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Crossing Borders in Anne Tyler's Fiction

Susan Norton



**THE REWARDS OF PERMEABILITY:
CROSSING BORDERS IN ANNE TYLER'S FICTION**

Anne Tyler's fiction is often compared to John Updike's because both writers treat 'domestic' themes. They centre their narratives on family, focusing on the household, the quotidian, and the requirements of the inner circle. In John Updike's *Rabbit* series (1960-1990) we see the recurrent image of the biological outsider, the missing member who cannot be let in because she does not hold full membership, only the fragile claim, if she chose to make it, of "illegitimate child," half-sister, step-daughter. Whatever her status, Rabbit's (possible) daughter Annabelle is not an Angstrom. The line of demarcation between Harry, Janice and Nelson, on the inside, and Annabelle on the outside, remains enforced by the plot, even though Harry often wills otherwise.

In Tyler's fiction, though, the lines of demarcation tend to be vaguer and are often crossed or (ostensibly) eliminated. Contact with outsiders, rather than threatening the sustainability of family, is often the very salve required to alleviate familial or personal suffering. By demonstrating the rewards of more permeable arrangements, her work very much questions the privileged status that American society has assigned to the nuclear form. Yet it does so in ways that are reluctant to undermine nuclearity completely. Instead her work suggests that a variety of family forms, including the nuclear one, are viable provided they tolerate individual growth and change

and are open to external influences. Her work interrogates the nuclear impulse to close ranks irrationally and often features characters who function as border crossers. These characters either penetrate the nucleus from within or from without, or they encourage a family member to leave the centre. The crossing, in either direction, almost always proves a mutually beneficial one.¹

In a benchmark essay entitled "Anne Tyler: Medusa Points and Contact Points" (1985), Mary F. Robertson identifies Tyler's subtle deviation, as a "domestic" novelist, from predictable treatments of family. Recognising that a social critic might feel that "Tyler's very limitation of subject matter confirms an ideology of the private family to the detriment of political awareness" (184)², Robertson shows how Tyler's narrative patterns in fact disrupt any such notion. And while she accepts John Updike's charge (and the charge of lesser known readers) that certain of Tyler's plot-lines are "implausible" because her realistically drawn characters don't always behave predictably, she argues that "thwarted prejudices are exactly the point... [T]he genre [of family fiction] depends traditionally on features that produce certain expectations in the reader. Foremost, perhaps, is a clear conception of the boundary between the insiders of a family and its outsiders. The typical family novel reserves its emotional centre for the insiders" (185).

In other words, in a conventional family plot the narrative will focus most on exchanges among "insiders." These exchanges will advance the story's themes and outcomes, and the text as a whole will do nothing to question the centrality of the primary, most often "traditional," family. In such a conventional family plot, derived from nineteenth century realism, the private, internally dramatic family remains generally coherent and

ideologically ordained. When such families survive, normative values are upheld. Thus it is ideologically revealing that each of Updike's *Rabbit* novels (excepting the first, of course, in which Rabbit runs) concludes with the primary family in various positions of clear reunification. The reader invariably comes away from them with a reinforced feeling of security.

In Tyler's novels, though, not only do characters sometimes achieve growth or salvation by splitting off from a marital relationship or a family of origin, but the narrative centrality of the primary family can become dislodged by the acute insinuation of certain well-developed extra-familial characters into the lives of primary family characters. These extra-familial characters may then inadvertently work to alter the consciousness of the primary family member and bring about her improved reunification with family, as, for instance, Joel, Noah and Nat unknowingly do for Delia in *Ladder of Years* (1995). At other times the outsider may offer a protagonist some beneficial alternative to the constricting or otherwise unsatisfactory conditions of an original family or marriage. Thus Macon of *The Accidental Tourist* (1985) eventually chooses Muriel over the stultifying company of his siblings and over the probable pain of a re-alliance with his ex-wife Sarah. Ian Bedloe of *Saint Maybe* (1991) chooses life, love and progeny with Rita diCarlo instead of a waning sense of usefulness to his three grown, informally adopted children.

But not only do "outsiders" frequently bring about welcomed change in Tyler's work; they often fully enter the realm of the dominant plotline as well. Indeed two of Ian's children gain entry to the Bedloe family as rather unwelcome outsiders to its "apple pie household" (SM 4). Agatha and

Thomas, after all, are the natural offspring not of Ian's dead brother Danny, but, as if to make their claim to Bedloe family status even more fragile, of Danny's dead wife's first husband. Yet over time, they, along with their half-sister Daphne, become transformed into the very insiders around which much of the plot revolves.

Thus, Tyler makes the marginal central, leaving the original to recede in much the same, gradual way that Mr. and Mrs. Bedloe, Ian's parents, "drift toward the stairs" (*SM* 95) one evening and leave teenaged son Ian to spend the next twenty years raising Lucy's children. The original family form, a "traditional" and nuclear one, palpably the envy of all the neighbourhood, gives way to an alternative family form, one which, despite growing pains, eventually thrives and flourishes. Though it is true that certain members of the original Bedloe family (such as Ian's parents) only partially embrace the newcomers, Aggie, Thomas and Daphne, Tyler's text itself fully accommodates them and encourages the reader's willingness to do so as well. The original Bedloe family reconfigures itself to make Ian its head. Though he resists the responsibility, as any adolescent would, his selflessness grows as his maturity and dedication to the task increase. Eventually, a fully viable family extension is formed. Then, with an even further insistence on openness and accommodation, Tyler puts this latter-day manifestation of the Bedloe family in the challenging position to accept yet a third extension. It must allow Ian his union with Rita and their new baby. Clearly Tyler shifts the narrative focus from one form, to the next, to the next, as offshoots of one family blossom into another. But we are never allowed completely to lose sight of the original. Bee and Doug remain in the margins, as do Ian's sister

Claudia and her family. At times they are very much integral to Ian's bustling household and they play supporting roles. But the family mutation process, once it has begun, proves unstoppable -- when Danny Bedloe crashes into the brick wall, what he leaves behind is a semi-porous membrane that several prospective family members penetrate rather easily. These new members (Aggie, Thomas and Daphne), then, cross the Bedloe line of demarcation without demolishing it. It is their otherness as outsiders that gradually allows them to offer insiders the comfort of alternative sensibilities.

To attempt to ward off the strange or unfamiliar is, in Tyler's work, a decisive move toward familial and personal depletion and stagnation. The Pecks of *Searching for Caleb* (1975) present an obvious case in point. In Tyler's depiction of this most insular family, a profound clannishness prevents even relatives by marriage from enjoying the same privileged status as biological members. Peck spouses are consistently relegated to the periphery or driven away from the family entirely. The remaining blood-related insiders lead senselessly proud but diminished, rather paranoid lives. Justine Peck, the novel's heroine, rebelliously marries the black sheep of the family, her first cousin Duncan, thereby managing to take inbreeding to an ironically subversive level. Because Duncan is strikingly dissimilar to any of the other Pecks, Justine succeeds in locating both an alternative sensibility and yet a kindred spirit with whom she can live her life. In *Searching for Caleb*, and in many of Tyler's other works, we find an ongoing interrogation of the alleged divisions between family and not-family. The margins always beckon the centre and, if the centre yields, it is allowed, paradoxically, to survive.

This capacity of Tyler's families to survive *provided* they maintain some ethos of permeability is, I believe, the quality that places her fiction firmly left of centre between works that embrace "traditional family values" and those that explode nuclearity entirely. It is hard, for instance, to imagine that the Angstrom marriage would have survived three sequels and as many decades had Annabelle's mother Ruth, like Danny Bedloe, driven into a brick wall and left Harry to convince Janice that Annabelle ought to be raised by them! Updike forecloses upon such possibilities early on and leaves Harry to pine for his outsider daughter across an invisible white picket fence that separates the strange from the familiar, the American family from "society."

But in *Saint Maybe* and numerous other of her novels, Tyler optimistically permits the basic survival of a "traditional" family while at the same time broadening its membership. She dislodges the ideologically privileged position of the American nuclear family and disrupts readerly expectations that the enclosed family is fictively most interesting. Indeed, Robertson believes that:

[Tyler's] assault on the notion of what is a proper family makes her close in spirit to other postmodernists who regularly engage in what might be called category assassination, questioning just about every conventional distinction between one concept and another that we use to order our lives and thought. (192)

Whether Tyler can rightly be called a postmodernist in even this limited a sense is arguable, given her quite conventional methods of tale-telling,

characterisation, and so on. But that she does blur the boundaries of family to the emotional advantage of her characters is clear if, at times, quite fraught.

In *Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant* (1982), for example, Tyler demonstrates the desirability of fluid family borders, but in quite harrowing ways. Pearl Tull, the mother of Cody, Ezra, and Jenny Tull, is as insular in her approach to family life as can be imagined or endured. Having been orphaned as a child, raised by an uncle and his large family, and regarded as the "spinster niece tying up [the] spare bedroom" until the age of thirty, Pearl had leapt at the chance to marry the younger, "flamboyant" travelling salesman, Beck Tull. When he abandons her and their three children years later, she responds by drawing a kind of iron curtain around them. Though the children continue to go to school and she takes a job as a cashier at the corner grocery store, she permits no degree of intimacy or emotional honesty with anyone outside the immediate family. Even her own relatives are kept in the dark about Beck's desertion. Disturbingly, Pearl's insistence on intense family loyalty results in violent domestic scenes, instances of child abuse, and hurtful sibling betrayals -- especially and most poignantly Cody's lifelong betrayals, small and large, of his naive brother Ezra. Pearl's wishful belief in the inviolability of family turns her household into a kind of pressure cooker - the greater the emotional repression, the more likely an eruption. Cody, Ezra and Jenny are required to keep up appearances, conceal the fact of Beck's absence, and refrain from forming relationships with others. Early on in the novel their mother "goes on one of her rampages." After dumping out all of Jenny's bureau drawers and returning to the kitchen where she could be

heard "slamming things around and talking to herself," Pearl's rules of exclusion become painfully apparent:

Their mother was slicing a brick of Spam. She didn't look at them, but she started speaking the instant they were seated. 'It's not enough that I should have to work till five p.m., no; then I come home and find nothing seen to, no chores done, you children off till all hours with disreputable characters in alleys or wasting your time with school chorus, club meetings; table not set, breakfast dishes not washed, supper not cooked, floors not swept ... and not a sign of any of you. Oh, I know what's going on! I know what you three are up to! Neighbourhood savages, that's what you are, mingling with each and all. How am I supposed to deal with this? How am I supposed to cope? Useless daughter, great unruly bruising boys ... I know what people are saying. You think my customers aren't glad to tell me?' (51)

Soon Pearl turns on Jenny specifically, accusing her of envying another girl's Sears and Roebuck dress: "What's wrong with us, I'd like to know? Aren't we good enough for my own blood daughter? ... Does she have to pick up riffraff? Does she have to bring home scum? We're a family! We used to be so close! What happened to us? Why would she act so disloyal?" (52). When Cody, the oldest, tries to come to Jenny's defence, Pearl throws a spoon in his face and slaps him, grabs hold of one of Jenny's braids to yank her to the floor, and smashes a bowl of peas over Ezra's head: "'Parasites,' she yells. 'I wish

you'd all die, and let me go free. I wish I'd find you dead in your beds" (53).

Pearl's rage subsides, and the three children are left to return the kitchen to order (symbolic and otherwise). Meanwhile:

Outside, the neighbourhood children were organising a game of hide-and-peek, but their voices were so faint that they seemed removed in time as well as in space. They were like people from long ago, laughing and calling only in memory,.... (53)

The dichotomy Tyler establishes between inside and outside, us and them, is striking here. Life beyond the walls of the Tull house takes on a shimmering, almost mirage-like quality, while inside all is airless and even frightening at times. As Updike had memorably manipulated domestic space in *Rabbit, Run* to make Harry feel inadequate when he peered in through the window of his mother's house⁴, here Tyler also exploits our commonest associations of the kitchen. Ordinarily thought of as the hub of family activity, the place where nurturing, domestic organisation and communication take place, the Tull kitchen is the site of strife and confusion. The convincing quality of Tyler's realism, moreover, is sustained and enhanced by her sharp eye for low-budget middle-class detail as located, for instance, in Pearl's choice of Spam for dinner, and Jenny's envy of a dress from Sears.

Additional instances of Pearl's hostility to the outer world occur throughout the novel, reflected, for example, in her practice of never removing her hat while at work so as to give "the impression that she had

merely dropped in and was helping out as a favour, in a pinch" (15), and in her irate condemnation of Jenny's innocent friendship with the troubled and painfully misunderstood Josiah Payson. But "often, like a child peering over the fence at someone else's party, she gaze [d] wistfully at other families and wonder[ed] what their secret [was]" (185).

Eventually, of course, Pearl's stifling parenting drives her children away from her. After stealing Ezra's fiancé from him, Cody becomes a travelling time efficiency consultant³ who rarely visits home. Ezra attaches himself to Mrs. Scarlatti and her restaurant (which will eventually become his). And Jenny latches on to three husbands in quick succession. Tyler sprinkles the narrative with overt references to "outsiders", as when Jenny recalls that when Ezra left for the army in 1952, he'd asked her to check in from time to time with Mrs. Scarlatti and Josiah, but hadn't said anything about taking care of Pearl -- "he'd only mentioned outsiders" (68); or again when Pearl remembers fantasising that if Beck were to return home within a few months of his desertion, he could so easily be readmitted to the family since:

only the two of them knew he'd left; outsiders would go on believing the Tulls were a happy family. Which they were, in fact. Oh, they'd always been so happy! They'd depended only on each other, because of moving around so much. It had made them very close. (11)

But the acute *unhappiness* of the Tulls belies the illusion here, and makes Tyler's caution against rigid nuclearity clear.

It is also clear in *The Accidental Tourist* where the Learys amuse themselves nightly with an invented card game, too complicated for anyone outside the family to understand, called, tellingly, "Vaccination" -- as if by ritualistically playing it they can inoculate themselves against the hazardous influence of society at large and simultaneously maintain their own "quarantine" (78). "In fact, more than one *outsider* had accused them of altering the rules to suit the circumstances" (*AT 77*, italics mine).

Not entirely unconscious of his irrationally insular tendencies, Macon does realise that "physical contact with people not related to him -- an arm around his shoulder, a hand on his sleeve -- made him draw inward like a snail," and that, to him, "outsiders' skin felt so unreal -- almost waxy, as if there were an invisible extra layer between him and them" (47). One evening after his wife Sarah has left him primarily because of his inability to express emotion over the random murder of their son Ethan, Macon looks up during a game of Vaccination and notices the childhood portrait of himself and his siblings on the opposite wall.

It occurred to Macon that they were sitting in much the same positions here this evening: Charles and Porter on either side of him, Rose perched in the foreground. Was there any real change? He felt a jolt of something very close to panic. Here he still was! The same as ever! (78)

As in *Saint Maybe*, *Searching for Caleb*, and *Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant*, in *The Accidental Tourist* all impulses to seal off the nucleus are punished, and all efforts to penetrate it rewarded. Thus, Tyler does not grant Macon happiness until he eventually leaves the familiar enclave of his siblings, firmly resists the temptation to return to Sarah, and chooses a life of continuously questioned assumptions with tough-minded and imaginative Muriel Pritchett whom he comes to love because, as he yearns to explain to his disapproving brother Charles, "She looks out hospital windows and imagines how the Martians would see us" (239).

Ironically, then, it is Muriel's radical otherness that eventually sustains Macon. To be biogenetically related in Tyler's work is often simply to be with an extension of one's self. She suggests that to be healthy, one must venture outside the self. For Macon, Muriel's very non-Learyness (that is, her non-leeriness) turns out to be her most liberating quality.

Yet Tyler does not allow Macon's fate to rest clearly with Muriel either. Despite the always deceptive simplicity of her prose, her vision -- here as elsewhere -- is complex. When, in Paris, Macon finally chooses Muriel over Sarah, Tyler couches his decision in quite tentative terms. After breaking the news,

[h]e put his arm around [Sarah] painfully, and after a pause she let her head rest against his shoulder. It struck him that even this moment was just another stage in their marriage. There would probably be still other stages in their thirtieth year, fortieth year -- forever, no matter what separate paths they chose to travel. (340)

Such semi-closure is typical of Tyler's work. Her characters are engaged in a constant vacillation between letting go and taking in, letting go and taking in. Though Updike may also depict his characters in states of vacillation, his novels firmly reinstate biological and marital ties.

Tyler, by contrast, resoundingly resists plot constructions and resolutions that unquestioningly privilege the nuclear form. She hastens to enlighten or to chasten those characters who insist on policing family borders, and she regularly disillusiones those who romanticise family relationships. Many of her characters find their own biogenetic, nuclear families so lacking that they adopt replacements. But no family configuration in Tyler's world, whether surrogate or biogenetic, can withstand for long her most insidious threat to family security, exclusivity. For Tyler, the most fertile ground for renewal lies just across the border.

Endnotes

¹For an interesting discussion of the ways Family Systems Theory, a still thriving school of family therapy, uses metaphors relating to "borders" and "permeability" in its therapeutic approaches, see Rosenblatt, Chapter Four, "Metaphors of Family Boundaries," in *Metaphors of Family Systems Theory: Toward New Constructions*, (New York: The Guilford Press, 1994).

² See, for instance, Susan Gilbert, "Private Lives and Public Issues: Anne Tyler's Prize Winning Novels," in *The Fiction of Anne Tyler*, ed. Ralph C. Stephens, (The University Press of Mississippi, 1990), 136-145. Gilbert feels Tyler's work advocates stasis and endurance at the expense of radical political vision and, specifically, feminist change.

³ For an extensive discussion of time in Tyler's novels, see Karin Linton's *The Temporal Horizon: A Study of the Theme of Time in Anne Tyler's Major Novels* (Uppsala University Press: 1989), especially "Chapter Three, *Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant*."

⁴See page 13 of *Rabbit, Run* where Harry approaches his parents' lit kitchen window and "on tiptoe looks in one bright corner. He sees himself sitting in a high chair, and a quick odd jealousy comes and passes. It is his son.... His mother's glasses glitter as she leans in from her place at the table with a spoon of smoking beans at the end of her fat curved arm.... The others around the table express praise, blurred syllables from his father, piercing from his sister,.... Pop and Mim smile and make remarks but Mom, mouth set, comes in grimly with her spoon. Harry's boy is being fed, this home is happier than his,.... "

With this tableau freshly processed, Harry "glides a pace backward" and "his acts take on a decisive haste" (*Run* 12). He runs. It is as though he knows in an instant that he and Janice will never be able to replicate such a scenario, that they will never achieve such a picturesque ideal. His retreat from, significantly, the kitchen window reflects his fear of domestic failure, yet confirms his intuitive belief in the validity of what he has just witnessed: he senses that this is how things *ought* to be.

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