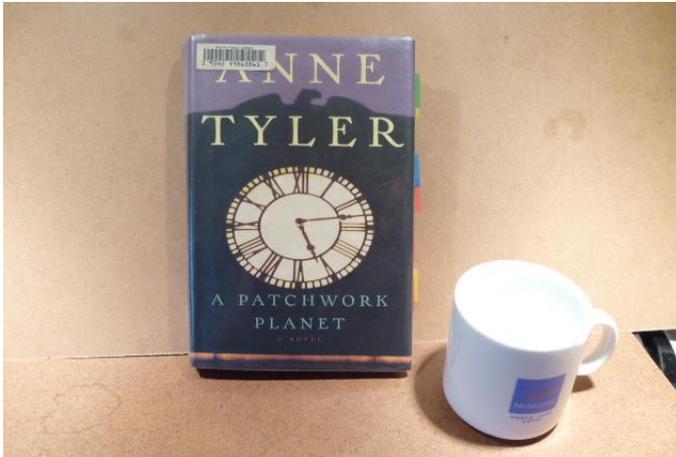


A Patchwork Planet

By Rod Fraser



IT WAS IN the 1990s, shortly after my divorce, when I first read an Anne Tyler novel. I believe it was *Searching for Caleb*, or perhaps *The Accidental Tourist*. It doesn't matter; all of her novels are worth reading.

In addition to having more time for novels—as a single, mid-forties male—my reading of Anne Tyler's books had an additional bonus. It turns out they provided conversation for dates. With one or two exceptions, I found women my age liked Anne Tyler.

This led to a number of interesting conversations about her 'wickedly' funny books, insights into life,

eccentric characters and strange families. To say my knowledge of her fiction aided my love life is certainly true.

In one of her books, a young woman, a protagonist in the story, notes that the arguments for changing everything in your life—ranked against the arguments for changing nothing—were often equally compelling. Quite so. I've never forgotten that true, but amusing observation.

One final bit of trivia.

During the above time frame, one of my dates was a woman in the publishing business who met Anne Tyler on one or two occasions. She told me Ms. Tyler was a warm, friendly woman, gracious, attractive, a southerner (she was brought up in North Carolina)—remarkably interested in the lives of all those she met (including my date).

SO WHILE RECENTLY searching for something to read in the stacks at the library, I happened upon *A Patchwork Planet*, an Anne Tyler novel that tells the story of misfit, Barnaby Gaitlin, a troubled, but kind young man, trying to find his way in life—boxed in between his sometimes sure instincts and the stifling expectations of a stuffy old family.

Barnaby got off to a poor start in adolescence, when he, and four of his friends, broke into a few

neighbourhood homes. Barnaby was caught by the police and packed off to an unusually strict private school (an institution for troubled teenagers of the rich—just short of a reform school). His friends were never arrested. Barnaby took the blame selflessly.

The stigma of the above school and Barnaby's troubled past made it difficult for him to find work in his late teens. Fortunately, Mrs. Dibble of 'Rent-a-Back' was able to see past all that and hired him on the spot.

She told Barnaby, "all of our clients are aged or infirm, or just somehow or other in need, and what they're in need of is precisely your kind of good-heartedness." He was to become her most valued employee.

"Rent-a-Back" offered temporary help for seniors with all the tasks they were too feeble or unwilling to do. Barnaby, with a number of other employees, picked up groceries, raked leaves, put up Christmas trees, removed litter, cleaned windows and eaves-troughs, set out garbage each week and handled a multitude of other chores, as required.

When the novel begins, Barnaby has worked for Mrs. Dibble eleven years. He is 30 years old and is still hoping to find his angel, 'an apparition (in human form) who will tell him his destiny.'

His grandfather made it rich many years ago, when his angel appeared to tell him to go into a new

line of work. And since that time, the Gaitlin family were expected to have an angel appear at some point in their lives to provide similar guidance.

Barnaby thought he found his angel in Sophia, a bank loan officer he met on the train to Philadelphia. It seemed very likely. Sophia was pretty, steady, articulate, warm and engaging. She was interested in Barnaby and arranged for him to help her elderly aunt, with the view to getting to know him better. And it goes without saying, her aunt actually needed the help.

It appears that Sophia let her aunt know of Barnaby's past problems with the police. So when some \$3,000 went missing from Auntie's flour jar, all hell broke loose. Barnaby was a key suspect and the police were called in. It was quite a mess. Barnaby was reassigned to other clients, but fortunately he wasn't arrested.

When Barnaby's other clients heard the news, they didn't believe it. They rallied to his side, asking Mrs. Dibble to assign Barnaby to do additional work at their homes—much of it busywork—to show support and solidarity with Barnaby.

In a touching paragraph, Mrs. Dibble tells all this to Barnaby, laughing with joy, as she did so.

"They love you, Barnaby," Mrs. Dibble told him, "and now her laughter had faded.... It hasn't

escaped their notice how you've cared for them all these years."

"You're not firing me," Barnaby replied.

"Barnaby, I would never fire you.... I tell everyone that Barnaby's going to end up owning this company. You just watch: when I'm old and decrepit, it's Barnaby who'll buy me out."

THIS NOVEL CONTAINS many lovely and amusing stories of the interactions between Barnaby and his co-workers on the one hand, and their feeble clients on the other. Over time, Barnaby comes to care deeply for his charges—those over-the-hill seniors and their difficult lives.

And in so doing, he finds himself. He comes to understand that he has found his angel, or at least a place or role in life that he can call his own.

It goes without saying that Barnaby didn't steal Auntie's money. The details of how this all works out should be left for those who choose to read the book. But I will leave you with one interesting anecdote.

About a year or so after Barnaby's burglary and theft, when he had returned home from school for Easter, he had a major blowout with his parents. There was considerable upset in the home as the

family sat down to a troubled dinner. Barnaby's grandfather was present. At the conclusion of the meal, he called Barnaby aside, gave him the keys to his most prized possession, a vintage Corvette Stingray with a split-window at the rear.

He told Barnaby he was getting older. He shouldn't drive anymore and he wanted to make him a gift of the car. To show the kind of support, that people in this life can only hope for, he told Barnaby he didn't feel he could entrust it to a better person.

Somehow his grandfather, like Mrs. Dibble and all of Barnaby's clients, could see that everything would be well with Barnaby in the fullness of time.

December 15, 2018