

BOOK CLUB To Go!

Back When We Were Grownups

By Anne Tyler

Introduction

The woman is Rebecca Davitch, a fifty-three-year-old grandmother. Is she an impostor in her own life? She asks herself. Is it indeed her own life? Or is it someone else's? On the surface, Beck, as she is known to the Davitch clan, is outgoing, joyous, a natural celebrator. Giving parties is, after all, her vocation—something she slipped into even before finishing college, when Joe Davitch spotted her at an engagement party in his family's crumbling nineteenth-century Baltimore row house, where giving parties was the family business. What caught his fancy was that she seemed to be having such a wonderful time. Soon this large-spirited older man, a divorcé with three little girls, swept her into his orbit, and before she knew it she was embracing his extended family plus a child of their own, and hosting endless parties in the ornate, high-ceilinged rooms of The Open Arms.

Now, some thirty years later, after presiding over a disastrous family picnic, Rebecca is caught un-awares by the question of who she really is. How she answers it—how she tries to recover her girlhood self, that dignified grownup she had once been—is the story told in this beguiling, funny, and deeply moving novel.

(barnesandnoble.com)

About the Author

Anne Tyler was born in Minneapolis, Minnesota, in 1941; her family moved frequently, generally living in Quaker communities in the Midwest and South, before settling in North Carolina. Tyler attended Duke University, where she majored in Russian. In her first year, she became a pupil of Reynolds Price, who himself would become a major novelist and long-time friend. Price encouraged Tyler to pursue writing more vigorously, but she instead dedicated most of her attention to Russian. She graduated in 1961 then entered Columbia University to continue her studies. In 1962, she returned to Duke as Russian bibliographer for the library. The following year, Tyler married Taghi Modarressi, a psychologist from Iran. In 1964, the two moved to Montreal, where Tyler worked as an assistant librarian at McGill University Law School and wrote her first two novels *If Morning Ever Comes* (1964) and *The Tin Can Tree* (1965). In 1967, she and her husband moved to Baltimore, the setting for most of Tyler's subsequent novels. With the publication of *A Slipping-Down Life* (1970) and *The Clock Winder* (1972), Tyler began to receive more serious and positive critical attention, but only in the mid-seventies, when such writers as Gail Godwin and John Updike called attention to her, did her novels benefit from widespread recognition. Tyler's stature as an important literary figure was confirmed by the success of *Morgan's Passing* (1980), which was nominated for the National Book Critics Circle award and received the Janet Heidinger Kafka Prize. *Dinner at Homesick Restaurant* (1982) won the PEN/ Faulkner Award for fiction and was nominated for a National Book Critics Circle award and the 1983 Pulitzer Prize. *The Accidental Tourist* (1985) and *Breathing Lessons* (1988) were honored respectively with a National Book Critics Circle Award and a Pulitzer Prize.

(answers.com)

Author Interview by Ballantine Books

Q: What was the genesis of this novel? Did a particular character or situation come to mind first?

A. Tyler: I plotted *Back When We Were Grownups* just after emerging from a year in which there had been several losses and serious illnesses in my family. I wanted my next novel to be full of joy and celebration, which is how I ended up with a main character who earned her living throwing parties.

That a sense of loss shows through anyway, at a later point in the book, is proof that the subconscious always tends to triumph in the end.

Q: Why did you choose this title for the novel? Were there others that you discarded along the way?

A. Tyler: It's one of my few organic, natural-born titles; it was always there, on its own.

(readinggroupguides.com)

Reviews

“This novel is a treasure, a jubilant look at a woman who embarks on a modern search for herself with style, grace, and, yes, celebration.”—*The Miami Herald*

“One does not so much read a Tyler novel as visit it. Her ability to conduct several conversations at once while getting the food to the table turns the act of reading into a kind of transport. . . . In a literary landscape that too often mistakes sarcasm for humor and self-reference for irony, an Anne Tyler novel, brimming with the real thing, calls for a toast.”—*San Francisco Chronicle*

A universe so consistent, so familiar, so perfectly delineated in all its mildness that the most startling thing is the pleasure it provides.— *Washington Post Book World*

Rebecca Davitch asks herself a question that many of us have posed: Do I belong inside the life I am living? The problem that Rebecca faces as she stares herself down is that she's 53 years old and, suddenly, the clock is ticking very loudly....- *Barnes & Noble*

(randomhouse.com and barnesandnoble.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. It is upon Peter's second disappearance during the picnic that Rebecca first thinks: "How on earth did I get like this? How? How did I ever become this person who's not really me?" (p. 20, lines 33-34). Why does Rebecca's "identity crisis" begin at this particular moment in her life?
2. What is the significance of Rebecca's "Freudian slip"--if it can be called that--when she tells Zeb that she is a "superficial" woman, when she really means "superfluous"? Is Rebecca either "superfluous" or "superficial"? Is superfluous a word one could use to describe any character in the book?
3. The opening words of the novel, "Once upon a time . . . , " recall the motif used in fables or fairy tales. In what ways does *Back When We Were Grownups* resemble a fairy tale or contain elements of the fairy tale or fable? Does *Back When We Were Grownups* have a moral?
4. How is marriage portrayed in *Back When We Were Grownups*? Are there marriages of convenience, or are there examples of marriage where both parties to the marriage are equally "useful" to each other, as Rebecca advises NoNo on her marriage to Barry (p. 246, lines 31-32)? Is Rebecca's advice to NoNo convincing to the reader? To Rebecca herself? Why do marriages fail: Joe and Tina's, Will and Laura's, and Min Foo's first two marriages?
5. Is the ending of *Back When We Were Grownups* anticlimactic or satisfying? Is the reader mad at or frustrated with Rebecca, or proud of her? At what point does the reader come to "recognize" the "real" Rebecca?
6. How does Tyler develop the characters in her novel? Compare how certain characters, such as Poppy and Rebecca's mother, speak a lot, and others, such as Peter, say very little. How much do we learn about some of the lesser characters by the few words they say in the novel? How is Rebecca's character developed differently than the other characters?
7. What is the meaning of the title (p. 188, lines 11-17)? What does it mean to be "grownup, " and can Rebecca or any of the other characters be described as "grownups"?

8. How would you characterize the conversations Rebecca has with her grandchildren? What do they reveal about Rebecca? For example: Rebecca tells Merrie about her dream (p. 49, lines 13-14), and she discusses Poppy's birthday party with Peter (p. 117, lines 20-35).
9. In several places, two characters' conversational paths converge. (For example, p. 64, lines 30-31.) Where else does Tyler use this style to convey how people talk to each other--but don't seem to really hear each other? Are these realistic conversations? What does it tell us about the way people communicate?
10. How does Tyler achieve a balance between the celebratory and the mournful in *Back When We Were Grownups*? Does one tone dominate the other?
11. Rebecca frequently feels that she is untrue to her own nature. (For example, p. 183, lines 14-15; p. 69, line 24; and p. 162, lines 25-) Is Rebecca really a "fraud" (p. 39, lines 28-29), or is this a common character trait?

(litlovers.com)