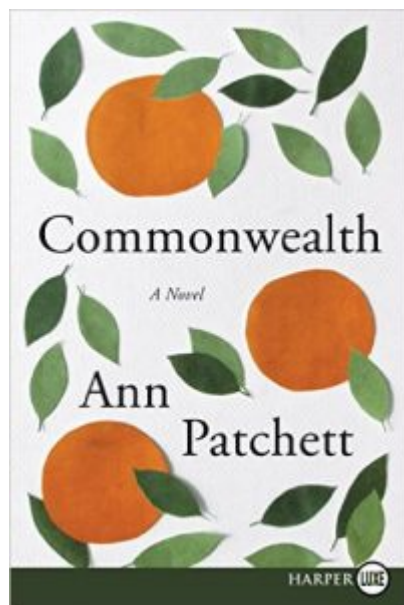


Book review: Complicated pull of family delivers

By Kim Wyatt



“Commonwealth”

By Ann Patchett

HarperLuxe, 464 pages

One-line review: Dreamy scenes and strong characters illuminate family, human nature and how we become who we are.

In Ann Patchett’s sixth novel “Commonwealth,” a blended family struggles to survive marriage and childhood and make sense of it. The commonwealth in the title doesn’t refer to a nation or state, but to the family as a political unit with factions and truces and ceasefires and surrender. A skilled storyteller, Patchett lays honest sentences one on top of another making scenes that unfurl like flowers. I would recommend this book for the opening scene alone, in which adult desires shoot

through a baby's christening party like a bullet. Children and adults mingle until the ever-present Southern California oranges are juiced for cocktails and poured into small paper cups that kick the story into motion for generations to come.

Patchett is a compassionate author: She understands people and finds them mostly good, sometimes funny and often complicated. Parenting isn't always easy. On a car trip, one young child's annoying personality "fills the car like mustard gas." Parents neglect to cut down an orange tree that fills with bees each spring, even though the son is allergic. Siblings give Benadryl to the youngest so he will go to sleep and they don't have to watch him; it is these same siblings who later in life provide each other the greatest comfort.

The book begins in the 1960s and spans fifty years. The six step-siblings are shuttled back and forth between California and Virginia, and they display resiliency in varying degrees. The greatest pleasure in its pages comes through the interactions of the children—how they withhold, forgive and surprise each other over time. A nonlinear structure enhances the complicated pull of family, mimicking the film that nostalgia lays over memories—we don't always remember things in order, nor do we recall events the same way. We do, however, remember the sting of emotions, and that is what drives this family to resolution.

The oranges resurface with a tragedy befalling the oldest child. Although this was handled in another one of Patchett's dreamy extended scenes, one false note got me wondering about the efficacy and half life of a certain drug, but wasn't enough to keep me from finishing. (And what would Chekov say of the gun that may or may not go off?)

"Commonwealth" will make you think of your childhood—the wondrous and the horrifying, the generosity and the missteps. After reading, I wanted to see my flawed but loving family and give each of them a hug. A neat trick from a seasoned author,

and a satisfying read.

Kim Wyatt is the owner of the independent press Bona Fide Books in Meyers.