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SAINT MAYBE

By Anne Tyler
Alfred A. Knopf

Where can you go when your last novel (*Breathing Lessons*) won the Pulitzer Prize and the one before (*The Accidental Tourist*) won the National Book Critics Circle Award? Anne Tyler's choice in *Saint Maybe* is to traverse the landscape she already maps like no one else: the family lives of quirky Baltimoreans, compassionately and convincingly drawn, haunted by their past and inextricably tied to each other. Then she adds a dimension--here an explicit focus on spirituality--that reflects how she's deepened since her last novel.

The classic Tyler trademarks appear immediately, the warmth and humor of the narrative voice, as if the novel were being told us by a friend who creates an engaging character quickly and hooks us to her tale. That voice is strengthened by its detachment. We know the story is created rather than ripped from autobiography, a fiction, art not reportage, the lie by which we see the truth.

In 1965 on maple-lined Waverly Street, house #8 belongs to the Bedloe family, "never just the Bedloes, but the Bedloe *family* . . . the ideal, apple-pie household." "Handsome and easygoing" Ian, the youngest son, is "a medium kind of guy," and his admired older brother Danny has just brought home Lucy Dean, "the woman who's changed my life." Behind Lucy trot two children from her former marriage, and soon-- Ian suspects too soon--she presents Danny with a third, Daphne. Ian also wonders where Lucy goes on the afternoons he babysits for her. When a miffed Ian voices his suspicion one night, his allegations lead directly to Danny's suicide and indirectly to Lucy's.

Ian tells no one of his culpability but Cicely, his girlfriend. The three orphans move into the Bedloe house. Visited in dreams by Danny and Lucy, wracked with guilt, Ian goes off to college. One day, he wanders into the storefront Church of the Second Chance, confesses his role in Danny and Lucy's deaths and feels relieved. "Don't you think I'm forgiven?" he asks its Reverence Emmett?

"Goodness no," Ian hears. "You can't just say, 'I'm sorry, God' . . . You have to offer reparation--concrete, practical reparation." So Ian drops out of college, becomes a carpenter (symbolism is not always subtle), and spends the next 22 years raising his two nieces and nephew. Suddenly celibate to the point where Cicely leaves him, Ian devotes his life to step-parenting, the church and carpentry until middle age, when even his children cannot bear his stodgy reclusiveness. Daphne, who always touched Ian deeply, finally blurts in exasperation: "King Careful, . . . Saint Maybe, . . . Mess up, I say! . . . Make every mistake you can think of! Use all the life you've got!" Shortly after, Daphne's friend Rita, who cleans homes and lives of clutter, steps into Ian's life.

If Ian shared Tyler's own zen-like capacity to enter and fully live each action, to be totally *there*, the second half of the book would be as vibrant as the first, but at times we grow impatient with Ian's hesitance to jump-start his life. Also frustrating is the smorgasbord presentation of colorful characters, allowing a few wonderful tastes (e.g., Mrs. Myrdal "one of those women who grow quilted in old age--her face a collection of pouches, her body a series of squashed mounds") but leaving us wishing for more, especially more of Lucy.

But to suggest *Saint Maybe* is not Tyler's best novel (*Accidental Tourist* still reigns) is merely to praise with faint damnation, for she is one of fiction's absolute masters. Continuing to go her unfashionable way, she writes of family bonds in an era where, as one comic puts it, "a marriage is considered successful if it outlasts milk." She dares to like her characters and find their ordinary lives never too small for large concerns. Nor could Ian's life, directed by sin (in its classical sense of estrangement from one's spiritual center) and driven toward atonement (at-one-ment), be considered small. Tyler's characters seldom find enrichment in art or music or books. It flows instead from the current that runs between them and other people, which she paints with economical, deft and invisible brushstrokes.

If you shelve your contemporary novelists alphabetically, as I do, Anne Tyler stands beside John Updike. There's a metaphor there too powerful to ignore.