, his need for order pushes him to the breaking point. In an effort to reorganize the house and thus his life, he invents the Macon Leary Body Bag, which becomes his personal cocoon and allows him to retreat every night from the outside world.

Alienation and Loneliness

Sarah accuses Macon of not being able to maintain a meaningful connection with her or anyone else and cites this as the reason she leaves him. Ethan's death has eventually led him to give up on life, on "everything that might touch [him] or upset [him] or disrupt [him]." Macon cannot dispute Sarah's insistence that "there's something so muffled about the way you experience things.... You're encased. You're like something in a capsule. You're a dried up kernel of a man that nothing real penetrates." He admits that he avoids contact with other people because it "made him draw inward like a snail." As a result, he has become "a fairly chilly man." Sarah fears that she is beginning to adopt Macon's pessimism as well as his desire to alienate himself from the world. Before Ethan died, she had been a social person, but now she, like Macon, avoids contact with others. In order to save herself, Sarah leaves, telling him, "I don't have enough time left to waste it holing up in my shell." The loneliness that results from the loss of his son and his wife submerges Macon into the "bleakest period of his life."

Apathy and Passivity

Macon responds with apathy and passivity in the face of his suffering. At first, he is devastated by Sarah's departure, but he soon comes to accept it. After he breaks his leg, he moves in with Rose, who takes care of all his needs. Ironically his apathy and passivity cause him to enter into a relationship with Muriel, who is fiercely determined to forge a connection with him. When he goes to her apartment, intending to inform her that he cannot have dinner with her because he does not want to explain what has happened to him, he allows her to change his mind. Muriel gently coaxes him to open up to her and express his grief. Before he realizes it, and almost against his will, Macon begins to reconnect with the world.

Change and Transformation

Macon's relationship with Muriel and Alexander helps transform him from a passive and apathetic man who hides from the world to a man who is strong enough to make his own decisions and to face life's challenges. He realizes that when he was with Sarah, he had been "locked inside the standoffish self he'd assumed when he and she first met. He was frozen there.... Somehow, his role had sunk all the way through to the heart." Muriel allows him to explore his true self, which he acknowledges to Charles when he tells him that with her, "I'm more myself than I've been my whole life long." Muriel and Alexander also help Macon reconnect with the world, even though the process is painful for him. After recognizing his growing attachment to Alexander, Macon admits he feels "a pleasant kind of sorrow sweeping through him. Oh, his life had regained all its old perils. He was forced to worry once again about nuclear war and the future of the planet."
Style

Point of View

Tyler creates an effective narrative structure in the novel by presenting the other characters through Macon’s point of view. Although the novel is written in the third person, the narrator limits the perspective as readers observe Macon’s interactions with and observations of others. This structure more fully reveals Macon’s transformation during the course of the novel. For example, readers understand Macon’s confusion over his relationship with Muriel when the narrator reveals his shifting and sometimes contradictory visions of her. Muriel notes this confusion when she tells Macon, “One minute you like me and the next you don’t. One minute you’re ashamed to be seen with me and the next you think I’m the best thing that ever happened to you.” Macon admits “he had never guessed that she read him so clearly.”

Symbolism

Tyler employs several symbols to reinforce Macon’s sense of isolation and passivity. The first symbols are his logo and the title of his guidebooks. Noting his reluctance to experience life, Sarah tells him, “That traveling armchair isn’t just your logo; it’s you.” Macon not only travels “with his eyes shut and holding his breath and hanging on for dear life,” he travels through life in the same manner. Throughout much of the novel, he wanders “in a fog . . . adrift upon the planet, helpless, praying that just by luck he might stumble across his destination.” The cast on Macon’s broken leg and his creation of the Macon Leary Body Bag are additional symbolic representations of his alienation. At one point, Macon admits that he wishes his cast would cover him from head to foot. The cast and body bag thus become symbolic of his spiritual death.

Finally, the sleeping pills Sarah gives Macon when he injures his back in Paris become a symbol of Sarah’s effect on Macon. After being with Muriel, Macon comes to realize that while he was married to Sarah, he assumed an aloofness and disconnection that had at first attracted Sarah. Now, however, he believes himself to be “locked inside” that self. The powerful sleeping pills thus symbolize the kind of person he becomes in Sarah’s presence. When Macon finally rejects the pills, he rejects the self he becomes when he is with her.

Comic Relief

Tyler often employs comic relief after chronicling the suffering experienced by her characters. Through her presentation of eccentric characters and unconventional developments, Tyler effectively relieves the tensions and heightens the tragic elements of the novel by contrast. These comic elements are an essential and integral part of the whole work. This mixture of comedy and tragedy is often displayed in scenes involving Edward, Macon’s dog.

Historical Context

Teenage Homicide Rates

According to the United States Bureau of the Census, the teenage homicide rate soared 169 percent between 1984 and 1993. Studies conducted on this increase conclude that the crack cocaine epidemic and easy access to firearms were to blame. These sobering statistics helped create an atmosphere of fear in the 1980s, when crime became a major concern for the American public. Tyler tapped into this fear through her characterization of Macon Leary, who, at the beginning of the novel, is still grieving the loss of his son, Ethan. As Ethan was eating lunch at a fast-food restaurant, a teenager entered and randomly executed him. After the murder, Macon withdrew from a world he feared.

Divorce Rates in America

The Census Bureau reported that in 1970 there were 4.3 million divorced adults in America; that number rose to 17.4 million in 1994. During that period, the percentage of divorced Americans over eighteen years of age climbed from 3 percent to 9 percent. Many experts determined that the primary cause was no-fault divorce laws, first adopted in California in 1969. Sociologists linked the high divorce rate to what they considered to be the breakdown of the American family. As a result of this perceived breakdown, a new focus on what was termed “the dysfunctional family” emerged.

Dysfunction in a family results from serious crises such as divorce, sexual abuse, alcoholism, or infidelity. Unexpected events like the death of a family member or loss of a job can also trigger a family crisis. As a result, members often assign blame, fail to communicate with each other, experience excessive anger, and shut themselves off from the rest of the family.

The high divorce rate and incidents of dysfunction redefined the American family in the 1980s. As the traditional family unit broke down,
American tourists seeking the security of familiar tastes and sights in China would likely visit a McDonald’s restaurant.

new families emerged and a more flexible definition was created. Families now could consist of two parents and their children, a couple who decided to have no children, a single parent and his or her children, a parent and stepparent and their children, or grandparents and their grandchildren. Children and their foster parents were also considered to be a family unit.

In The Accidental Tourist, Tyler reflects the changing configurations of the American family as she chronicles the demise of several such traditional families. Yet she also invents some nontraditional ones as a result. After all the Leary men experience failed marriages, they recreate the family of their childhood when they move back in with Rose. Macon and Muriel reconstruct a family unit after both of their marriages end in divorce. Tyler’s study of the dynamics of family relationships serves as an apt reflection of the cultural climate of America in the 1980s.

Critical Overview

Anne Tyler’s novels have gained mostly favorable reviews, from her first publication, If Morning Ever Comes, in 1964, to her most recent, A Patchwork Planet, in 1999. In the 1970s Tyler came to the attention of novelist Gail Godwin, who reviewed her fifth novel, Celestial Navigation (1974), and John Updike, who reviewed Searching for Caleb (1976). After that, Tyler’s books received national and eventually international attention. The Accidental Tourist, which won the National Book Critics Circle Award, is considered by many to be her best work. Most critics cite Tyler’s astute and compassionate characterizations and clever intermingling of humor and pathos as the reasons for the novel’s critical and commercial success.

A Library Journal reviewer asserted, “Not a character, including Macon’s dog Edward, is untouched by delightful eccentricity in this charming story, full of surprises and wisdom.” Larry McMurtry in the New York Times Book Review found Muriel Pritchett “as appealing a woman as Miss Tyler has created, and upon the quiet Macon she lavishes the kind of intelligent consideration that he only intermittently gets from his womenfolk.” McMurtry added that the novel’s themes, “some of which [Tyler] has been working for more than twenty years, cohere with high definition in the muted ... personality of Macon Leary.”

Some reviewers, however, find some of the novel’s characters unrealistic. For example, McMurtry admitted, “Two aspects of the novel do not entirely satisfy. One is the unaccountable neglect of Edward, the corgi, in the last third of the book.... The other questionable element is the dead son, Ethan. Despite an effort now and then to bring him into the book in a vignette or a nightmare, Ethan remains mostly a premise.” Yet he tempered his criticism when he concluded, “At the level of metaphor ... [Tyler] has never been stronger.”

Critics also applaud the novel’s mixture of comedy and tragedy. Peter Prescott, in his Newsweek review of the novel, concluded that Tyler’s “comedies,” including The Accidental Tourist, “are of the very best sort, which is to say that they are always serious, that they combine the humor of a situation with a narrative voice that allows itself moments of wit.” Richard Eder, in his article in the Los Angeles Times Book Review, noted that the character of Macon Leary “is an oddity of the first water, and yet we grow so close to him that there is not the slightest warp in the lucid, touching and very funny story of an inhibited man moving out into life.” McMurtry determined that this quality helps make the novel one of Tyler’s best: “Miss Tyler shows, with a fine clarity, the
mingling of misery and contentment in the daily lives of her families, reminding us how alike—and yet distinct—happy and unhappy families can be."

Some critics, however, argued that the comedy masks a lack of development in the novel. Chicago Tribune Book World critic John Blades wondered whether "Tyler, with her sedative resolutions to life's most grievous and perplexing problems, can be taken seriously as a writer." Elizabeth Mahn Nollen, in her article on the novel in Family Matters in the British and American Novel, answered critics like Blades who find the upbeat ending in The Accidental Tourist to be "candy coated" with a discussion of the theme of parenting. Nollen claimed that as a result, "the redemption/regeneration of certain characters has not been taken as seriously as it might be." She found the novel to be an effective study of a father who provides "essentially positive, if complicated, examples of parenthood." The ending, she argued, "is the only closure the author could choose to get her message across: that fatherhood matters—that it can be a redemptive and healing force."

Tyler focuses the narrative in this novel more on Macon's struggles with family life rather than where the families reside. However, she does situate the novel in its historical moment. Through her characterization of Macon, Tyler reflects the paranoia over increasing crime rates in the 1980s, when the novel was written and published. The novel also illustrates the decade's growing concern with the dysfunctional family and its causes and effects. Finally, Tyler explores changing roles for women. All the female characters show their strength in The Accidental Tourist. Some exert it as they are firmly entrenched in traditional roles, while others reveal their courageous attempt to adopt more modern attitudes.

All the female characters in the novel are involved or want to be involved in a marital and/or family relationship. This, granted, is considered to be a traditional role for women, but all the characters, male and female, express this desire, which becomes one of the novel's dominant themes. The characters also, however, end up separating themselves from these relationships, as noted by Joseph C. Voelker in Art and the Accidental in Anne Tyler. The characters in the novel, he argues, distance themselves from the complex feelings they have for their families. Voelker determines that they experience a "sickness for home (longing, nostalgia) but also sickness of it (the need to escape from the invasiveness of family) and sickness from it (the psychic wounds that human beings inevitably carry as a result of having had to grow up as children in families)."

Rose Leary is the most traditional female character in the novel. She has accepted the role of caretaker for her entire family at one point or another. She cared for her ailing grandparents, and after her brothers' marriages failed, she welcomed them back into the family home and promptly took over the role of nurturer. She reinstated family rituals, like cooking baked potatoes for their evening meal, which used to comfort them as children when left alone by their mother. The narrator notes there was "something vague about her that caused her brothers to act put-upon and needy whenever she chanced to focus on them."

At first Rose appears to be content with the orderly, isolated existence she and her brothers share. However, she soon begins to feel "a sickness of home" as she chafes under her brothers' narrow idea of her role in their lives. When she begins a relationship with Julian, she discovers a new sense of self, and is strong enough to break away from

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Criticism

Wendy Perkins

Perkins is an associate professor of English at Prince George's Community College in Maryland and has published several articles on British and American authors. In the following essay, she examines the traditional and nontraditional roles of the female characters in The Accidental Tourist.

In her article in the New York Times Book Review, Katha Pollitt takes an overview of Anne Tyler's work and concludes that her fiction does not reveal a firm sense of time or place. She argues that Tyler's novels "are modern in their fictional techniques, yet utterly unconcerned with the contemporary moment as a subject, so that, with only minor dislocations, her stories could just as well have taken place in the twenties or thirties. The current school of feminist-influenced novels seems to have passed her by completely: her women are strong, often stronger than the men in their lives, but solidly grounded in traditional roles." Other critics have also noted that Tyler's characterizations take precedence over her setting details in her work, including in her tenth novel, The Accidental Tourist.
her old ties. Her need to feel useful, though, causes her to return to her traditional role, and eventually she becomes wife and mother when she and Julian move in with Porter and Charles.

Sarah, Macon's wife, also breaks out of a traditional role for a period of time, but instead of moving from one family unit to another, she expresses a desire to live alone. Annoyed by Macon's "little routines and rituals, depressing habits, day after day" and his inability to comfort her, she decides to leave him and establish a place of her own and a more complete sense of self. She admits she has been pulled into Macon's pessimism, and as a result, she too is cutting herself off from the rest of the world. When she leaves, she tells him, "I don't have enough time left to waste it bolting up in my shell."

Sarah, however, is unable to assuage the grief she feels over Ethan's death and so moves back in with Macon and returns to her traditional role as wife, because of its familiarity. She admits to Macon, "I think that after a certain age people just don't have a choice.... You're who I'm with. It's too late for me to change. I've used up too much of my life now."

Muriel Pritchett's nonconformity makes her unique among the novel's other female characters. She also wants to enter into a relationship with someone, but if she is unable to accomplish this, she makes it clear that she can take care of herself. She appears to have been left alone virtually all of her life. Her interaction with her mother suggests that Muriel experiences a "sickness from family." She displays what Vöelker calls the "psychic wounds that human beings inevitably carry as a result of having had to grow up as children in families." Muriel's wounds emerge in the picture she gives her mother, in which Macon notices that she appears "wary and uncertain, and very much alone." Macon notes that when Lilian Dugan pays attention to her daughter, which happens rarely, she most often criticizes her. Muriel admits that her family considers her to be the "bad one" and her sister the "good one."

Muriel's wounds, though, seem to have helped her develop a strong sense of independence and resilience. When her husband leaves her and her young son, Muriel raises him by herself, aided by her sharp entrepreneurial skills. She also reveals her independent nature when Macon expresses his concern over her quitting one of her jobs. She tells him, "Don't you know [I] can always take care of [myself]? Don't you know [I] could find another job tomorrow. if [I] wanted?" She can also take care of herself in her dangerous neighborhood. Once while coming back from the supermarket, a teenager emerges out of a shadowy doorway and demands that she give him the contents of her purse. She responds, "Like hell I will," and attacks him. As a result, Macon admits "he felt awed by her, and diminished."

Muriel retains her unconventionality even when acknowledging that it does not always appeal to Macon. She tells Macon that she knows "one minute you like me and the next you don't. One minute you're ashamed to be seen with me and the next you think I'm the best thing that ever happened to you." She does try, briefly, to adopt a more conventional look, when she tries to model herself after Rose. But she soon reverts back to her eccentric but honest self. Finally, "the surprise of her
and her careless enthusiasm for life win Macon over. When Muriel gives Macon a picture of her as a child, he cherishes it, deciding, "she meant, he supposed, to give him the best of her ... her fierceness—her spiky, pugnacious fierceness as she fought her way toward the camera with her chin set away and her eyes bright slits of determination." Unlike Sarah, Muriel does not try to change Macon, yet her openness and acceptance, and ultimately her independence, enables him to emerge from his protective shell.

Tyler explained in an interview with Marguerite Michaels in The New York Times Book Review that "the real heroes to me in my books are first the ones who manage to endure and second the ones who somehow are able to grant other people the privacy of the space around them and yet still produce some warmth." According to her definition then, Muriel, with her independent yet loving spirit, is a real hero.


Larry McMurtry

In the following excerpt, McMurtry discusses the way in which Tyler reintroduces her customary themes of sibling bonding and the hapless male protagonist in The Accidental Tourist.

In Anne Tyler's fiction, family is destiny, and (nowadays, at least) destiny clamps down on one in Baltimore. For an archeologist of manners with Miss Tyler's skills, the city is a veritable Troy, and she has been patiently excavating since the early 1970's, when she skipped off the lawn of Southern fiction and first sank her spade in the soil which has nourished such varied talents as Poe, Mencken, Billie Holiday and John Waters, the director of the films Pink Flamingos and Polyester.

It is without question some of the fustiest soil in America; in the more settled classes, social styles developed in the 19th century with sporelike tenacity, all that the present century can throw at them. Indeed, in Baltimore all classes appear to be settled, if not cemented, in grooves of neighborhood and habit so deep as to render them impervious—as a bright child puts it in The Accidental Tourist—to everything except nuclear flash.

From this rich dust of custom, Miss Tyler is steadily raising a body of fiction of major dimensions. One of the persistent concerns of this work is the ambiguity of family happiness and unhappiness. Since coming to Baltimore, Miss Tyler has probed this ambiguity in seven novels of increasing depth and power, working numerous changes on a consistent set of themes.

In The Accidental Tourist these themes, some of which she has been sifting for more than 20 years, cohere with high definition in the muted (or, as his wife says, "muffled") personality of Macon Leary....

Like most of Miss Tyler's males, Macon Leary presents a broad target to all of the women (and even a few of the men) with whom he is involved. His mother; his sister, Rose; his wife, Sarah; and, in due course, his girlfriend, Muriel Pritchett—a dog trainer of singular appearance and ability—regularly pepper him on the subject of his shortcomings, the greatest of which is a lack of passion, playfulness, spontaneity or the desire to do one single thing that they like to do. This lack is the more maddening because Macon is reasonably competent; if prompted he will do more or less anything that's required of him. What exasperates the women is the necessity for constant prompting.

When attacked, Macon rarely defends himself with much vigor, which only heightens the exasperation. He likes a quiet life, based on method and system. His systems are intricate routines of his own devising, aimed at reducing the likelihood that anything unfamiliar will occur. The unfamiliar is never welcome in Macon's life, and he believes that if left to himself he can block it out or at least neutralize it.

Not long after we meet him, Macon is left to himself. Sarah, his wife of 20 years, leaves him. Macon and Sarah have had a tragedy; their 12-year-old son, Ethan, was murdered in a fast-food joint, his death an accidental byproduct of a holdup.

Though Macon is as grieved by this loss as Sarah, he is, as she points out, "not a comfort." When she remarks that since Ethan's death she sometimes wonders if there's any point to life, Macon replies, honestly but unhelpfully, that it never seemed to him there was all that much point to begin with. As if this were not enough, he can never stop himself from correcting improper word choice, even if the incorrect usage occurs in a conversation about the death of a child. These corrections are not made unkindly, but they are invariably made; one does not blame Sarah for taking off.

With the ballast of his marriage removed, Macon immediately tips into serious eccentricity. His little systems multiply, and his remaining companions, a Welsh corgi named Edward and a cat named Helen, fail to adapt to them. Eventually the systems...
overwhelm Macon himself, causing him to break a leg. Not long after, he finds himself where almost all of Miss Tyler’s characters end up sooner or later—back in the grandparental seat. There he is tended to by his sister. His brothers, Porter and Charles, both divorced, are also there, repeating, like Macon, a motion that seems but inevitable in Anne Tyler’s fiction—a return to the sibling unit.

This motion, or tendency, cannot be blamed on Baltimore. In the very first chapter of Miss Tyler’s first novel, *If Morning Ever Comes* (1964), a young man named Ben Joe Hawkes leaves Columbia University and hurries home to North Carolina mainly because he can’t stand not to know what his sisters are up to. From then on, in book after book, siblings are drawn inexorably back home, as if their parents or (more often) grandparents had planted tiny magnets in them which can be activated once they have seen what the extrafamilial world is like. The lovers and mates in her books, by exerting their utmost strength, can sometimes delay these re-groupings for as long as 20 years, but sooner or later a need is to be with people who are really familiar—their brothers and sisters—overwhelms them.

Macon’s employer, a man named Julian, who manages to marry but not to hold Macon’s sister, puts it succinctly once Rose has drifted back to her brothers: “She’d worn herself a groove or something in that house of hers, and she couldn’t help swerving back into it.” Almost no one in Miss Tyler’s books avoids that swerve; the best they can hope for is to make a second escape, as does the resourceful Caleb Peck in *Searching for Caleb* (1976). Brought back after an escape lasting 60 years, Caleb sneaks away again in his 90’s....

*The Accidental Tourist* is one of Anne Tyler’s best books, as good as *Morgan’s Passing, Searching for Caleb, Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant*. The various domestic worlds we enter—Macon/Sarah; Macon/the Leary siblings; Macon/Muriel—are delineated with easy skill; they are poignant, now funny. Miss Tyler shows, with a fine clarity, the mingling of misery and contentment in the daily lives of her families, reminding us how alike—and yet distinct—happy and unhappy families can be. Muriel Pritchett is as appealing a woman as Miss Tyler has created: and upon the quiet Macon she lavishes the kind of intelligent consideration that he only intermittently gets from his own womenfolk.

Two aspects of the novel do not entirely satisfy. One is the unaccountable neglect of Edward, the corgi, in the last third of the book. Edward is one of the more fully characterized dogs in recent literature: his breakdown is at least as interesting and if anything more delicately handled than Macon’s. Yet Edward is allowed to slide out of the picture. Millions of readers who have managed to saddle themselves with neurotic quadrupeds will want to know more about Edward’s situation.

The other questionable element is the dead son. Ethan. Despite an effort now and then to bring him into the book in a vignette or a nightmare, Ethan remains mostly a premise, and one not advanced very confidently by the author. She is brilliant at showing how the living press upon one another, but less convincing when she attempts to add the weight of the dead. The reader is invited to feel that it is this tragedy that separates Macon and Sarah. But a little more familiarity with Macon and Sarah, as well as with the marriages in Miss Tyler’s other books, leaves one wondering. Macon’s methodical approach to life might have driven Sarah off anyway. He would have corrected her word choice once too often, one feels. Miss Tyler is more successful at showing through textures how domestic life is sustained than she is at showing how these textures are ruptured by a death.

At the level of metaphor, however, she has never been stronger. The concept of an accidental tourist captures in a phrase something she has been saying all along, if not about life, at least about men: they are frequently accidental tourists in their own lives. Macon Leary sums up a long line of her males. Jake Simms in *Earthly Possessions* is an accidental kidnapper. The lovable Morgan Gower of *Morgan’s Passing*, an accidental obstetrician in the first scenes, is an accidental husband or lover in the rest of the book. Her men slump around like tired tourists—friendly, likable, but not all that engaged. Their characters, like their professions, seem accidental even though they come equipped with genealogies of Balzacian thoroughness. All of them have to be propelled through life by (at the very least) a brace of sharp, purposeful women— it usually takes not only a wife and a girlfriend but an indignant mother and one or more devoted sisters to keep these sluggish fellows moving. They poke around haphazardly, ever mild and perennially puzzled, in a foreign country called Life. If they see anything worth seeing, it is usually because a determined woman on the order of Muriel Pritchett thrusts it under their noses and demands that they pay some attention. The fates of these families hinge on long struggles between semiattentive males and semiobsessed females. In her pa-
tent investigation of such struggles. Miss Tyler has produced a very satisfying body of fiction.


Jonathan Yardley

In the following excerpt, Yardley praises The Accidental Tourist for its many exceptional qualities, describing it as a moving, deeply significant novel.

With each new novel ... it becomes ever more clear that the fiction of Anne Tyler is something both unique and extraordinary in contemporary American literature. Unique, quite literally: there is no other writer whose work sounds like Tyler’s, and Tyler sounds like no one except herself. Extraordinary, too: not merely for the quietly dazzling quality of her writing and the abidingly sympathetic nature of her characters, but also for her calm indifference to prevailing literary fashion and her deep conviction that it is the work, not the person who writes it, that matters. Of The Accidental Tourist one thing can be said with absolute certainty: it matters.

It is a beautiful, incandescent, heartbreaking, exhilarating book. A strong undercurrent of sorrow runs through it, yet it contains comic scenes—one involving a dog, a cat and a clothes dryer, another a Thanksgiving turkey, yet another a Christmas dinner—that explode with joy. It is preoccupied with questions of family, as indeed all of Tyler’s more recent fiction is, but there is not an ounce of sentimentality to be found in what it says about how families stick together or fall apart. There’s magic in it, and some of its characters have winning eccentricities, yet more than any of Tyler’s previous books it is rooted firmly, securely, insistently in the real world.

That world is of course Baltimore, which in Tyler’s fiction, as indeed in actuality, is both a place and a state of mind. By now Baltimore belongs to Tyler in the same way that Asheville belongs to Thomas Wolfe. Chicago to James T. Farrell, Memphis to Peter Taylor. Albany to William Kennedy: like these writers, she at once gives us the city as it really exists and redefines it through the realm of the imagination. When the protagonist of The Accidental Tourist, Macon Leary, drives along North Charles Street, he is on the map; when he arrives at Singleton Street, he is in uncharted territory. But there can be no question that Singleton Street, though fictitious, is real....

He was beginning to feel easier here. Singleton Street...
City have a Taco Bell? Did any place in Rome serve Chef Boyardee ravioli? Other travelers hoped to discover distinctive local wines: Macon's readers searched for pasteurized and homogenized milk. It is as Macon heads off on one of his research trips that his life begins to change. The veterinarian who has boarded Edward in the past now refuses to accept him—"Says here he bit an attendant," the girl tells Macon. "Says, 'Bit Barry in the ankle, do not readmit'"—so in desperation Macon pulls into the Meow-Bow Animal Hospital. There Edward is cheerfully admitted by "a thin young woman in a ruffled peasant blouse," with "aggressively frizzy black hair that brushed to her shoulders like an Arab head-dress." Her name is Muriel Pritchett, and when Macon returns to reclaim Edward she tells him that she is a dog trainer on the side, with a specialty in "dogs that bite." As Edward's bad habits become steadily worse, Macon at last turns to her in desperation. It is the beginning of the end of his old world.

He’d been right on the edge. His grief over Ethan's death and the pain caused by Sarah's desertion had just about done him in. Just about turned him into "some hopeless wreck of a man wandering drugged on a downtown street." Enter Muriel—Muriel with her "long, narrow nose, and sallow skin, and two freckled knobs of collarbone that promised an unluxurious body," Muriel babbbling away like "a flamenco dancer with galloping consumption," Muriel with her bewildering array of odd jobs and her pathetic young son by a broken marriage and her rundown house on Singleton Street. Love at first sight it is not: "He missed his wife. He missed his son. They were the only people who seemed real to him. There was no point looking for substitutes."

But life deals things out whether you're looking for them or not. Muriel, a fighter all her days, fights her way into Macon's heart: "Then he knew that what mattered was the pattern of her life: that although he did not love her he loved the surprise of her, and also the surprise of himself when he was with her. In the foreign country that was Singleton Street he was an entirely different person. This person had never been suspected of narrowness, never been accused of chilliness, in fact. was mocked for his soft heart. And was anything but orderly." The accidental tourist has become a traveler—"'Maybe, he thought, travel was not so bad. Maybe he'd got it all wrong'"—whose journeys now are in the heart, whose world has grown larger than he had ever before imagined possible.

Where those journeys at last lead him is Tyler's secret, though it is no indiscretion to say that in the novel's final pages he faces wrenching, painful choices. But those choices are really less important than the change that has already taken place. Macon Leary has been given the gift of life. A man who had seemed fated to spend the rest of his days in a rut—"Here he still was!" The same as ever! What have I gone and done? he wondered and he swallowed thickly and looked at his own empty hands"—has been given new connections, with himself and with others.

This is the central theme of Tyler's fiction: how people affect each other, how the lives of others alter our own. As are her previous novels, *The Accidental Tourist* is filled with connections and disconnections, with the exaltation and heartbreak that people bring to each other; she knows that though it is true people need each other, it is equally true "that people could, in fact, be used up—could use each other up, could be of no further help to each other and maybe even do harm to each other." The novel is filled as well with the knowledge that life leaves no one unscared, that to live is to accept one's scars and make the best of them—and to accept as well the scars that other people bear.

And in *The Accidental Tourist* there are many others: the large and bumptious Leary family, Macon's wonderfully unpredictable boss, the people of Singleton Street, and most certainly Edward, the funniest and most lovable dog within memory. They occupy what indisputably is Tyler's best book, the work of a writer who has reached full maturity and is in unshakable command, who takes the raw material of ordinary life and shapes it into what can only be called art. The magical, slightly fey and otherworldly tone of her previous books is evident here, but more than ever before Tyler has planted her fiction in the hard soil of the world we all know: *The Accidental Tourist* cuts so close to the bone that it leaves one aching with pleasure and pain. Words fail me: one cannot reasonably expect fiction to be much better than this.


*Sources*


Voelker focuses on family relationships in Tyler's novels. He finds the characters in *The Accidental Tourist* to be in a "utopian emotional state," where they experience "sickness for home (longing, nostalgia) but also sickness of it (the need to escape from the invasiveness of family) and sickness from it (the psychic wounds that human beings inevitably carry as a result of having had to grow up as children in families)."

### For Further Study


Binding argues that Tyler follows the southern literary tradition, finding echoes of Faulkner, O'Connor, and Welty in her writing.


In this interview, Tyler discusses her evolution as a writer and her writing style.


The author examines family relationships in Tyler's novels and argues that they have a distinctly American sensibility.


Town focuses on Macon's search for identity, arguing that he "tries on roles and partners, until he finds ones that fit."


In this interview, Willrich provides a biography and discussion of Tyler's writing style, focusing on what she calls Tyler's tendency to observe "from a distance."