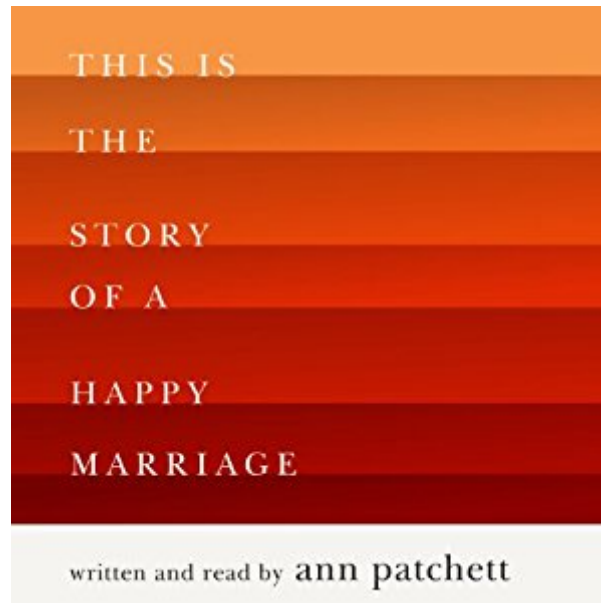




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# This Is The Story Of A Happy Marriage



## Synopsis

Blending literature and memoir, Ann Patchett, author of *State of Wonder* and *Bel Canto* examines her deepest commitments: to writing, family, friends, dogs, books, and her husband in *This is the Story of a Happy Marriage*. Together, these essays, previously published in *The Atlantic*, *Harper, Vogue*, and *The Washington Post*, form a resonant portrait of a life lived with loyalty and with love. *This Is the Story of a Happy Marriage* takes us into the very real world of Ann Patchett's life. Stretching from her childhood to the present day, from a disastrous early marriage to a later happy one, it covers a multitude of topics, including relationships with family and friends, and charts the hard work and joy of writing, and the unexpected thrill of opening a bookstore. As she shares stories of the people, places, ideals, and art to which she has remained indelibly committed, Ann Patchett brings into focus the large experiences and small moments that have shaped her as a daughter, wife, and writer.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Patchett as a novelist doesn't make it easy to get comfortable with her. Each new novel is a different country, with its own language and culture. You can't just glide from one to another; you need to spend time learning about this next stamp on your passport and what you learned previously doesn't help you now. That's not true of this book of essays. Her life ties them all together and the pieces are biographical without being a biography. It's one country, but with a great deal of diversity, both geographical

and temporal. It was good to get to know the girl who would write *The Patron Saint of Liars* (still my favorite) and her parents. Her reference to her father's work as a police detective involved in the Manson case got me searching for his name in *Helter Skelter*. After finding him there, I was quickly reminded that Bugliosi only had room for one hero in his book, and that spot was reserved for himself. Her story about the events leading up to her marriage (the marriage of the title) gives new meaning to the phrase, "The heart wants what it wants". She is best when recounting her personal relationships, especially with her grandmother and with Sister Nena, the person who literally taught her to write. It was nice to be reminded of what I liked about Catholicism.

I had the devil's own time getting into this collection of essays, but after some false starts I loved it. The title annoys me because it almost guarantees a missed opportunity for a broader (read: male) audience. Maybe I'm surrounded by a bunch of male Luddites but, honestly, raise your hand if you are - or know - a man who would gravitate to this title . . . I rest my case. Everyone should give it a fair shake. I promise there is something for everyone reading this blog. Patchett is best known as a novelist (about which, more later), but she has long been an essayist. Her pieces have appeared in the *NY Times*, *Harpers*, *Vogue*, *Atlantic*, *The Bark*, and more. She has collected some of her best work here and arranged it somewhat chronologically. It is almost a memoir. The essay from which the book takes its title is near the end, and by that time we like her and want her happy. It is no spoiler to reveal there is a happy ending. But before we get there Patchett recounts a childhood scarred by divorce, school years marked by a near inability to read and write, good and bad relationships and friendships, hard work, a few lucky breaks, and ultimately a life of success and satisfaction. As in life, it's the journey in which the interest lies - not the destination. In the Introduction Patchett declares her book is "full of example and advice." She really delivers in "The Getaway Car: A Practical Memoir about Writing and Life." One of her great gifts is an ability to link unlikely elements to create a clear and immediate focus. This essay, which is the longest in the book, is the best I have ever read about writing. It is also a primer for life. She is practical, honest, funny and not especially patient or encouraging because writing, like life, is to be taken seriously and attacked with discipline. In "On Responsibility" she tenderly connects the trials and pleasures of caring for her aged, confused grandmother, and her dog, Rose. In between, she tries out for the LAPD, edits *The Best American Short Stories 2006* poolside at the Bel Air Hotel, and delivers a kick-ass speech at Clemson College. And more, much more. If you haven't read Ann Patchett's novels, you should. Her biggest hit was *Bel Canto*, the tale of an opera singer amongst a group of

hostages in a South American country. Personally, I liked *State of Wonder* better. *Run* was my favorite, but *The Patron Saint of Liars* (now that is a great title) is close behind. If you are new to her, I suggest you start with this book of essays. Knowing her will deepen your reading experience. She talks to her dog, loves her Granny, opens an independent bookstore, and goes on the Winnebago vacation from hell. In the best tradition of good writers, she drove me to look up "sestinas" and "villanelles" as well as what sounds like the best and most complicated apple pie recipe on the planet. Read this book. You'll love it.

I adore Ann Patchett. I love her books. I love the story of her friendship with Lucy Grealy I love that when Nashville lost its bookstores she opened up an independent one of her own. I loved watching her interview with Stephen Colbert (if you haven't seen it, find it on YouTube). And I loved that in this book of her essays, all previously published, but all new to me, she touches on all those subjects as well as many others. My book club decided to read this collection because we thought it would be a quick read (and it was) and because we've enjoyed Patchett's books so much she is the only author I can think of that, when she publishes something new, we always consider it and nearly always read it. Now, this is not a perfect book, but Patchett is an excellent writer and does non-fiction as well as she does fiction. I wasn't aware of her background as a magazine contributor, but it wasn't at all surprising to see that in both types of writing she visits many of the same themes generally very artfully. I loved that in the first few pages she mentioned her early work with Adrian Nicole LeBlanc, author of *Random Family*, one of my all-time favorite books. OK, so some of the essays were a bit long for me (but she actually even touches on that, noting that her non-fiction was always a slave to the word count required by the publisher) but they were all good, some great (particular standouts for me were the story of her RV trip with her estranged partner, lifelong friendship with an elderly nun, her adult relationship with her grandmother (the reference to "picking up the horrible fried-fish planks from Captain D's she loved" (213) made me laugh out loud....I used to do the very same thing for my grandmother, only she preferred Long John Silver's) and her recounting of the controversy when [title: *Truth and Beauty*] was selected as Clemson's freshman class read). And then, oh, the dog stories. Any animal lover will fall a little in love with Rose and I'm not ashamed to say I had the patented Oprah-ugly-cry while reading "Dog Without End" which is one of the most beautiful tributes I've ever read. My husband and I don't have children, but do have beloved dogs so I have lived through the same comments she and her husband receive, that dogs are just a placeholder (then, later, a substitute) for children and I love how she shuts down those "well-meaning" folk, describing exactly how I feel, "'Look at that,' people said, looking at me and not

Rose. 'Look how badly she wants a baby.' A baby? I held up my dog for them to see, my bright, beautiful dog. 'A dog,' I said. 'I've always wanted a dog.' The truth is, I have no memory of ever wanting a baby. I have never peered longingly into someone else's stroller. I have, on occasions too numerous to list, bent down on the sidewalk to rub the ears of strange dogs, to whisper to them about their limpid eyes." (75-76). Exactly. And in one sentence she sums up my feelings about dogs with pedigrees (yes, I DO judge people who buy and don't adopt. I do. I try to be a better person than that, but then see the heartbreaking photos of pets nobody wants.) Rose was a "Parking Lot Dog, dropped off in a snowstorm to meet her fate" (77). There are way too many Parking Lot Roses out there - if we buy dogs and don't adopt from shelters or rescues, we are saying they aren't valuable enough to save. So, there's my PSA for the day. However, my adoration for Patchett blossomed into something else when she compared her relationship with her grandmother to her relationship with Rose. When I lost my maternal grandmother (I was in my thirties) I explained it to my husband in the very same terms that Patchett uses - love for an elderly grandparent is often so similar to the love you have for your dogs, because it's so clear, so true and so unmarked by disappointment and constant change. I was just gutted and felt I was experiencing it again. I marked a lot more dog lines so I could save them for myself. So, if you like Ann Patchett, read this. If you love essays or great magazine writing, read it. If you love dogs, read the dog essays, then read the whole thing.

I really loved this book of short stories. I did not think that I would ever want to read a bunch of short stories, but I read it for a book group. The short stories made me laugh out loud or sad, so they were really engaging. It was nice to have a book of short stories, because it is easy to put the book down and then pick it back up again and not have to worry about the characters.

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