

The Accidental Tourist Study Guide

The Accidental Tourist by Anne Tyler

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Introduction

When *The Accidental Tourist* was published in 1985, Anne Tyler was already a well-established and successful author. Her tenth novel soon became a best seller and won the National Book Critics Circle Award. Most reviewers consider this to be her best work. The novel has also been made into a successful film starring William Hurt and Kathleen Turner. As in many of her previous works, *The Accidental Tourist* focuses on the complexities of family relationships. In this story, middle-aged travel writer Macon Leary finds himself alone and miserable after his son is murdered and his wife leaves him. As a result, he realizes that he is in danger of becoming "a dried up kernel of a man that nothing real penetrates." During the course of the novel, however, Macon confronts his suffering and carves out a new life for himself with the help of an energetic and eccentric young woman and her son. Tyler's intermingling of comedy and tragedy results in a bittersweet tale of loss and recovery. Critics applaud the novel's lovingly drawn and compelling characters and Tyler's insight into the complex inner workings of the American family.

Author Biography

At fourteen, Tyler discovered a writer who would have a significant impact on her own literary career. While reading Eudora Welty's short story "The Wide Net," Tyler noted that one of the characters reminded her of someone she knew. Previously, Tyler had questioned her desire to become a writer because she thought that to write well one needed to have extraordinary experiences; she thought that her life was too dull. Welty taught her that good literature can also be about ordinary people and events.

Tyler was born on October 25, 1941, to a chemist and a social worker in Minneapolis, Minnesota. She moved frequently with her father, a chemist, and her mother, a social worker, settling at different times in Pennsylvania, Chicago, Duluth, and Raleigh, North Carolina. At one point the family moved to Celo, a commune in the mountains of North Carolina. Tyler has admitted that her writing career began at age three when she used to make up stories to help herself fall asleep at night. By seven, she had written in a notebook her first book, illustrated with drawings. While growing up she toyed with the idea of becoming an artist, but she eventually decided she was a better writer.



Plot Summary

Part I

In *The Accidental Tourist*, Anne Tyler presents an intimate portrait of Macon Leary, a middle-aged man coming to terms with the tragic death of his son. After his wife leaves him, Macon cuts himself off from the rest of the world. Almost against his will, he becomes involved with an unconventional woman who helps him cope with his loss and take control of his life.

On their way back from a vacation at the beach, Macon's wife, Sarah, informs Macon she wants a divorce because he has not been "a comfort" to her since the death of their son Ethan. Initially shocked, he begins to see her departure as a chance "to reorganize" the house. He expresses his penchant for order in a series of guidebooks he writes under the title *The Accidental Tourist* for those people forced to travel on business. Like his readers, Macon hates traveling, and does so only "with his eyes shut and holding his breath and hanging on for dear life." Yet he enjoys "the virtuous delights of organizing a disorganized country" and helping his readers "pretend they had never left home."

As he prepares to leave for a trip to England to update his book, Macon boards his dog Edward at the Meow-Bow Animal Hospital. There he meets Muriel Pritchett, a young woman with "aggressively frizzy" hair. Muriel offers to train Edward, who bit a handler at the last place he boarded. She gives Macon her number and tells him that even if he doesn't want to hire her, he can just call to talk. In London, Macon revisits hotels and restaurants and makes notes for his book.

When he returns, Macon admits he "couldn't think of any period bleaker than this in his life." He feels just as alienated at home as he does while traveling. Since contact with other people depresses him, he shuts himself up in his house, sometimes never changing out of his bathrobe. Organizing the house provides him with his only pleasure, because "it gave him the sense of warding off a danger." Reduced to wearing sweat suits every day and eating popcorn he cooks in his bedroom, Macon approaches his breaking point. He recognizes that he is in danger of "turning into one of those pathetic creatures you see on the loose from time to time- unwashed, unshaven, shapeless, talking to themselves, padding along in their institutional garb." Alarmed at the thought, he tries to return to a more normal routine.

Part II

After breaking his leg in a fall down the basement stairs, Macon moves in with his sister Rose and brothers Porter and Charles. He soon finds a sense of contentment with the house's organized household rituals. The Learys "always had to have everything just so ... always clamping down on the world as if they really thought they could keep it in line." Macon enjoys the sense of being "unconnected" at Rose's. He tells nobody about his



move, and no one in the family answers the phone. He also enjoys being pampered by Rose, a maternal woman who has taken care of everyone in the family at one time or another, including their grandparents and her brothers, who moved in with her after their marriages failed.

As his leg heals, Macon recalls his childhood in California and his mother, Alicia, a "giddy young war widow" who always seemed to have a new boyfriend. Her spurts of enthusiasm disturbed her children, who thought she went too far with her "violent zigzag of hobbies, friends, boyfriends, and causes." When she remarried, she sent them to live with their grandparents in Baltimore. Macon recalls his childhood as a "glassed-in place with grownups rushing past, talking at him, making changes, while he himself stayed mute."

Macon decides to hire Muriel to train Edward, who has been behaving erratically at Rose's. As she teaches Edward how to sit, lie down, and heel, she shares the story of her life with him. When Macon feels that she is treating Edward too harshly, he tells her not to return. Soon after, Sarah calls and asks Macon to meet her for lunch. There she tells him she will not come back to him because she doesn't "have enough time left to waste it holing up in my shell" as he does.

During a trip to New York, Macon experiences an anxiety attack and calls Muriel, who comforts him. When he returns, he begins a relationship with her and eventually moves in with her and her young son, Alexander. Macon admits he doesn't love her but loves "the surprise of her, and also the surprise of himself when he was with her.... He was an entirely different person ... [one] who had never been suspected of narrowness ... of chilliness ... and was anything but orderly." When Charles tells him that Muriel is "not your type of woman" and "you're not yourself these days," Macon replies, "I'm more myself than I've been my whole life long." Yet Macon admits to himself that he does not want to get "involved" in her life.

Part III

Macon develops a relationship with Alexander. He buys clothes for him, shows him how to fix things around the house, and protects him from the jeers of other children. However, when he and Muriel attend Rose's wedding to Julian, he sees Sarah, which rekindles his feelings for her. Macon leaves Muriel and Alexander and moves back in with Sarah, but they soon fall into their old destructive patterns. Sarah tells him, "The trouble with you is that you think people should stay in their own sealed packages. You don't believe in opening up. You don't believe in trading back and forth."

He decides to take a business trip to Paris, hoping it will take his mind off his situation. On the plane, Macon discovers Muriel has booked the same flight. When he asks her why she is following him, she tells him that he needs her. While in Paris, they eat a few meals together, and Macon begins to feel comfortable with her again. The next morning, however, Macon injures his back, and Sarah flies to Paris to take care of him. After Sarah discovers Muriel is staying in the same hotel, she and Macon discuss their



relationship. Macon wonders whether he could learn to do things differently, and whether he could learn to make his own decisions. He decides to leave Sarah and go back to Muriel. On his way to the airport, he sees Muriel trying to hail a cab, and he tells his cab driver to stop and pick her up.



Chapter 1

Chapter 1 Summary

Macon and Sarah are driving back from the beach after they have cut short their week's vacation. Macon is wearing a formal summer suit, which he prefers over jeans when he drives. Sarah is in a strapless terry beach dress. Sarah has a tan but Macon is pale; he has the thin skin that burns easily. The two people look as if they have been on entirely different trips.

It starts to rain heavily, yet Macon refuses to alter his driving style, let alone pull off for a while. Sarah would prefer to sit under an overpass to wait out the storm but Macon is fixed on the road and is oblivious to her discomfort even though she is now gripping the dashboard.

Sarah tells him that he is not a comfort and that all his little routines and depressing little habits are wearisome for her. However, they are comforting to him and right now, they are both in need of whatever comfort they can find. Macon and Sarah have lost a child and have struggled through the past year. Sarah tells him that she wants a divorce and she can no longer live with him. Finally, that gets his attention and he pulls into a Texaco station and cuts the engine. The couple does not talk or touch and the only noise is the rain beating on the overhang above them.

Chapter 1 Analysis

Macon and Sarah cannot weather this storm and their marriage is now as bleak as the grey day that surrounds them on their way back from the beach. Clearly, they are in different places; they're even dressed differently as if they originated from two very separate places and maybe they have.



Chapter 2

Chapter 2 Summary

Macon and Sarah have separated. Sarah has found an apartment, leaving him the house and all his bizarre little habits. Macon loves his systems so and now that he has no one to criticize them, he delights in them. Most of them have to do with cleaning. The dishwasher, to his mind, is a huge waste of energy. In his system, he will add each dirty dish to the kitchen sink with some bleach and on alternate days, he will pull the plug and spray everything with very hot water.

Macon does show some flexibility in scheduling when he switches from taking his showers in the mornings to the nights. While he is in there, he lets the tub fill with water in which he swishes around his dirty clothes. Then he hangs everything up on hangers to dry. Then he dresses in tomorrow's underwear so he will not get any pajamas dirty. Only occasionally does he think that he might be carrying things a bit too far. In addition, more than occasionally, he thinks of Sarah, and how they were destined to part from the moment they met.

Macon tries to picture her in her new apartment and is consoled a small bit by the chaos he knows must be surrounding her - sneakers in the oven and the sofa heaped with china. Macon is immediately grateful for his own environment.

Probably because he works at home, he has an unusually keen sensitivity to keeping his things tidy. Macon is a writer of travel books for people who travel on business and really aren't interested in sightseeing, but rather where the best mattresses and the closest McDonald's can be located. The books are a series called *Accidental Tourist* and they are based on visiting the major countries in the world. Of course, he doesn't like to travel but he likes writing about it and he likes the rhythm of words and he likes punctuation in its place. Because he likes everything in its place.

Sarah has been gone three weeks when Macon's sister calls to talk to her. Sarah leaving Macon is shocking and she wonders when he would have told the family. Macon does not want pity or any drama, as they are only separated.

One thing that isn't scheduled for Macon is eating. Macon doesn't have meals anymore; he will simply have a glass of milk or eat some ice cream out of the carton. Macon feels overstuffed all the time even though his clothes and his face indicate that he is losing weight. Sleep is another issue entirely. Macon could watch TV until his eyes burned, head upstairs for his shower and laundry routine, and then head to bed with the dog and the cat. However, sleep will not come. Mostly he would have memories of Ethan and they seemed to float on the ceiling of his bedroom night after night.

Was it only a year ago when Ethan had been 12 and had gone away to summer camp in Virginia? Macon never understood the concept of summer camp but relented anyway



and he really didn't understand it when the camp counselor drove up to Baltimore to tell them that Ethan had been killed in a burger joint. Ethan had sneaked out with some bunkmates and had been shot during a robbery at the restaurant and it was about this time that he would get out of bed and go back downstairs and watch some more TV. Finally, he could go back to bed and drop off.

Chapter 2 Analysis

Macon has a very simplistic, organized life, is obsessive about economics and saving energy, and he certainly doesn't make any unnecessary movements. Even after the murder of his son, he is still contained. Maybe the sameness of it keeps him sane in a world that can allow a 12 year old to be shot execution style while buying a hamburger.



Chapter 3

Chapter 3 Summary

When Sarah calls and wonders if she can come by the house and pick up the navy rug from the dining room, Macon's mind wanders to the two of them sipping sherry and talking about how much they miss each other. However, Sarah's schedule won't permit and she doesn't take him up on his offer to bring it over. Macon wanted to see her new apartment but she said it was not put together just yet. Actually, she is having trouble getting out of bed these days; what is the point? What is the point of anything? Sarah wonders if the man who shot their son has any idea that he not only killed the people in that restaurant that night but many others as well. Sarah wants to go to the prison, tell him what he has done, and then she wants to shoot him between the eyes. Macon tries to calm her down as usual and they end up fighting about how they should fight. As it turns out, she stops over and picks up the rug while he is away on one of his research trips... this one to England.

Macon packs carefully, of course, and looks wistfully at his bathroom knowing that it will be the last decent one he will see for over a week. Then he loads Edward, the dog, into the car to deposit him at the kennel for boarding. Edward resists the minute he recognizes the building and Macon drags him through the door only to be told that they could no longer board him as he had bit an attendant the last time. Disgruntled, he leaves, trying to determine who can possibly keep him for a week. Then he sees the sign for the Meow-Bow Animal Hospital and pulls in.

The woman behind the counter has dinky little eyes, frizzy hair down to her shoulders, and she is wearing very short red shorts at the top of her stick legs. Edward seems to like her, that is enough for Macon, and he leaves him in the care of Muriel Pritchett.

Macon likes planes and has a particularly good flight from Baltimore to New York. Once he settles in at Kennedy, he pulls out his arsenal of crossword puzzles and completes them just as they are boarding his flight. Macon is seated next to a gray-haired woman who he thinks is innocuous enough, but buries himself in his book just to make sure. Soon the drone of the flight attendant's voices and the engines lull him into a twilight sleep where he stays until dawn, which was not really dawn at all, if you asked him. People reset their watches and they debark at Heathrow.

Macon sorts his currency into envelopes that he brought from home to avoid any unnecessary fumbling later on. London is his base and he will make little side trips to include new and updated information for this destination. Of course, he is efficient in his strategy and his execution. Plenty of other books say how to see as much of a city as possible, but his job is to say how to see as little as possible.

Macon tries breakfast at three different stops, making notes about the eggs and the strength of the coffee. Then in the afternoon, he visits hotels and speaks with managers,



tests beds, and squints at showerheads. At suppertime, he isn't quite up to a formal meal and goes instead to a typical American café and has plain boiled vegetables and lamb chops followed by some gingerbread and cream.

True to form, Macon is ready to go home before his scheduled departure. Seems like he always gets the itch to leave, no matter how short the stay. However, there are no flights available and he waits out his time watching TV and eating nonperishable groceries in his room because he just cannot face another restaurant.

Macon is first in line to board the flight home and the afternoon stretches on interminably. Even though he wishes it, Sarah will not be meeting him at the airport today like she used to do sometimes. So he gets his car out of the airport lot, picks up some milk at the 7-11, and stops at the Meow-Bow to rescue Edward.

This evening, Muriel wears a v-necked black dress splashed with big pink flowers. It too is way too skimpy and almost as preposterous as her high-heeled sandals. While there he notices that her nails are a dark red, she has put on a blackish lipstick, and that she has trouble running his credit card through the embossing machine because she is trying to spare her manicure. Muriel wants to know if the phone number is business or personal and offers her services as a dog trainer. Training dogs that bite is her specialty and she can work wonders with Edward.

Macon takes her business card as she is telling him to call and chat someday. Thankfully, Edward lets out a piercing yelp that allows him to escape to the safety of his own car.

Sarah is not at the house when he arrives. Macon really knew that she wouldn't be but she has been there because the navy rug was missing. Macon puts the milk up, unpacks his bags, washes his dirty clothes, and hangs them up to dry. The sight of it all reminds him of travel. Maybe he is the *Accidental Tourist at Home*.

Chapter 3 Analysis

Sarah and Macon are removed in more ways than their residences. Each are grieving the loss of their son - she in her bathrobe all day and he in his routines. How can two people who share such a huge loss be so disparate in that sharing? Macon will have to crumble soon and there is some foreshadowing in that the usual dog boarder will not keep Edward and Macon is forced to make a last minute change. This is so foreign for him yet he handles it pretty well. The flamboyant, frizzy haired Muriel seems persistent enough to find her way into his routine life. How will he ever handle that?



Chapter 4

Chapter 4 Summary

Macon's boss, Julian, does not waste time calling him after his return from England. Macon is still asleep when the phone rings yet somehow he is able to negotiate another two weeks longer than Julian had requested to get his manuscript. Macon tells Julian that he will try to do better than that though and hangs up still in a fog.

Instead of working on his book, Macon spends the next week or so organizing the household, room by room. Macon rearranges all the kitchen cupboards; he weeds and prunes in the yard, and stretches a clothesline across the basement so he wouldn't have to use the dryer. Then he disconnects the dryer's exhaust tube and teaches the cat to go in and out the windowpane where the tube had been. It is only a pity that the dog cannot do the same because Macon is not fond of walking Edward. Macon starts to think that maybe all his little eccentricities are a little silly, but isn't everything silly when you got right down to it?

It seems like the neighborhood is just learning that Sarah had left because he begins to get a flurry of invitations to all kinds of potluck dinners. Macon guesses that people think he needs to keep in contact with what a family is. However, he recoils from all the attention, and remembers what Sarah told him about his never needing any other people on a desert island. Not like her. Sarah would have liked to have people on her island before Ethan died, but she didn't go to parties anymore and she certainly didn't give any.

Macon remembers that they had met at a party in 1958 though, when they were both seventeen, and she was surrounded by a throng of athletes while he kept his distance in his black turtleneck, black pants, and sandals. Maybe it was the appeal of his poetic angst but she asked him to dance over the jocks. There was just something about this bubbly girl with copper brown curls—maybe because she was so different from him.

Macon vowed to keep his distance and maintain his dignity, although that wasn't easy being driven everywhere by his grandfather with whom he lived. Macon kept his distance when they went to college and wrote to each other. Sarah always signed her letters *I love you* but all he could muster was *Fondly*.

Eventually, they became engaged and married right after graduation. Macon went to work at his grandfather's factory and Sarah taught English at a private school. Seven years later Ethan was born and Macon was still distant, although Sarah no longer considered it mysterious, just annoying. Somehow, he was locked inside himself and just couldn't get out. Unfortunately, she felt that she loved him more than he loved her but this was not true; he just didn't know how to show it.



Muriel Pritchett's rough, wiry voice on the phone interrupts Macon's dreaming about Sarah, and he cannot place who she is at first. Then she further explains that she met him at the dog groomer's and wants to know how Edward is doing; that she can still train him, he isn't too old. In fact, he can bring him over to her house and she will even make dinner for them. Macon doesn't quite understand this invitation and manages to excuse himself from the call without making any firm commitment.

One day Macon decides to change his way of dressing. Macon would wear sweat suits at home so he could go from one shower to the next without changing clothes. The sweat suit would serve as both pajamas and daywear. It was brilliant. The first night he wore a sweatsuit to bed and, in fact, wore it the next day. Then it occurred to him that he could do this routine two days in a row and skip his shower on alternate evenings. Then all he would have to do is shave, unless he grew a beard.

However, the grey sweat suits were not good for Macon's morale because he found himself slumping at his typewriter and not wearing a belt made his stomach stick out a bit too much. So, he opted for his dressier clothing again and put the sweats away for winter pajamas.

It was not Tuesday, which meant it was grocery day yet he couldn't quite face going today so he did something so out of character. Macon called the small expensive grocery that delivered and gave the full week's order. While he was explaining delivery instructions, his emotions gave way and he vented on the poor clerk saying that he was all alone; it was just him, everybody has left, and what did he do that was so bad? Macon hung up quickly and hoped against hope that he hadn't given the woman his name. Macon then dressed in his white shirt and khakis and felt more like himself again.

Meanwhile Edward was cowering at the top of the stairs leading to the basement, where his food was now thanks to another one of Macon's recent new systems. However, for some reason he is even more skittish about going downstairs, so Macon carries him downstairs where he proceeds to make a puddle on the floor. That is when an eerie howl rang out and Edward jumps on Macon, knocks him to the ground and pins his left leg doubled behind him. If he had not been in so much pain, he could have laughed at the thought of the cat that was only crawling through the dryer hose, which was her new system to get outside. However, shouldn't she have realized the dryer was on? The cat seemed fine now and Macon crawls back upstairs to get help.

Chapter 4 Analysis

Macon's eccentricities are beginning to seem odd, even to him. Macon's remembering his early days with Sarah and how much she loved him, but he always kept himself in check and he's still keeping his life in check with newly devised routines that he works at in favor of writing. The need for structure and efficiency is starting to stifle him though and he breaks a major routine with the sweat suits. However, this level of casualness is so inappropriate for him that it literally makes him sick and he has to change clothes.

Zany Muriel has called to interrupt his measured thoughts and she clearly has designs on this unsuspecting soul... what will she do next?



Chapter 5

Chapter 5 Summary

Macon's broken leg brings him back home to be cared for by his sister Rose. Macon's two brothers live there too; Charles has never married and Porter returned after his divorce. All the Leary kids are back together again in the house where they grew up. Macon thinks of his childhood and how they were raised by their grandparents after their mother left with one of her many boyfriends. Macon's mother had been widowed when their father was killed in the war and her life was a string of boyfriends, new apartments, new causes, hobbies, and whatever else she could throw in. Change was believed in as if it were a religion. Macon's mother considered her children very boring; surely, they weren't really hers, were they?

In 1950, she decided to marry an engineer who traveled the world and tried to create some excitement in her children about the new life they would have. However, it was only a short time later that they found out that they would be going to their grandparents' home; they were not to be world travelers. So one night at the Baltimore airport, they were met by these two thin, severe people in dark clothes and couldn't have been happier. The siblings rarely saw their mother after that; she would dart in and out of their lives leaving a trail of irresponsible remarks with no regard to their consequence.

Macon's musings about his past brings him to the fact that no one knows where he is right now - not Sarah, not the neighbors, not even Julian and he likes the mystery of it all. Macon likes working on his book at the dining room table and hearing the noises that Rose makes as she worked around the house all day. Macon wonders if she thought about how unusual her life was, as she was not married, not employed, and just stayed in the house and took care of her brothers.

However, Macon's anonymity is soon interrupted by a visit from his neighbor, Garner Bolt. The neighbors had been concerned when they saw the newspapers and mail stacking up at his house and his wife sent him over here just to check. So he brought the mail and told him that his skinny lady friend in pedal pushers had been looking for him too. Macon doesn't have any idea who that is until Garner also mentions that she is teetering on really high heels. It was that dog lady, Muriel.

Macon has to let Garner know that he and Sarah had separated and the older man had some advice and was willing to share it. Basically, you just need to let her know that you care. Macon contests that it is more complicated than that but Garner said that it couldn't be. Garner diplomatically tries to tell him that the perception people have of Macon is one of being aloof. Even when Ethan was killed, he rejected any offers of help from the neighbors to bring a casserole or mow the yard and Garner said that people just wanted to help, to connect, but he wouldn't allow it. Macon thanks him for his perspective and for stopping by, but he also knows that Sarah needed him to be a rock most of the time and that's exactly what he is.



Chapter 5 Analysis

Macon's broken leg sure is a deterrent to all his new systems, because he has been forced to go back home so that his sister can care for him. However, it's a good thing too because his brothers are also there and it's like they are young again. It's comfortable to be around people who share his same passion for order and routine and maybe what the doctor ordered for Macon will heal more than his broken bones.



Chapter 6

Chapter 6 Summary

Macon's typing is interrupted by the sound of someone yelling to call off his dog. When he looks out, Edward has backed someone into the big magnolia and is barking furiously. The unfortunate someone is Julian, who had tracked Macon down after going to his house and finding it empty. The neighbors told him where to find him and then it became clear that Macon was here during his recovery and that he wasn't at home because Sarah had left. Julian tells Macon that he is so sorry and even offers Macon an extension on his manuscript but Macon does not need it. Macon hands over the bulk of the remaining pages, Julian is satisfied, and said that the next series will be the major U.S. cities. Macon groans at the thought of all those restaurants and hotels again but he has a few weeks before he will be well enough to travel. As Julian is saying goodbye, Edward blocks the door. Julian bends down to grab his leash and when Edward feels the tug, he snarls and nips Macon's hand.

Rose comes to his aid with some antiseptic but the Learys are leery of having Edward around any longer. Edward is unruly and rough and they just do not see why Macon persists in keeping the creature. There is only one reason and it was a huge one. Edward had belonged to Ethan. However, Macon agrees to get some training and discipline training for him, calls the Meow-Bow, and asks for Muriel. Muriel agrees to help, gives him a discount rate of \$5 per session, and says she will come over 5-6 times per week until the job is done.

Chapter 6 Analysis

Macon seems to have become more settled in the house where he and his sister and brother share the same enthusiasm for orderliness and structure. The work has been completed ahead of schedule and things are going well with the exception of Edward's erratic behavior, which seems to have gotten particularly worse now. So, for some reason, fate is pushing him to bring Muriel into his life. There's this feeling that life is about to spin uncomfortably out of control for him.



Chapter 7

Chapter 7 Summary

When Muriel arrives for the first lesson, Edward leaps on her and she pokes his rear end down with a long, sharp index finger. Macon is told to watch, follow her lead, and he needs to cluck to let Edward know that he is doing something positive. While Edward stays sitting, Muriel launches into the story of her hair, how it was blonde when she was younger and her mother had entered her into talent competitions but then her hair turned dark and everything changed. The sister who stayed blonde was the favorite one and all the boys liked her too.

Then she snaps her fingers over Edward's head and he jumps up and barks and Muriel praises him. Macon is feeling a little inadequate that he can't control the dog at all and she makes it seem so easy. Muriel gives him a new collar and leash which Edward is to wear all the time during his training; it gives Macon a way to correct him immediately.

Muriel bounces back and forth between the dog training and little tidbits about her personal life. Muriel was smart enough to go to college but never did and wished now that she had. Muriel got married in the fall of her senior year of high school and his mother never forgave her for stealing her son away and ruining his chances for a good life. However, as far as Muriel is concerned, it took two and that boy wanted to marry her in the worst way.

So the lessons continued, Muriel came to the house early each morning in a zany outfit and her frizzy hair. Muriel always manages to confuse Macon but Edward would moan a little bit each time she left.

The one thing the Learys are not good at is finding their way around when driving. Rose offers to drop Macon off at Julian's office while she runs an errand, and although he has been there many times before, it takes them longer than necessary to find the publisher's building. When he finally arrives, Julian is glad to see him; Macon turns over the balance of the manuscript, and talks about plans for the next series. Then Julian asks why Macon never invited him to dinner at his house and he replies that they weren't a very social family. Julian seems to accept that but questions Macon about Rose and offers to wait outside with him to wait for her return to pick him up.

Edward is not behaving well for Macon and he phones the Meow-Bow to find out that Muriel is not in that day because her son is ill. When he mentions the boy on her next visit she is immediately irritated that he has found out. It seems that men always cool when they find out that she has a child. Macon doesn't see what this has to do with him and becomes even more agitated at what she is doing to Edward at the moment. Edward has jumped at her and she immediately raises the leash so that he is off the floor and starts making gargling sounds deep in his throat.



Edward is choking yet she doesn't stop and finally she lets him drop and he collapses in a heap. Macon is sure he is dead and orders Muriel out of his house for good. Muriel tells him she will leave of course if that's what he wants and if he wants a dog that bites everyone and scares the neighbors, she will go. Macon doesn't reply but Edward moans a little bit when she leaves.

Chapter 7 Analysis

It's hard to imagine that this wacky woman with her extreme clothes and hair would bring any sort of discipline to anything, but Edward seems to respond to her. Maybe he feels that she is in control and that is something that Macon is not. Macon needs direction and guidance for himself and is no position to help anyone, not even his dog. So maybe Muriel will have more value than what she was originally hired to do.



Chapter 8

Chapter 8 Summary

Macon and Edward continue their training. Macon seems to think he is improving but his family isn't so sure and don't want to think about his leaving the dog with them when he resumes his traveling again. Macon wishes he could stay in his cast forever; in fact, he wishes it could cover him from head to toe so he could hide forever.

One night Julian brings over papers about New York and is a bit disappointed when he realizes that he has missed dinner but settles for coffee instead. When Julian, Rose, Macon, and Charles are making small talk, the phone rings and Macon answers it. It is Sarah and she wants to meet him for dinner tomorrow night so they settle on the Old Bay, the restaurant Macon had been going to ever since his grandparents took him as a little boy.

The next night he dresses in a gray tweed suit jacket with gray flannel trousers and hobbles up the steps of the restaurant on his crutches. Macon wonders how Sarah will greet him, but he doesn't have to worry long. Sarah simply presses her cheek to his briefly as if they are acquaintances. Sarah is surprised to see the cast on his leg and wonders why he hasn't called her for help, but he has gone back to his family as usual. Then she tells him that she wants to make their separation legal. This was the furthest thing from Macon's mind and he is shocked, because he had thought all along that they could work things out. However, according to Sarah, he is a dried up kernel of a man and she just can't try to get through to him anymore. After she leaves, he methodically finishes his dinner and heads to the phone to ask Rose to come get him.

Chapter 8 Analysis

Macon has withdrawn as much as possible, even wanting a head to toe cast so that no one can ever find him again. Though he doesn't realize it, the very shell that he thinks is protecting him is alienating him from people, especially Sarah. Macon thinks that he is holding steady and that's the right thing to do and she thinks he is frozen in place, unable to feel anything when she needs so much. Even when she tells him that she has hired an attorney, he seems unphased by it. It seems improbable that they can work their way back to the middle again.



Chapter 9

Chapter 9 Summary

Macon is remembering the day when Grandfather Leary's mind first began to wander. Out of the blue, he announced that he needed Macon to get his passport from the safe deposit box because he was sailing for Lassaque on June 12. Of course, there is no such country but the place his grandfather had invented in his mind sounded like a nice place to visit for sure. After that, he would sit for hours and dream up inventions like a motorcycle that would pull a plow and a plant that was a cross between basil and tomatoes, just perfect for spaghetti sauce companies!

So he isn't really surprised when his grandfather comes to him in a dream and tells him that he has lost his center and Sarah is that center. Sarah had been the best of all the Learys and she was gone. How long is Macon willing to sit, wait, and rot? Macon lay awake for a while and then he got up and fixed coffee. Today his cast is coming off and he is traveling to New York.

During a visit to a fine restaurant at the top of a New York skyscraper, Macon has a panic attack and tries to call Sarah to talk him out of it. Sarah is not at home, so he calls the Leary house and gets Charles who is locked in the pantry. Apparently, Edward is attacking him and that was the closest safe place. Macon finally relents and calls Muriel who agrees to go to the Leary house and calm Edward. Muriel also talks to Macon enough to calm him down so that he can finish his dinner minus the anxiety.

Chapter 9 Analysis

Macon is literally being forced out of his shell with the removal of his cast and he's actually quite brave to leave for New York that same day, given his newly mended state. Maybe he's healing in other ways too. Even though he hadn't wanted to call Muriel again, she is able to solve his dog and emotional crises one more time.



Chapter 10

Chapter 10 Summary

Muriel is telling Macon about her early-married life. The baby was the reason she got married and the reason she got divorced. Muriel was pregnant when she and Norman were married, there were complications, he was born severely premature, and would have problems all his life. Norman couldn't take the medical bills and the fact that his son was not like any others so he left. Muriel and her son, Alexander, have squeezed out a life ever since. At one point as they are talking, she looks up at Macon, something catches in him, and he feels an overwhelming urge to make a connection so he bends and kisses her. It surprises both of them, maybe Macon a little bit more so.

The Learys are facing a difficult decision; Thanksgiving is coming and none of them like turkey but feel compelled to have it because it is traditional. The dilemma is solved with the arrival of Porter's three children who have come for the weekend. Rose also invites an old neighbor and Julian, who she has been seeing on a regular basis for awhile now. The group makes it through the holiday without incident, although there is some question over Rose's turkey roasting technique and Julian is the only one brave enough to try it. Macon somehow seems to like him a little more after that.

The day after Thanksgiving, Macon is scheduled for a trip to Philadelphia and he took Porter's daughter, Susan, with him for a bit of diversion. The two of them test restaurants and hotels and even go to dinner at an inn where the waitress wears a Colonial costume and serves them hot buttered rum - a decision which Macon regrets as his niece gets very chatty and more exuberant than he'd ever seen her. However, it is good too. Macon and Susan talk about her memories of Ethan and she hopes that Ethan is not mad because they have to get on with their lives. Macon assures her that he isn't.

Rose, in the meantime, is knitting a crewneck sweater for Julian for Christmas. It is a hard pattern and she wants to get it right. Macon tries to dissuade her; Julian is a single guy who wears sailing and golfing clothes, not bulky rag knit crewnecks. However, Rose is adamant. Rose feels the spark of love for the first time in her life and no one, especially a man separated from his wife, is going to tell her what to do.

The training continues for Edward. Muriel and Macon take him on an expedition where he is to learn to stay on the sidewalk when they enter the grocery store, drug store, or wherever. Edward does very well, which is encouraging, and suddenly Muriel blurts out that she wants Macon to come to dinner tomorrow night. It would be good for Alexander to spend time around a man. Macon is not at all sure that this is the right thing to do and puts her off as long as he can. However, he cannot find a way to tell her outright that he'll never go to that dinner. Sarah and Ethan are the only ones he ever wanted and there is no point in looking for substitutes.



Chapter 10 Analysis

There's something about Muriel that is both endearing and repelling to Macon and he can't quite define it. Macon doesn't seem to mind their dog training sessions and he is touched by her stories of her past. It is strange to him, but he wants a connection. However, that does not include some other woman's child. Ethan filled his heart and he couldn't possibly have room for anyone else. Could he?



Chapter 11

Chapter 11 Summary

Macon lifts the phone and tries to form an apology for not being able to come to dinner the next night but the words freeze in his mouth. It really has nothing to do with her personally but ever since Ethan died, he has no interest in much of anything, especially women. Since he isn't able to call, he writes a note and drives to her house to deliver it.

Muriel thinks someone is trying to break in and threatens to blow his head off with a shotgun but quickly relents when he announces himself. Macon hands the note through the crack of the door. Muriel reads it, looks up at him, and then he breaks down telling her all about losing Ethan and how he and Sarah had broken apart, how he has no friends anymore, and that he is so far removed from everyone. Muriel hugs him, pulls him into her bedroom, undresses him, and tells him to sleep. However, when she crawls in beside him, the feel of the cool satin on her warm body overtakes him. In her sleep, she places his hand on her stomach and he feels the scar from her Caesarean. It is almost as if she has said to him: "I'm scarred too. We are all scarred. You're not the only one."

Chapter 11 Analysis

Muriel may be a working class woman, but she is a first class survivor and she is teaching Macon lessons way beyond the contracted dog training. Muriel's instincts pick up his emotions and his pain just like Edward picks up her commands. Muriel is a master of teaching heeling... and healing.



Chapter 12

Chapter 12 Summary

Rose is irritated with Macon, because he has been missing meals and sometimes doesn't even come home at night. Macon apologizes but realizes that he has been spending more and more evenings with Muriel and he doesn't care who knows it.

Rose is soon to get a surprise though as Julian shows Macon the engagement ring he plans to give to her on Christmas. Rose is so unlike any of the other women he has ever known - so true. Julian likes the idea of being part of family. Macon seems a bit leery of it but tells him it is a beautiful ring just the same.

Macon isn't really sure what attracted him to Muriel. Muriel's youthfulness is unsettling - she barely remembers Vietnam and had no idea about the Kennedy assassination. Muriel also talks non-stop about lots of things - but all superficial things. However, there are moments when she looks at him or he sees her washing dishes or singing one of her awful country songs, that he is totally taken by her. Macon guesses it is the pattern of her life. Macon doesn't love her, but he loves the surprise of her and the surprise of him when he is with her.

Macon is also making small strides with Alexander too. Macon teaches Alexander how to fix a leaky faucet one day and the little guy beams. Alexander's future is suddenly leak free and all because of Macon.

When Muriel pushes him to commit to going with her to her parents' home for Christmas dinner, he doesn't know how he can back out. Macon is already involved.

Chapter 12 Analysis

Macon finally has some purpose to his life and he is able to introduce Muriel and Alexander to things which they have never experienced. Macon is able to open up slowly without the fear of doing or saying the wrong thing. No one would have ever imagined the two of them together but she needs his steadiness and he needs her spontaneity. Opposites attract, right?



Chapter 13

Chapter 13 Summary

Muriel's parents live in a subdivision with streets named for trees that are nowhere near there. The car makes a right onto Apple Blossom Way and pulls up in front of the Dugan household where they are greeted by Muriel's sister, Claire, a pretty 17-yr. old blonde. Mrs. Dugan greets Macon with skepticism and accepts his gift of cranberry liqueur. Mr. Dugan is preoccupied with the possibility of the pipes freezing in the basement and darts in and out of the day.

Muriel shows Macon pictures from her childhood and he sees the progression of her silky blonde hair to the frazzled mane she has now. Mrs. Dugan finds it necessary to inform Macon of Muriel's progression of unsavory boyfriends since she was 13, as well as the fact that she still has major lapses in judgment. Dinner is a major undertaking with goose, many side dishes, and then three pies from which to choose. Mrs. Dugan warms to Macon as the afternoon wears on and the liqueur wears down in the bottle.

When they arrive back home, Muriel is despondent thinking that Macon will think differently about her now. Muriel's mother had shown her to be looking for anything in trousers and that certainly isn't true. Macon tries to convince her that he paid no attention to what her mother said and that it was a good Christmas. Muriel then gives him a picture of herself that she took from one of the photo albums she had shown him earlier in the day. It was a picture of her as a toddler climbing out of a wading pool. Macon thought that she wanted to give him her best and while she probably meant her Shirley Temple curls, all he could see was her fierceness and determination and he knew that she had given him the best thing that she ever could.

Chapter 13 Analysis

Christmas dinner with Muriel's parents was a way for Muriel to gain some respect and validation in her mother's eyes. Macon is not someone she had made up and he was a decent man, not like some of her other relationships. Macon has given her the gift of self esteem that day while she gave him, maybe not the best Christmas of his life, but certainly better than last year's, the first one without Ethan.



Chapter 14

Chapter 14 Summary

Macon has pretty well moved into Muriel's house now. It happened bit by bit, a few shirts, shaving gear, until the final vestige of his life... Edward. Muriel, Alexander, Edward, and Macon form an odd little family. Macon makes breakfast every morning and fixes things around the house. Alexander has a playmate and someone to welcome him home from school with cookies and milk probably for the first time in his life.

One morning after a particularly heavy snowfall, Baltimore is silent and frozen and the little family is cocooned inside when Charles knocks at the door. Charles had a hard time finding the house but he needed to tell Macon that his neighbors called to say that apparently some pipes had frozen and burst in his house because they could see water running down the insides of the windows. So Macon dresses and sure enough, the pipes had burst and the living room was destroyed. Charles is distraught but Macon simply turns off the water main, digs out his boots, and heads back to the car. Surely, the insurance company will take care of it. Besides nobody really lives here anymore.

Charles takes the opportunity in the car to tell him that everyone disapproves of his relationship with Muriel, because she simply isn't appropriate. Muriel is tacky and is just looking for a meal ticket. Macon is outraged yet he knows that he can never explain to his brother how Muriel has saved his life. The only thing he can do is let Charles get lost driving him back to Muriel's house on the unsavory side of town, jump out at the corner, wave, and let his brother find his own way home.

Chapter 14 Analysis

It's funny what really makes a family. Macon was so set against the wacky Muriel and her sickly son. Macon had an idea of what a perfect family should be and he already had that. Yet there's something very touching in the way that he teaches the weak little boy how to throw a ball and fix a faucet and he bought him child sized tools for Christmas, trying to give him the tools for mechanical things and maybe some life skills too.



Chapter 15

Chapter 15 Summary

When Macon left for a trip to San Francisco a few days ago, Baltimore was covered in ice, but now on his return it is like the beginning of spring. Macon arrives home, puts a few things in order, and decides to take Edward out for a walk. Before long he hears the shrill sound of children teasing and he realizes that their target is Alexander. Macon lets Edward go to his defense and when Macon reaches him, Alexander is visibly relieved and takes Macon's hand for the walk home.

The next day Julian stops by with information for the next book, but Macon suspects that he just wants to get a look at his new life. All in all, he approves of Muriel and invites her and Alexander to his wedding to Rose. On the way out, he shares a brochure with Macon and shows him the Hawaiiin destination they have chosen for their honeymoon. Macon is just relieved he doesn't have to write about it.

One day when Muriel is out, Macon decides that Alexander can use some new clothes and takes him to get some jeans and T shirts. Macon runs into his mother in law at the store and doesn't quite know how to explain his outing. Then Alexander emerges from the dressing room, all disheveled, scruffy, and shaggy, but Alexander is happy and that's all that matters.

Chapter 15 Analysis

Macon has become Alexander's hero and the feeling may be quite mutual. Although he will never replace Ethan, the presence of the small boy has filled Macon's life with some purpose again. Macon wants to protect him and perhaps he thinks that if he's just careful enough, he could save this one.



Chapter 16

Chapter 16 Summary

The day of Rose's wedding dawned to rainfall but it has cleared up sufficiently by mid afternoon so that the ceremony can still be held outside as she has always wanted. Macon, Muriel, and Alexander arrive at the house and are greeted by Macon's mother. It had never occurred to him that she would be there and is she ever! Macon's mother's hair is now a deep tomato red, she is wearing a flowing white caftan, and takes Muriel's arm to chat immediately. Macon is struck with the horrible thought that maybe after all this time he is attracted to women like his mother, but he then breathes a sigh of relief when he sees Muriel release herself from his mother's grasp.

Macon also hadn't counted on seeing Sarah at the wedding but he should have known she would be there. Rose had told her beforehand that he was living with someone but she would not quite reveal if she were too. Macon couldn't help but feel how natural it felt as they stood in front of the minister, this time as best man and matron of honor.

Chapter 16 Analysis

There's something about a wedding that brings people's emotions to a pitch. Muriel wants to marry Macon. Rose is peaked and tense and his mother is flamboyant. Sarah is still Sarah - beautiful with those eyes that seemed as if they were his and he was so comfortable looking at them. The sudden appearance of Sarah into the story doesn't bode well for Muriel and Alexander and it's not clear which way Macon will go when pushed to decide and you're always pushed to decide.



Chapter 17

Chapter 17 Summary

Muriel is telling Macon about a man she had dated before him. The man was a customer who was going through a really bad divorce and couldn't trust a woman. Bit by bit, she changed all that and eventually he had even paid all of Alexander's unpaid medical bills. The two had talked about getting married but one day he met a stewardess and eloped within the week. Muriel thought that she had cured him so he could elope with this other woman. Muriel then asks Macon if he would ever do that and he tells her that of course he wouldn't.

When they are making the rounds of the thrift stores, she announces that she has quit her job at the Meow Bow. Macon cannot believe that she is so irresponsible and stays on the sidewalk while she goes in her favorite store to browse. Muriel is able to coax him out of his bad mood by fashioning a mitten into a puppet, which tells him not to be mad at Muriel. Doesn't he know that she can take care of herself?

Muriel knows that Macon will soon be going to France for research and she wants desperately to go along even though he says they can't afford it. Muriel leaves messages all over the house and still he will not relent. One day she gives him a big calendar with a date marked in red; the date she has picked for their wedding. Macon's only response is that he really doesn't believe in marriage much anymore but she accuses him of being selfish and never doing anything she wants to.

Things smooth over enough for the two of them to attend a dinner party at Rose and Julian's - their first since their marriage. Muriel is greeted coolly by the brothers, but Rose is cordial. All Macon can think about is that the pate is Sarah's recipe and he is flooded with tarragon, cream, and the taste of home.

Chapter 17 Analysis

Muriel is trying to feel Macon out on his intentions. True to form, he doesn't tell her more than she needs to know. Plus, Muriel had seen how Macon and Sarah looked at each other at Rose's wedding. Muriel has some forewarning that this too will probably turn out to be just like the case of the man before him; she fixed him up so he could go back out in the world again and love someone else. Who will fix Muriel's heart?



Chapter 18

Chapter 18 Summary

Macon is in a hotel room in Winnipeg when Sarah reaches him. Sarah tracked him down through his brothers who told her where he was. Macon's brothers also told her about the damage to their house, which is partly why she is calling. Sarah wants to move back in because her lease is up and she can't find another apartment. Sarah will use the money she would have spent on rent to make any repairs that the insurance wouldn't cover. Sarah also tells him that the legal papers are ready to be signed and that she had been shocked to actually see them. Sarah hadn't anticipated the emotional jolt they would give her. Macon senses that he can't handle what will come next and tells her that of course she can move into the house and hangs up the phone.

By the time he is in Edmonton, Sarah calls to tell him that the plumber doesn't think the damage is as bad as they all had expected. The two talk about the weather in their respective cities until he feels that he has to hang up because he is about to fly all to pieces and can just imagine his head floating away over Alberta.

In Vancouver when she calls, she tells him that she has moved back in and that she and the cat are mostly living upstairs as the downstairs still needs work. Sarah asks him if he plans on staying with Muriel forever and he says that he really can't say. Macon does notice how odd her name sounds at that moment.

When he returns to Baltimore he drives the route to Muriel's house but keeps on driving through the city up into his old neighborhood and parks in front of his house. The downstairs windows are dark but the upstairs windows are glowing softly and he feels that he has come home.

Chapter 18 Analysis

Sarah has obviously reconsidered the divorce and makes some excuse about needing a place to live in order to move back into the house. It only takes her a few phone calls and she is back in Macon's life again too. Sarah is fixing all the broken parts of the house and tidying up the mess that was left in her wake and it almost seems too easy, that maybe she should have had to work harder for it. There's an outrage that rises when you realize what this will do to a waif like Muriel who struggles so hard and Sarah can just glide back in like nothing ever happened.



Chapter 19

Chapter 19 Summary

Macon and Sarah need a new couch since their furniture was destroyed in the water damage. The couple drives to the store, very efficiently chose one, and request same day delivery. Sarah suggests lunch at the Old Bay and they have wine with lunch, which was something Macon has never done. On the way home they stop at the bank so that he can get his passport out of the safe deposit box because his trip to Paris is coming up. The two then stop at the old house to pick up some azalea fertilizer from Rose. Rose is staying back at the house because the brothers' lives are a mess since she got married.

Sarah goes off to her sculpture class and Macon sits down to write. Macon is very distracted today and is watching the bees around the azaleas when he decides to call Muriel. Macon wants to remind her that it is bee season and to take special care with Alexander. Muriel is outraged that he called - she is a fine mother. Macon completely used her up, left Alexander without a word, and now has the nerve to call her and warn her about bee stings.

Later on, Julian stops by with some material for Paris but his real reason is to ask Macon about Rose. Julian truly loves her and doesn't understand why she left. Their marriage had been going so well. Macon told him to give her a job. Rose needs to bring order out of chaos and she needs to be needed. Julian thanks him and leaves with some renewed hope for rescuing his tender marriage.

Chapter 19 Analysis

It seems as if Macon and Sarah are furnishing their life again. Sarah marvels at the change in him, he is so much more relaxed now and less finicky. The couple is still comfortable with one another even after being separated for that year. Macon's mind and heart keep straying to Muriel and Alexander and when he makes the call, it seems to be fated because he doesn't have to reach out anymore. It's almost as if he needs her to intervene so he won't fall back into the sameness of his old life. Macon feels that staying with Sarah is the responsible thing to do and it's comfortable, but something deeper is pulling at him.



Chapter 20

Chapter 20 Summary

Macon is settling into his seat for the trip from New York to Paris when his eyes look up and land on a completely unexpected sight. Muriel is going to Paris anyway. Muriel had borrowed the money, different people were taking turns watching Alexander, and she had gotten Macon's travel details from his travel agent. Macon can't even begin to imagine how bad this will look if Sarah were to find out.

When he lands, he rushes through customs, grabs a cab and feels lucky to have evaded her when it occurs to him that the travel agent would surely have given Muriel his hotel information too. Macon also is concerned that she will get lost in Paris, that she wouldn't have converted her money, or any number of other tragedies. So he is almost relieved when he hears her knock on the door.

Macon goes out for his day of restaurant research and returns sore and exhausted. Muriel must have radar on him because not two minutes later, Muriel is at his door loaded down with purchases she has made at thrift stores. Muriel convinces him to go to dinner with him and they eat at Burger King. Back at the hotel, he says goodnight and goes to his room to watch TV until he falls asleep.

Coming back to the hotel from his second day of research, he sees Muriel up ahead, again loaded down with packages. Macon agrees to dinner again and this night they go to a fine restaurant. To Macon's relief, the waiter knows more English than he had expected which saves him the embarrassment of Muriel's ordering in some botched up French. Again, he declines her offer to stay in her room and says he will be out all day tomorrow.

In the morning he has relented and decides to invite her along for the day, but when he tries to fix the phone cord when he realizes the phone isn't working, his back goes out and he crawls to his bed. With the help of the maid, he is able to get downstairs to a phone booth to call Julian to get his travel plans rearranged. Rose answers the phone at the office; she is working there now trying to get things organized. Rose tells him to get back to bed and everything will be taken care of.

Macon keeps very quiet in his room, not wanting to alert Muriel that he is in there. Macon later hears a knock at the door and he curses himself for having the TV on. However, this time a key turns in the lock and in walks Sarah. Rose and Julian made arrangements for her to take over Macon's research for a couple days while he recovers, and then the two of them can take a little time together in Paris when he is feeling better. Sarah brought him pain killers from the doctor and he ebbs in and out of a sleepy fog for a couple of days.



Then Sarah announces that she saw Muriel and wants to know what is going on. Macon isn't quite sure if she believes him that Muriel followed him; he had no idea she was coming to Paris. Sarah says that she believes him and sets about the business of getting him better and filling in for him on some of the research.

On the third night he does not take the pain pill, because he doesn't want to be foggy anymore. Macon doesn't sleep and things are clearer to him than they had been for a long time. So he rises, trying not to disturb Sarah but she wakes and he tells her he has to catch the plane back home because he is going back to Muriel. It was not an easy decision for him. Sarah tries to tell him how his life will be - that people will ostracize them because they are such an odd couple. However, it is very clear to him now that couples come together for reasons that other people cannot possibly guess.

Macon manages to get to the street and grab a cab and as it is making a U-turn he spots Muriel out front hailing a cab of her own. Macon yells at the driver, they screech to a halt, a sudden flash of sunlight hits the windshield and brilliant spangles fly across the glass. The spangles could have been water spots or dried leaves, it doesn't matter, they looked so festive it could have been confetti.

Chapter 20 Analysis

Muriel has an instinct about what Macon needs. When she shows up out of the blue on the plane to Paris, it is not at all unusual for her. Muriel knows that he needs her spontaneity and her spunk to get on this plane even though she's never flown in a jet and certainly never been to a foreign country. Sarah loves him too and comes immediately to his rescue when he throws out his back. Sarah then launches into caretaker mode, but there is something missing. Maybe it's Ethan or maybe it's because you can't let grief be your only tie to someone and that's really what it had come to with them. Macon has let life just happen to him for so long and he's finally out of his fog and has come to a foreign country to find home—Muriel. For the first time in his life, Macon makes a choice of his own - he chooses to really live and he chooses Muriel.



Characters

Garner Bolt

Macon's curious neighbor who comes to Rose's house looking for Macon. He watches Macon's house and reports back to him about Muriel coming over and his water pipes bursting.

Boyd Dugan

Muriel's father. When Macon and Muriel spend Christmas with the Dugans, Boyd stays silent until the talk turns to cars.

Claire Dugan

Muriel's teen-age sister. Claire often stays at Muriel's when she fights with her parents, whom she considers too strict.

Lilian Dugan

Muriel's mother. At Christmas she ignores Alexander and embarrasses Muriel by talking about her past relationships. She embarrasses Macon by asking him what his intentions are toward her daughter. She has apparently always been highly critical of Muriel, who tries to gain her approval.

Julian Edge

Julian publishes Macon's books. Tyler reveals Julian through Macon's point of view, which, based on Julian's interactions with others, seems credible. Macon considers him to be "athletic looking" and "younger ... brashier, [and] breezier" than he is: "Julian's heart was not in the Businessman's Press but out on the Chesapeake Bay someplace." Macon decides Julian is not "entirely real," that "he has never truly grown up" because he has "never had anything happen to him" including having children. Julian "never seem[s] to have a moment's self doubt." He appears to be open-minded when he readily accepts Macon's relationship with Muriel.

His one weakness, however, is his fear of being alone, which probably prompts him to become interested in Macon's sister, Rose. After he and Rose marry, Julian begins to have things "happen to him" when Rose decides to move back in with her brothers so she can take care of them. Julian feels vulnerable and turns to Macon for advice.



Edward

Ethan's dog. Macon keeps him when Sarah leaves. Edward figures prominently in Macon's relationship with Muriel. First he causes them to meet at the Meow Bow where Muriel works; then his erratic behavior at Rose's prompts Macon to hire Muriel to train him. Finally after Macon moves in with Muriel, Edward is the first to bond with her son, Alexander.

Alicia Leary

Macon's mother. As a "giddy young war widow," Alicia had little time for her children when they lived with her in California. When she did spend time with them, her enthusiasm disturbed them since it "came in spurts, a violent zigzag of hobbies, friends, boyfriends, causes. She always seemed about to fall over the brink of something. She was always going too far.... The faster she talked and the brighter her eyes grew, the more fixedly her children stared at her, as if willing her to follow their example of steadiness and dependability."

After she remarried, she sent her children to live with their grandparents in Baltimore and saw them rarely after that. When she did "dart in and out of their lives," like "some naughty, gleeful fairy," the children considered her too "flashy" and too "vivid."

Charles Leary

Charles is Macon's brother, "a soft sweetfaced man who never seemed to move." He and his brother Porter took over Grandfather Leary's business when he died. Since Charles was "more mechanical," he dealt with the production end of the business. After his marriage failed, he moved in with Rose and fell into the same comforting family routine they practiced as children. While he usually keeps to himself, when Macon moves in with Muriel, Charles interferes. He tells Macon that something must be wrong with him since Muriel is not his "type of woman" and that she is "not worth it."

Ethan Leary

Macon's and Sarah's son who is seen only through their memories of him. He was shot and killed by a teenager at a fast-food restaurant while at summer camp. His loss profoundly affects both of his parents.

Grandfather Leary

Macon's grandfather, seen only through flashbacks. He owned a manufacturing company that he passed down to his grandsons. He and Macon's grandmother were



"two thin, severe, distinguished people in dark clothes." He helped raise the children after their mother remarried.

Macon Leary

The novel's main character, a middle-aged man trying to cope with the death of his son and the subsequent shattering of his world. Macon writes a series of guidebooks for business people who, like him, hate to travel. When he is forced to, he does so "with his eyes shut and holding his breath and hanging on for dear life." Yet Macon likes "the virtuous delights of organizing a disorganized country." He also tries to organize his life in an effort to understand and to control it and to "ward off danger." One such effort however, his invention of the Macon Leary Body Bag, comes to symbolize his growing isolation from the outside world. He admits that "gatherings of any sort depressed him. Physical contact with people not related to him ... made him draw inward like a snail." As a result, he has become "a fairly chilly man." His wife, Sarah, notes his withdrawal, telling him he has given up on everything-"everything that might touch you or upset you or disrupt you." She observes, "There's something so muffled about the way you experience things.... You're encased.

You're like something in a capsule. You're a dried up kernel of a man that nothing real penetrates." With Muriel's and Alexander's help, however, Macon gains the courage to come out of his protective shell. With her, he becomes "an entirely different person ... [one] who had never been suspected of narrowness ... of chilliness ... and was anything but orderly." By the end of the novel, Macon takes control of his life and makes the decision to become an active participant in the world.

Porter Leary

Macon's brother. Porter was considered the best looking of all the Learys. He was also "the most practical man Macon had ever known.... He gave an impression of vitality and direction that his brothers lacked." Like Macon and Charles, Porter "always had to have everything just so ... always clamping down on the world as if [he] really thought [he] could keep it in line."

Rose Leary

Rose is Macon's sister. She lives with and takes care of his two brothers. Rose is as organized as her brothers, as evidenced by her kitchen, which she has completely alphabetized. There seems to be "something vague about her that caused her brothers to act put-upon and needy whenever she chanced to focus on them." When she marries Julian, she appears to be finding a sense of self, but she soon moves back in with her brothers in order to return to her safe, orderly life. She and Julian eventually reunite when she takes over his office and reorganizes it.



Sarah Leary

Sarah, Macon's wife, leaves him because he is not a "comfort" to her after the death of their son, Ethan. Feeling oppressed by Macon's tendency to withdraw from the world, Sarah decides she needs a place of her own. Before Ethan died, she had been a social person, but now she "[doesn't] like crowds anymore." When Macon asks her to come back to him, she explains, "Ever since Ethan died I've had to admit that people are basically bad." She decides to leave him because she knows that he has always believed this. This pessimism, along with the acknowledgment that she too is retreating from the world, scares her and prompts her decision to divorce Macon. She tells him, "I don't have enough time left to waste it holing up in my shell." When she and Macon reconcile, she continually finds fault with the same "little routines and rituals, depressing habits, day after day" that he exhibited before she left him.

Susan Leary

Porter's daughter. Susan accompanies Macon on a trip to Philadelphia and reminisces with him about Ethan.

Alexander Pritchett

Alexander is Muriel's son. When Macon first sees him he appears to be "small, white, [and] sickly ... with a shaved-looking skull." Alexander is a lonely boy, ostracized by his peers, due in part to Muriel's overprotective mothering. She determines that he has allergies to just about everything and so restricts his diet and activities. Macon decides that "school never went very well" for Alexander, since he often comes home "with his face more pinched than ever, his glasses thick with fingerprints." Alexander, however, thrives under Macon's care.

Muriel Pritchett

Macon begins a relationship with Muriel after Sarah leaves him. Tyler presents Muriel through Macon's point of view, which ultimately reveals all aspects of her personality, since his opinion of her continually changes. Muriel detects his fickleness when she tells him, "One minute you like me and the next you don't. One minute you're ashamed to be seen with me and the next you think I'm the best thing that ever happened to you." Muriel has "a voice that wander[s] too far in all directions" and she "talks nonstop." Macon notes her "long, narrow nose, and sallow skin, and two freckled knobs of collarbone that promised an unluxurious body." Muriel has on occasion a "nasty temper, a shrewish tongue, and a tendency to fall into spells of self-disgust from which no one could rouse her for hours." Finally, her parenting skills are inconsistent: "One minute overprotective, the next callous and offhand."



She is obviously intelligent. The quality Macon admires the most is "her fierceness, her spiky, pugnacious fierceness as she fought her way toward the camera with her chin set awry and her eyes bright slits of determination." Muriel fights for everything she wants, including Macon. Unlike Sarah, Muriel does not try to change Macon, yet her openness and acceptance enables him to emerge from his protective shell.

Dominick Saddler

A teenager who lives in Muriel's neighborhood. He fixes her car and baby-sits Alexander. He dies suddenly in an accident while driving Muriel's car.



Themes

Death

Ethan's death triggers the novel's initial conflict. At first it leads to the dissolution of Sarah and Macon's marriage. The past year had been "miserable" for both of them, with "months when everything either of them said was wrong." When Sarah admits, "Now that Ethan's dead I sometimes wonder if there's any point to life," Macon responds, "It never seemed to me there was all that much point to begin with." This pessimism spurs Sarah's decision to leave Macon. She feels he is not grieving as much as she, nor is he providing her with the comfort she requires. Macon looks for someone to blame for Ethan's death, including Sarah and himself.

Order and Disorder

Ethan's death coupled with Sarah's departure throws Macon into a state of disorder that he desperately tries to remedy with an obsessive search for order. This need for organization is a consistent theme in Macon's life, evidenced by the pleasure he takes "organizing a disorganized country" for the readers of his guidebooks. After the death of his son, it provides him with his only pleasure, since it gives him "the sense of warding off a danger."

Ultimately, though, his need for order pushes him to the breaking point. In an effort to reorganize the house and thus his life, he invents the Macon Leary Body Bag, which becomes his personal cocoon and allows him to retreat every night from the outside world.

Alienation and Loneliness

Sarah accuses Macon of not being able to maintain a meaningful connection with her or anyone else and cites this as the reason she leaves him. Ethan's death has eventually led him to give up on life, on "everything that might touch [him] or upset [him] or disrupt [him]." Macon cannot dispute Sarah's insistence that "there's something so muffled about the way you experience things.... You're encased. You're like something in a capsule.

You're a dried up kernel of a man that nothing real penetrates." He admits that he avoids contact with other people because it "made him draw inward like a snail." As a result, he has become "a fairly chilly man." Sarah fears that she is beginning to adopt Macon's pessimism as well as his desire to alienate himself from the world. Before Ethan died, she had been a social person, but now she, like Macon, avoids contact with others. In order to save herself, Sarah leaves, telling him, "I don't have enough time left to waste it holing up in my shell." The loneliness that results from the loss of his son and his wife submerges Macon into the "bleakest period of his life."



Apathy and Passivity

Macon responds with apathy and passivity in the face of his suffering. At first, he is devastated by Sarah's departure, but he soon comes to accept it. After he breaks his leg, he moves in with Rose, who takes care of all his needs. Ironically his apathy and passivity cause him to enter into a relationship with Muriel, who is fiercely determined to forge a connection with him. When he goes to her apartment, intending to inform her that he cannot have dinner with her because he does not want to explain what has happened to him, he allows her to change his mind. Muriel gently coaxes him to open up to her and express his grief. Before he realizes it, and almost against his will, Macon begins to reconnect with the world.

Change and Transformation

Macon's relationship with Muriel and Alexander helps transform him from a passive and apathetic man who hides from the world to a man who is strong enough to make his own decisions and to face life's challenges. He realizes that when he was with Sarah, he had been "locked inside the standoffish self he'd assumed when he and she first met.

Style

Point of View

Tyler creates an effective narrative structure in the novel by presenting the other characters through Macon's point of view. Although the novel is written in the third person, the narrator limits the perspective as readers observe Macon's interactions with and observations of others. This structure more fully reveals Macon's transformation during the course of the novel. For example, readers understand Macon's confusion over his relationship with Muriel when the narrator reveals his shifting and sometimes contradictory visions of her. Muriel notes this confusion when she tells Macon, "One minute you like me and the next you don't. One minute you're ashamed to be seen with me and the next you think I'm the best thing that ever happened to you." Macon admits "he had never guessed that she read him so clearly."

Symbolism

Tyler employs several symbols to reinforce Macon's sense of isolation and passivity. The first symbols are his logo and the title of his guidebooks. Noting his reluctance to experience life, Sarah tells him, "That traveling armchair isn't just your logo; it's you." Macon not only travels "with his eyes shut and holding his breath and hanging on for dear life," he travels through life in the same manner. Throughout much of the novel, he wanders "in a fog ... adrift upon the planet, helpless, praying that just by luck he might stumble across his destination." The cast on Macon's broken leg and his creation of the Macon Leary Body Bag are additional symbolic representations of his alienation. At one point, Macon admits that he wishes his cast would cover him from head to foot. The cast and body bag thus become symbolic of his spiritual death. Finally, the sleeping pills Sarah gives Macon when he injures his back in Paris become a symbol of Sarah's effect on Macon. After being with Muriel, Macon comes to realize that while he was married to Sarah, he assumed an aloofness and disconnection that had at first attracted Sarah. Now, however, he believes himself to be "locked inside" that self. The powerful sleeping pills thus symbolize the kind of person he becomes in Sarah's presence.

When Macon finally rejects the pills, he rejects the self he becomes when he is with her.

Comic Relief



Historical Context

Teenage Homicide Rates

According to the United States Bureau of the Census, the teenage homicide rate soared 169 percent between 1984 and 1993. Studies conducted on this increase conclude that the crack cocaine epidemic and easy access to firearms were to blame. These sobering statistics helped create an atmosphere of fear in the 1980s, when crime became a major concern for the American public. Tyler tapped into this fear through her characterization of Macon Leary, who, at the beginning of the novel, is still grieving the loss of his son, Ethan. As Ethan was eating lunch at a fast-food restaurant, a teenager entered and randomly executed him. After the murder, Macon withdrew from a world he feared.

Divorce Rates in America

The Census Bureau reported that in 1970 there were 4.3 million divorced adults in America; that number rose to 17.4 million in 1994. During that period, the percentage of divorced Americans over eighteen years of age climbed from 3 percent to 9 percent. Many experts determined that the primary cause was no-fault divorce laws, first adopted in California in 1969. Sociologists linked the high divorce rate to what they considered to be the breakdown of the American family. As a result of this perceived breakdown, a new focus on what was termed "the dysfunctional family" emerged. Dysfunction in a family results from serious crises such as divorce, sexual abuse, alcoholism, or infidelity. Unexpected events like the death of a family member or loss of a job can also trigger a family crisis. As a result, members often assign blame, fail to communicate with each other, experience excessive anger, and shut themselves off from the rest of the family.

The high divorce rate and incidents of dysfunction redefined the American family in the 1980s. As the traditional family unit broke down, new families emerged and a more flexible definition was created. Families now could consist of two parents and their children, a couple who decided to have no children, a single parent and his or her children, a parent and stepparent and their children, or grandparents and their grandchildren. Children and their foster parents were also considered to be a family unit.

In *The Accidental Tourist*, Tyler reflects the changing configurations of the American family as she chronicles the demise of several such traditional families. Yet she also invents some nontraditional ones as a result. After all the Leary men experience failed marriages, they recreate the family of their childhood when they move back in with Rose. Macon and Muriel reconstruct a family unit after both of their marriages end in divorce. Tyler's study of the dynamics of family relationships serves as an apt reflection of the cultural climate of America in the 1980s.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3



Critical Essay #1

Perkins is an associate professor of English at Prince George's Community College in Maryland and has published several articles on British and American authors. In the following essay, she examines the traditional and nontraditional roles of the female characters in The Accidental Tourist.

In her article in the *New York Times Book Review*, Katha Pollitt takes an overview of Anne Tyler's work and concludes that her fiction does not reveal a firm sense of time or place. She argues that Tyler's novels "are modern in their fictional techniques, yet utterly unconcerned with the contemporary moment as a subject, so that, with only minor dislocations, her stories could just as well have taken place in the twenties or thirties. The current school of feminist-influenced novels seems to have passed her by completely: her women are strong, often stronger than the men in their lives, but solidly grounded in traditional roles." Other critics have also noted that Tyler's characterizations take precedence over her setting details in her work, including in her tenth novel, *The Accidental Tourist*.

Tyler focuses the narrative in this novel more on Macon's struggles with family life rather than where the families reside. However, she does situate the novel in its historical moment. Through her characterization of Macon, Tyler reflects the paranoia over increasing crime rates in the 1980s, when the novel was written and published. The novel also illustrates the decade's growing concern with the dysfunctional family and its causes and effects. Finally, Tyler explores changing roles for women. All the female characters show their strength in *The Accidental Tourist*. Some exert it as they are firmly entrenched in traditional roles, while others reveal their courageous attempt to adopt more modern attitudes.

All the female characters in the novel are involved or want to be involved in a marital and/or family relationship. This, granted, is considered to be a traditional role for women, but all the characters, male and female, express this desire, which becomes one of the novel's dominant themes. The characters also, however, end up separating themselves from these relationships, as noted by Joseph C. Voelker in *Art and the Accidental in Anne Tyler*.

The characters in the novel, he argues, distance themselves from the complex feelings they have for their families. Voelker determines that they experience a "sickness for home (longing, nostalgia) but also sickness of it (the need to escape from the invasiveness of family) and sickness from it (the psychic wounds that human beings inevitably carry as a result of having had to grow up as children in families)."

Rose Leary is the most traditional female character in the novel. She has accepted the role of caretaker for her entire family at one point or another. She cared for her ailing grandparents, and after her brothers' marriages failed, she welcomed them back into the family home and promptly took over the role of nurturer. She reinstated family rituals, like cooking baked potatoes for their evening meal, which used to comfort them



as children when left alone by their mother. The narrator notes there was "something vague about her that caused her brothers to act put-upon and needy whenever she chanced to focus on them."

At first Rose appears to be content with the orderly, isolated existence she and her brothers share. However, she soon begins to feel "a sickness of home" as she chafes under her brothers' narrow idea of her role in their lives. When she begins a relationship with Julian, she discovers a new sense of self, and is strong enough to break away from her old ties. Her need to feel useful, though, causes her to return to her traditional role, and eventually she becomes wife and mother when she and Julian move in with Porter and Charles.

Sarah, Macon's wife, also breaks out of a traditional role for a period of time, but instead of moving from one family unit to another, she expresses a desire to live alone. Annoyed by Macon's "little routines and rituals, depressing habits, day after day" and his inability to comfort her, she decides to leave him and establish a place of her own and a more complete sense of self. She admits she has been pulled into Macon's pessimism, and as a result, she too is cutting herself off from the rest of the world. When she leaves, she tells him, "I don't have enough time left to waste it holing up in my shell."

Sarah, however, is unable to assuage the grief she feels over Ethan's death and so moves back in with Macon and returns to her traditional role as wife, because of its familiarity. She admits to Macon, "I think that after a certain age people just don't have a choice.... You're who I'm with. It's too late for me to change. I've used up too much of my life now."

Muriel Pritchett's nonconformity makes her unique among the novel's other female characters. She also wants to enter into a relationship with someone, but if she is unable to accomplish this, she makes it clear that she can take care of herself. She appears to have been left alone virtually all of her life. Her interaction with her mother suggests that Muriel experiences a "sickness from family." She displays what Voelker calls the "psychic wounds that human beings inevitably carry as a result of having had to grow up as children in families." Muriel's wounds emerge in the picture she gives her mother, in which Macon notices that she appears "wary and uncertain, and very much alone." Macon notes that when Lilian Dugan pays attention to her daughter, which happens rarely, she most often criticizes her. Muriel admits that her family considers her to be the "bad one" and her sister the "good one." Muriel's wounds, though, seem to have helped her develop a strong sense of independence and resilience.

When her husband leaves her and her young son, Muriel raises him by herself, aided by her sharp entrepreneurial skills. She also reveals her independent nature when Macon expresses his concern over her quitting one of her jobs. She tells him, "Don't you know [I] can always take care of [myself]? Don't you know [I] could find another job tomorrow, if [I] wanted?" She can also take care of herself in her dangerous neighborhood. Once while coming back from the supermarket, a teenager emerges out of a shadowy doorway and demands that she give him the contents of her purse. She responds, "Like



hell I will," and attacks him. As a result, Macon admits "he felt awed by her, and diminished."

Muriel retains her unconventionality even when acknowledging that it does not always appeal to Macon. She tells Macon that she knows "one minute you like me and the next you don't. One minute you're ashamed to be seen with me and the next you think I'm the best thing that ever happened to you." She does try, briefly, to adopt a more conventional look, when she tries to model herself after Rose, but she soon reverts back to her eccentric but honest self. Finally, "the surprise of her" and her careless enthusiasm for life win Macon over. When Muriel gives Macon a picture of her as a child, he cherishes it, deciding, "she meant, he supposed, to give him the best of her ... her fierceness- her spiky, pugnacious fierceness as she fought her way toward the camera with her chin set awry and her eyes bright slits of determination." Unlike Sarah, Muriel does not try to change Macon, yet her openness and acceptance, and ultimately her independence, enables him to emerge from his protective shell. Tyler explained in an interview with Marguerite Michaels in *The New York Times Book Review* that "the real heroes to me in my books are first the ones who manage to endure and second the ones who somehow are able to grant other people the privacy of the space around them and yet still produce some warmth." According to her definition then, Muriel, with her independent yet loving spirit, is a real hero.

Source: Wendy Perkins, in an essay for *Novels for Students*, Gale, 1999.



Critical Essay #2

In the following excerpt, McMurtry discusses the way in which Tyler reintroduces her customary themes of sibling bonding and the hapless male protagonist in The Accidental Tourist.

In Anne Tyler's fiction, family is destiny, and (nowadays, at least) destiny clamps down on one in Baltimore. For an archeologist of manners with Miss Tyler's skills, the city is a veritable Troy, and she has been patiently excavating since the early 1970's, when she skipped off the lawn of Southern fiction and first sank her spade in the soil which has nourished such varied talents as Poe, Mencken, Billie Holiday and John Waters, the director of the films *Pink Flamingos* and *Polyester*.

It is without question some of the fustiest soil in America; in the more settled classes, social styles developed in the 19th century withstand, with spore-like tenacity, all that the present century can throw at them. Indeed, in Baltimore *all* classes appear to be settled, if not cemented, in grooves of neighborhood and habit so deep as to render them impervious-as a bright child puts it in *The Accidental Tourist* - to everything except nuclear flash. From this rich dust of custom, Miss Tyler is steadily raising a body of fiction of major dimensions.

One of the persistent concerns of this work is the ambiguity of family happiness and unhappiness. Since coming to Baltimore, Miss Tyler has probed this ambiguity in seven novels of increasing depth and power, working numerous changes on a consistent set of themes.

In *The Accidental Tourist* these themes, some of which she has been sifting for more than 20 years, cohere with high definition in the muted (or, as his wife says, "muffled") personality of Macon Leary....

Like most of Miss Tyler's males, Macon Leary presents a broad target to all of the women (and even a few of the men) with whom he is involved. His mother; his sister, Rose; his wife, Sarah; and, in due course, his girlfriend, Muriel Pritchett - a dog trainer of singular appearance and ability - regularly pepper him on the subject of his shortcomings, the greatest of which is a lack of passion, playfulness, spontaneity or the desire to do one single thing that *they* like to do. This lack is the more maddening because Macon is reasonably competent; if prompted he will do more or less anything that's required of him. What exasperates the women is the necessity for constant prompting. When attacked, Macon rarely defends himself with much vigor, which only heightens the exasperation.

He likes a quiet life, based on method and system. His systems are intricate routines of his own devising, aimed at reducing the likelihood that anything unfamiliar will occur. The unfamiliar is never welcome in Macon's life, and he believes that if left to himself he can block it out or at least neutralize it.



Not long after we meet him, Macon is left to himself. Sarah, his wife of 20 years, leaves him. Macon and Sarah have had a tragedy: their 12-year-old son, Ethan, was murdered in a fast-food joint, his death an accidental byproduct of a holdup. Though Macon is as grieved by this loss as Sarah, he is, as she points out, "not a comfort." When she remarks that since Ethan's death she sometimes wonders if there's any point to life, Macon replies, honestly but unhelpfully, that it never seemed to him there was all that much point to begin with. As if this were not enough, he can never stop himself from correcting improper word choice, even if the incorrect usage occurs in a conversation about the death of a child. These corrections are not made unkindly, but they are invariably made; one does not blame Sarah for taking off.

With the ballast of his marriage removed, Macon immediately tips into serious eccentricity. His little systems multiply, and his remaining companions, a Welsh corgi named Edward and a cat named Helen, fail to adapt to them. Eventually the systems overwhelm Macon himself, causing him to break a leg. Not long after, he finds himself where almost all of Miss Tyler's characters end up sooner or later - back in the grand-parental seat. There he is tended to by his sister. His brothers, Porter and Charles, both divorced, are also there, repeating, like Macon, a motion that seems all but inevitable in Anne Tyler's fiction - a return to the sibling unit. This motion, or tendency, cannot be blamed on Baltimore. In the very first chapter of Miss Tyler's first novel, *If Morning Ever Comes* (1964), a young man named Ben Joe Hawkes leaves Columbia University and hurries home to North Carolina mainly because he can't stand not to know what his sisters are up to. From then on, in book after book, siblings are drawn inexorably back home, as if their parents or (more often) grandparents had planted tiny magnets in them which can be activated once they have seen what the extra-familial world is like.

The lovers and mates in her books, by exerting their utmost strength, can sometimes delay these regroupings for as long as 20 years, but sooner or later a need to be with people who are *really* familiar- their brothers and sisters-overwhelms them.

Macon's employer, a man named Julian, who manages to marry but not to hold Macon's sister, puts it succinctly once Rose has drifted back to her brothers: "She'd worn herself a groove or something in that house of hers, and she couldn't help swerving back into it." Almost no one in Miss Tyler's books avoids that swerve; the best they can hope for is to make a second escape, as does the resourceful Caleb Peck in *Searching for Caleb* (1976). Brought back after an escape lasting 60 years, Caleb sneaks away again in his 90's.... *The Accidental Tourist* is one of Anne Tyler's best books, as good as *Morgan's Passing*, *Searching for Caleb*, *Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant*.

The various domestic worlds we enter - Macon/ Sarah; Macon/the Leary siblings; Macon/Muriel - are delineated with easy skill; now they are poignant, now funny. Miss Tyler shows, with a fine clarity, the mingling of misery and contentment in the daily lives of her families, reminding us how alike - and yet distinct - happy and unhappy families can be. Muriel Pritchett is as appealing a woman as Miss Tyler has created; and upon the quiet Macon she lavishes the kind of intelligent consideration that he only intermittently gets from his own womenfolk.



Two aspects of the novel do not entirely satisfy. One is the unaccountable neglect of Edward, the corgi, in the last third of the book. Edward is one of the more fully characterized dogs in recent literature; his breakdown is at least as interesting and if anything more delicately handled than Macon's. Yet Edward is allowed to slide out of the picture. Millions of readers who have managed to saddle themselves with neurotic quadrupeds will want to know more about Edward's situation. The other questionable element is the dead son, Ethan. Despite an effort now and then to bring him into the book in a vignette or a nightmare, Ethan remains mostly a premise, and one not advanced very confidently by the author. She is brilliant at showing how the living press upon one another, but less convincing when she attempts to add the weight of the dead. The reader is invited to feel that it is this tragedy that separates Macon and Sarah.

But a little more familiarity with Macon and Sarah, as well as with the marriages in Miss Tyler's other books, leaves one wondering. Macon's methodical approach to life might have driven Sarah off anyway. He would have corrected her word choice once too often, one feels. Miss Tyler is more successful at showing through textures how domestic life is sustained than she is at showing how these textures are ruptured by a death.

At the level of metaphor, however, she has never been stronger. The concept of an accidental tourist captures in a phrase something she has been saying all along, if not about life, at least about men: they are frequently accidental tourists in their own lives. Macon Leary sums up a long line of her males. Jake Simmes in *Earthly Possessions* is an accidental kidnapper. The lovable Morgan Gower of *Morgan's Passing*, an accidental obstetrician in the first scenes, is an accidental husband or lover in the rest of the book. Her men slump around like tired tourists - friendly, likable, but not all that engaged.

Their characters, like their professions, seem accidental even though they come equipped with genealogies of Balzacian thoroughness. All of them have to be propelled through life by (at the very least) a brace of sharp, purposeful women - it usually takes not only a wife and a girlfriend but an indignant mother and one or more devoted sisters to keep these sluggish fellows moving. They poke around haphazardly, ever mild and perennially puzzled, in a foreign country called Life. If they see anything worth seeing, it is usually because a determined woman on the order of Muriel Pritchett thrusts it under their noses and demands that they pay some attention. The fates of these families hinge on long struggles between semi-attentive males and semi-obsessed females. In her patient investigation of such struggles, Miss Tyler has produced a very satisfying body of fiction.

Source: Larry McMurtry, "Life Is a Foreign Country," in *The New York Times Book Review*, September 8, 1985, pp. 1, 36.



Critical Essay #3

In the following excerpt, Yardley praises The Accidental Tourist for its many exceptional qualities, describing it as a moving, deeply significant novel.

With each new novel ... it becomes ever more clear that the fiction of Anne Tyler is something both unique and extraordinary in contemporary American literature. Unique, quite literally: there is no other writer whose work sounds like Tyler's, and Tyler sounds like no one except herself. Extraordinary, too: not merely for the quietly dazzling quality of her writing and the abidingly sympathetic nature of her characters, but also for her calm indifference to prevailing literary fashion and her deep conviction that it is the work, not the person who writes it, that matters. Of *The Accidental Tourist* one thing can be said with absolute certainty: it matters.

It is a beautiful, incandescent, heartbreaking, exhilarating book. A strong undercurrent of sorrow runs through it, yet it contains comic scenes—one involving a dog, a cat and a clothes dryer, another a Thanksgiving turkey, yet another a Christmas dinner— that explode with joy. It is preoccupied with questions of family, as indeed all of Tyler's more recent fiction is, but there is not an ounce of sentimentality to be found in what it says about how families stick together or fall apart. There's magic in it, and some of its characters have winning eccentricities, yet more than any of Tyler's previous books it is rooted firmly, securely, insistently in the real world.

That world is of course Baltimore, which in Tyler's fiction, as indeed in actuality, is both a place and a state of mind. By now Baltimore belongs to Tyler in the same way that Asheville belongs to Thomas Wolfe, Chicago to James T. Farrell, Memphis to Peter Taylor, Albany to William Kennedy; like these writers, she at once gives us the city as it really exists and redefines it through the realm of the imagination. When the protagonist of *The Accidental Tourist*, Macon Leary, drives along North Charles Street, he is on the map; when he arrives at Singleton Street, he is in uncharted territory. But there can be no question that Singleton Street, though fictitious, is real....

He was beginning to feel easier here. Singleton Street still unnerved him with its poverty and its ugliness, but it no longer seemed so dangerous. He saw that the hoodlums in front of the Cheery Moments Carry- Out were pathetically young and shabby - their lips chapped, their sparse whiskers ineptly shaved, an uncertain, unformed look around their eyes. He saw that once the men had gone to work, the women emerged full of good intentions and swept their front walks, picked up the beer cans and potato chip bags, even rolled back their coat sleeves and scrubbed their stoops on the coldest days of the year. Children raced past like so many scraps of paper blowing in the wind - mittens mismatched, noses running - and some woman would brace herself on her broom to call, 'You there! I see you! Don't think I don't know you're skipping school!' For this street was always backsliding, Macon saw, always falling behind, but was caught just in time by these women with their carrying voices and their pushy jaws. Singleton Street is not Macon's natural territory. Though by no means wealthy, he belongs to that part of Baltimore north of downtown where houses are detached, have yards, are



shaded by trees; this is the world in which he grew up and in which until quite recently he lived all his life. But now, at the age of 43, he is finding that world come apart on him. A year ago something unspeakably awful happened; his 12-year-old son, Ethan, off at summer camp, was murdered in a fast food restaurant, "one of those deaths that make no sense - the kind where the holdup man has collected his money and is free to go but decides, instead, first to shoot each and every person through the back of the skull." Now he has been left by Sarah, his wife of 20 years, who has been devastated by her son's death and believes that she must start life over because "I don't have enough time left to waste it holing up in my shell," a shell she thinks Macon played a crucial role in constructing.

So there he is, alone in the house with Helen, the cat, and Edward, the rowdy little Welsh Corgi to whom he stubbornly clings because the dog was Ethan's. Macon is a creature of firm if peculiar habit who believes that a system can be devised to meet each of life's difficulties; his stratagems for breakfast, bedclothes and the laundry are nothing if not ingenious, even if they don't exactly work. Change and disruption frighten him, which makes him perfectly suited to be the author of guide-books "for people forced to travel on business," accidental tourists who, like Macon, hate travel and much prefer to be at home:

He covered only the cities in these guides, for people taking business trips flew into cities and out again and didn't see the countryside at all. They didn't see the cities, for that matter. Their concern was how to pretend they had never left home. What hotels in Madrid boasted king-sized Beauty-rest mattresses? What restaurants in Tokyo offered Sweet'n'Low? Did Amsterdam have a McDonald's? Did Mexico City have a Taco Bell? Did any place in Rome serve Chef Boyardee ravioli? Other travelers hoped to discover distinctive local wines; Macon's readers searched for pasteurized and homogenized milk. It is as Macon heads off on one of his research trips that his life begins to change. The veterinarian who has boarded Edward in the past now refuses to accept him - "Says here he bit an attendant," the girl tells Macon. "Says, 'Bit Barry in the ankle, do not readmit'" - so in desperation Macon pulls into the Meow-Bow Animal Hospital. There Edward is cheerfully admitted by "a thin young woman in a ruffled peasant blouse," with "aggressively frizzy black hair that burgeoned to her shoulders like an Arab headdress." Her name is Muriel Pritchett, and when Macon returns to reclaim Edward she tells him that she is a dog trainer on the side, with a specialty in "dogs that bite." As Edward's bad habits become steadily worse, Macon at last turns to her in desperation. It is the beginning of the end of his old world.

He'd been right on the edge. His grief over Ethan's death and the pain caused by Sarah's desertion had just about done him in, just about turned him into "some hopeless wreck of a man wandering drugged on a downtown street." Enter Muriel- Muriel with her "long, narrow nose, and sallow skin, and two freckled knobs of collarbone that promised an unluxurious body," Muriel babbling away like "a flamenco dancer with galloping consumption," Muriel with her bewildering array of odd jobs and her pathetic young son by a broken marriage and her rundown house on Singleton Street. Love at first sight it is not: "He missed his wife. He missed his son. They were the only people who seemed real to him. There was no point looking for substitutes."



But life deals things out whether you're looking for them or not. Muriel, a fighter all her days, fights her way into Macon's heart: "Then he knew that what mattered was the pattern of her life; that although he did not love her he loved the surprise of her, and also the surprise of himself when he was with her. In the foreign country that was Singleton Street he was an entirely different person.

This person had never been suspected of narrowness, never been accused of chilliness; in fact, was mocked for his soft heart. And was anything but orderly." The accidental tourist has become a traveler - " Maybe, he thought, travel was not so bad. Maybe he'd got it all wrong" - whose journeys now are in the heart, whose world has grown larger than he had ever before imagined possible.

Where those journeys at last lead him is Tyler's secret, though it is no indiscretion to say that in the novel's final pages he faces wrenching, painful choices. But those choices are really less important than the change that has already taken place. Macon Leary has been given the gift of life.

A man who had seemed fated to spend the rest of his days in a rut - "Here he still was! The same as ever! *What have I gone and done?* he wondered and he swallowed thickly and looked at his own empty hands" - has been given new connections, with himself and with others.

This is the central theme of Tyler's fiction: how people affect each other, how the lives of others alter our own. As are her previous novels, *The Accidental Tourist* is filled with connections and disconnections, with the exaltation and heartbreak that people bring to each other; she knows that though it is true people need each other, it is equally true "that people could, in fact, be used up - could use each other up, could be of no further help to each other and maybe even do harm to each other."

The novel is filled as well with the knowledge that life leaves no one unscarred, that to live is to accept one's scars and make the best of them - and to accept as well the scars that other people bear. And in *The Accidental Tourist* there are many others: the large and bumptious Leary family, Macon's wonderfully unpredictable boss, the people of Singleton Street, and most certainly Edward, the funniest and most lovable dog within memory.

They occupy what indisputably is Tyler's best book, the work of a writer who has reached full maturity and is in unshakable command, who takes the raw material of ordinary life and shapes it into what can only be called art. The magical, slightly fey and otherworldly tone of her previous books is evident here, but more than ever before Tyler has planted her fiction in the hard soil of the world we all know; *The Accidental Tourist* cuts so close to the bone that it leaves one aching with pleasure and pain. Words fail me: one cannot reasonably expect fiction to be much better than this.

Source: Jonathan Yardley, "Anne Tyler's Family Circles," in *Washington Post Book World*, August 25, 1985, p. 3.

Adaptations

The Accidental Tourist was adapted as a film released by Warner Brothers in 1988. It starred Kathleen Turner, Geena Davis, and William Hurt.

The novel was also recorded as a book on tape by Recorded Books in 1991.



Topics for Further Study

Define the term "dysfunctional family" and research the causes and effects of different kinds of dysfunction. Can the families in the novel be considered dysfunctional? If so, how?

Compare the movie version of *The Accidental Tourist* to the novel. How do the characters compare to the way you imagined them after reading the book?

Investigate the psychological effects of losing a loved one and compare your findings to Macon's and Sarah's behavior.

Many critics find southern elements in Tyler's works. Investigate the qualities of a "southern writer" and determine whether or not you find those qualities in the novel.

What Do I Read Next?

Breathing Lessons, Anne Tyler's 1988 Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, focuses on family relationships and chronicles a woman's determined efforts to encourage people to connect with each other.

Independence Day, Richard Ford's 1995 novel, reflects the comic and sobering realities of American life in the 1980s as it follows the story of Frank Bascombe, a middle-aged real estate salesman, and his struggles with his career, his ex-wife, his girlfriend, and his children.

The Stone Diaries, the Pulitzer Prize-winning novel written by Carol Shields, presents a fictionalized autobiography of Daisy Goodwill Flett. It recounts her long history as daughter, wife, mother, and widow, and her struggles to finally understand herself and her world.

In *Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant*, published in 1982, Anne Tyler focuses on family life through the eyes of dying Pearl Tull, who remembers the difficult task of raising three children on her own.



Further Study

Paul Binding, "Anne Tyler," in his *Separate Country: A Literary Journey through the American South*, University Press of Mississippi, 1988, pp. 171-81.

Binding argues that Tyler follows the southern literary tradition, finding echoes of Faulkner, O'Connor, and Welty in her writing.

Laurie L. Brown, "Interviews with Seven Contemporary Writers," *Women Writers of the Contemporary South*, edited by Peggy Whitman Prenshaw, University Press of Mississippi, 1984, pp. 4-22.

In this interview, Tyler discusses her evolution as a writer and her writing style.

Julie Persing Papadimas, "America Tyler Style: Surrogate Families and Transiency," in *Journal of American Culture*, Vol. 15, No. 3, Fall, 1992, pp. 45-51.

The author examines family relationships in Tyler's novels and argues that they have a distinctly American sensibility.

Caren J. Town, "Anne Tyler," in *Dictionary of Literary Biography, Vol. 123: American Novelists since World War II, Third Series*, edited by James R. Giles and Wanda H. Giles, Gale Research, 1994, pp. 232-49.

Town focuses on Macon's search for identity, arguing that he "tries on roles and partners, until he finds ones that fit."

Patricia Rowe Willrich, "Watching through Windows: A Perspective on Anne Tyler," in *The Virginia Quarterly Review*, Vol. 6, No. 3, Summer, 1992, pp. 497-516.

In this interview, Willrich provides a biography and discussion of Tyler's writing style, focusing on what she calls Tyler's tendency to observe "from a distance."

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Larry McMurtry, in *The New York Times Book Review*, September 8, 1985, p. 1.

Elizabeth Mahn Nollen, "Fatherhood Lost and Regained in the Novels of Anne Tyler," in *Family Matters in the British and American Novel*, edited by Andrea O'Reilly Herrera, Elizabeth Mahn Nollen, and Sheila Reitzel Foor, Popular Press, 1997, pp. 217-36.

Peter Prescott, in *Newsweek*, September 9, 1985, p. 92.

Joseph C. Voelker, in *Art and the Accidental in Anne Tyler*, University of Missouri Press, 1989.

Voelker focuses on family relationships in Tyler's novels. He finds the characters in *The Accidental Tourist* to be in a "utopian emotional state," where they experience "sickness for home (longing, nostalgia) but also sickness of it (the need to escape from the invasiveness of family) and sickness from it (the psychic wounds that human beings inevitably carry as a result of having had to grow up as children in families)."



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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Novels for Students (NfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's □For Students□ Literature line, NfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels



frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of NfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of NfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel; and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized



Each entry, or chapter, in NfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- **Introduction:** a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- **Author Biography:** this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- **Plot Summary:** a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- **Characters:** an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed—for instance, the narrator in *Invisible Man*—the character is listed as "The Narrator" and alphabetized as "Narrator." If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name "Jean Louise Finch" would head the listing for the narrator of *To Kill a Mockingbird*, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname "Scout Finch."
- **Themes:** a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- **Style:** this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- **Historical Context:** This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- **Critical Overview:** this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- **Criticism:** an essay commissioned by NfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).



- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an "at-a-glance" comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

NfS includes "The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature," a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Novels for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the NfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the NfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.



Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Novels for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Novels for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from NfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Novels for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from NfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Novels for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of NfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of NfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Novels for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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