Average Waves in Unprotected Waters Study Guide

Average Waves in Unprotected Waters by Anne Tyler

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Introduction

"Average Waves in Unprotected Waters," first published in the February 28, 1977, edition of the *New Yorker*, is one of Anne Tyler's most anthologized short stories. Themes that appear in all of Tyler's writing are encapsulated in the life of the story's protagonist, Bet Blevins, whom the reader meets on the day she is to institutionalize her mentally handicapped son. These themes include: the family and the role of the individual in relationship to the family, parenting, memory, absent fathers, and identity and self-discovery. Published the same year Tyler published her seventh novel, *Earthly Possessions*, the story grapples with the complex web of characteristics that define an ordinary life. Like many of Tyler's characters, Bet Blevins is an ordinary American. She endures the hardships she has been dealt and does so as a "normal" person may be expected to endure. Through Blevins and others, Tyler proves that most events in life are complex and nuanced, which often clouds the delineation between what is heroic and what is simply normal. Tyler is well known for her ability and propensity for writing about ordinary people, a trait she shares with one of her greatest literary influences, the southern writer Eudora Welty.

Tyler developed an affinity for the short story form in the early 1970s, as it allowed her to balance the demands of motherhood and writing while her children were young, and in the latter half of the decade, she published stories in many magazines, including the *Ladies' Home Journal*, the *New Yorker*, and *McCall's*. Though there is not an edition of Tyler's collected short stories in which "Average Waves in Unprotected Waters" appears, the story can currently be found in several anthologies, including the ninth edition of *The American Tradition in Literature*, edited by George Perkins and Barbara Perkins and published by McGraw-Hill.

Author Biography

Anne Tyler was born on October 25, 1941, in Minneapolis, Minnesota. Her father, Lloyd Parry Tyler, a chemist, and mother, Mahon Tyler, a social worker, were committed Quakers and social activists. They raised Tyler and her three younger brothers in several Utopian communities throughout the United States, settling in the Celo Community in the mountains of North Carolina for five of Tyler's formative years. Robert W. Croft, in his book *An Anne Tyler Companion*, writes about Tyler's life at Celo, where Tyler was perceived as an outsider, a role she claims helped her learn to use her imagination. A voracious reader, Tyler often read favorite books twenty and thirty times. She and her brothers were primarily home schooled, which placed Tyler ahead of most students her age and allowed her to enter Duke University at the age of sixteen. At Duke, she majored in Russian. After graduating, she moved to New York to pursue a master's degree in Russian at Columbia University. Though she finished all the required coursework, she never completed her thesis. Instead, Tyler returned to North Carolina and worked as a Russian bibliographer in the Duke University Library. She met Taghi Modarressi, an Iranian psychiatrist and writer, and married him in 1963. Shortly after their wedding, the newlyweds moved to Montreal, Canada, where Modarressi completed his medical residency.

While in Montreal, Tyler's writing life began to take shape. She completed the manuscript for her first novel, *If Morning Ever Comes*, in 1963. Knopf published the book and all of her subsequent novels. In 1965, her first daughter, Tezh, was born, and two years later another daughter, Mitra, arrived. Tyler published her second novel, *The Tin Can Tree*, in 1965. In 1967, the family moved to Baltimore, Maryland, a city that has figured prominently in Tyler's later fiction. Between 1967 and 1977, when "Average Waves in Unprotected Waters" appeared in the *New Yorker*, Tyler published five novels and many short stories. Though she began to receive very favorable reviews beginning with her fifth book, *Celestial Navigation*, in 1974, her public following was still quite sparse. In 1982, with the release of *Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant*, that began to change. The book won the PEN/Faulkner Award for fiction and in 1983 was nominated for the Pulitzer Prize for fiction. In the same year, Tyler was elected a member of the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters. Her next book, *The Accidental Tourist*, won the National Book Critics Circle Award and was also nominated for the Pulitzer Prize for fiction. In 1988, *The Accidental Tourist* was made into an Academy Award-nominated motion picture, and the following year, her book *Breathing Lessons* won the coveted Pulitzer Prize for fiction. The success of these last books catapulted Tyler onto the list of America's best-selling authors and secured a large audience for her work. She continues to write novels, and her latest book, *Back When We Were Grownups*, appeared in 2001. Tyler lives a very private life in Baltimore with her family.

Plot Summary

"Average Waves in Unprotected Waters" begins at first light on the day Bet Blevins, the story's protagonist, is to institutionalize her mentally handicapped son, Arnold. At the age of nine, Arnold has become too difficult for Bet to manage. In the shabby, one-room apartment, Bet wonders, as she prepares Arnold's things and dresses him one last time, if he understands what is happening and if she is truly making the right decision. As they leave the crumbling apartment building, Mrs. Puckett, a kindly neighbor who is crying, stops Bet and gives her cookies for Arnold, but he runs off without acknowledging the woman who has baby-sat for him since his birth.

After taking a bus from their apartment, Bet and Arnold arrive at the train station. Bet has purchased gum, which she gives to a nervous Arnold. As the train leaves, he becomes calmer and falls asleep. While Arnold sleeps, Bet remembers him as a younger child. She remembers her husband, Avery, who left a few weeks after Arnold's mental disability was diagnosed. She determines that she and Avery married too young, against her parents' wishes. She wonders if the gene that caused Arnold's disability came from Avery or from her. She speculates that it came from her because, "she never could do anything as well as most people." She wonders why she was so eager to leave her home, which she now sees as "beautifully free and spacious." She realizes that she has had, and continues to have, one virtue: her steadfastness. She remembers herself as a child, at the shore with her parents, and how she used to stand in the waves and let them pound her. She draws a connection between the waves and her life with Avery, remembering that after Avery left, she even stayed in the old apartment for a while, because she "took some comfort from enduring." Arnold wakes up and she must entertain him. They both watch the conductor come through the train asking for tickets. Arnold laughs at an old woman whom the conductor is accusing of having no ticket. Bet imagines that she is the one the conductor is scolding.

At Parkinsville, Bet and Arnold find a cab to take them to the Parkinsville State Hospital. Arnold wants to eat a cookie, but Bet refuses to give him one. She is afraid that he will get messy, and she wants the people at the hospital to think highly of him and to see that "someone cherished him." She is afraid that Arnold will go into one of his rages. To appease him, she breaks off a little piece of cookie and gives it to him to eat. When they arrive at the hospital, she asks the cab driver, repeatedly, if he will stay and wait for her. He promises that he will stay.

Inside the hospital, a nurse gives Bet a tour and shows her where Arnold will sleep. As they look around, Bet tries to tell the nurse how to care for Arnold. The nurse assures Bet that Arnold will be well cared for and informs her that she will be not be able to visit Arnold for six months as he becomes acclimated to his new home. After leaving Arnold with his blanket, Bet says good-bye.

Rushing from the building in tears, Bet climbs into the cab and urges the driver to drive quickly to the train station. She has timed her departure so she will not have to wait very long for a train. When she arrives at the train station, she learns that the train has been

delayed by twenty minutes. Bet becomes nearly desperate at this news and wonders how she will endure the interminable wait. Just then, the town's mayor enters the station and announces that he will be giving a twenty-minute speech. Bet is greatly relieved and believes that they have "come just for her sake," and that from now on, everything will be like that, "just something on a stage, for her to sit back and watch."

Characters

Arnold Blevins

Arnold Blevins is a nine-year-old boy with developmental disabilities who has been raised by his mother, Bet. The day portrayed in the story marks his transition from his mother's apartment to his new home at the Parkinsville State Hospital. Arnold is described as small though "strong, wiry" and "thin-skinned, almost transparent." He has "great glassy eyes" and looks that make him appear elderly, "pinched, strained, tired." He rarely alters his expression. The reader is told that he has fits, frequently violent tantrums that have become difficult for his mother to manage. He is easily bored, and when he becomes so, he often becomes unruly. He loves gum and sometimes swallows the gum even though he has been told not to. He often looks at familiar things as if they were unfamiliar or brand new. New things also "have no meaning for him." Though he is described in a way that suggests he forms no attachments, he does form attachments to some material items like his little "red duffel coat." He appears, however, oblivious to most human attachments, including the long-standing relationship with the Blevins's neighbor, Mrs. Puckett, who has baby-sat him since his birth.

Avery Blevins

Avery Blevins is Bet Blevins's absent husband, who left her and their son, Arnold, a few weeks after learning that Arnold was mentally handicapped.

Bet Blevins

Bet Blevins is the struggling single mother of Arnold Blevins, a nine-year-old developmentally disabled boy for whom she can no longer care. Bet's viewpoint is prevalent throughout the story and shows her as a woman who, first and foremost, takes "comfort from enduring." Strength of character has facilitated her life with Arnold, without the support of family, for many years. Bet's choices have required that she endure. She withstood a rash marriage to Avery, who left her and Arnold a few weeks after the boy was diagnosed as mentally disabled, and she has endured the hardship of caring for Arnold by herself. Bet vacillates between believing that Avery was the genetic cause of her son's defect and placing the culpability on herself. She believes that she "never could do anything as well as most people," and this feeling of failure translates not only to her guilty belief in her role in her son's biological condition, but now, in her social role as Arnold's mother. Bet's thoughts are fixated on making Arnold appear acceptable, clean, and cherished on this day, when she is to take him to live in the state hospital. Though the place ultimately promises proper and ongoing care for him, many of Bet's actions during the day suggest her uncertainty about the decision.

Much of Bet's character is revealed through memory. Through Bet's memories, the reader becomes aware of the hardship and isolation she has had to endure. In many

ways, Bet idealizes her past life, which was "beautifully free and spacious," though she recognizes how, even then, she was destined to live staunchly and endure, "as if standing staunch were a virtue." Her strength throughout these years of struggle takes a great toll on her, and ultimately, in order to endure the pain of loss, she chooses to disconnect and become an observer of life rather than a participant.

Mrs. Puckett

Mrs. Puckett is the Blevins's neighbor who baby-sat Arnold from his birth until he became too big for her to manage. She breaks down as she gives Bet cookies for Arnold and watches him leave his home for the last time.

Themes

Memory

Memory plays an important role in almost all of Tyler's fiction. In "Average Waves in Unprotected Waters," memory is a disconnecting as well as a connecting force, both allowing characters to make discoveries about themselves and serving as a means of alienation. The first acknowledgment of memory, or lack of memory, occurs when Mrs. Puckett gives Bet cookies for Arnold. The boy passes the older woman without acknowledging her. He does not seem to know her or have a memory of her. Bet has worried over Arnold's lack of memory for objects, but his inability to recognize the woman who baby-sat him from birth irritates her. Later, on the train, the act of remembering is an act of selfrealization for Bet. As she remembers her childhood and marriage, she learns about herself and her ability to endure. Parts of her memory are idealized. She decides that "her old life had been beautifully free and spacious." In many ways, her memories are contradictory to her present situation. But, she realizes that she is the same person throughout her memory, and from that, she gleans comfort and understanding.

Family versus Individual

As the most constant theme in Tyler's work, the family provides a contradictory force in the characters of Tyler's fiction. On the one hand, family nurtures and sustains an individual and provides him or her with a basic identity. Family is also a unit of stagnation and can strip individuals of their identity. Bet Blevins defines herself as a mother throughout the story, and her role as a single mother in her family of two is complicated by the fact that she is the mother of a developmentally disabled boy. The traditional family and traditional motherhood, the idea of nurturing a child from birth to adulthood and then watching that child leave "the nest" and make his own life, is not a possibility for Bet. She must decide, perhaps before she is ready, to release Arnold into a life that is appropriate for him. Acting alone, Bet defies the traditional definition of the successful family. Ultimately, she believes that her decision will save the family and herself. Her memories of her family serve as a catalyst to help Bet find herself and find in herself the ability to make a necessary decision.

Identity

In many ways, "Average Waves in Unprotected Waters" is a story about the search for self, from the most miniscule gene to the more intangible character traits that truly make a person unique. As Bet Blevins searches her son's unresponsive face and his spastic limbs for some sign of identity, she questions not only where his disability originated but the motivations for her own biological and emotional character. She wonders about the gene that she possibly gave him that caused his disability, which has, in a way,

prevented Arnold from having a true identity. While questioning who her son is, she makes discoveries about herself, particularly her ability to endure hardship. One hardship she endures is seeing others interact with Arnold. As she watches, she is often induced to try and prove that Arnold is "real." Throughout the story, she projects personality traits onto Arnold, hoping to prove to those around him that he is like other children and that she has not failed, either through the passage of her genes to him or through her actions as his mother. She does define herself as a mother. Yet, at the conclusion of the story, she has given up her role as mother, and in doing so chooses a kind of lack of identity that is the result of passivity. Bet becomes a mere observer of "something on a stage."

Clean versus Dirty

Throughout "Average Waves in Unprotected Waters," images of cleaning and the concern for tidy appearances prevail. The first reference to the apartment building in which Bet and Arnold live reveals that the place is "crumbling" and that there was nothing anyone could do to "lighten its cluttered look." The building's degraded appearance is irritating and depressing to Bet as a physical manifestation of her poverty and hardship. With Arnold, Bet struggles between wanting him to be tidy and wanting him to appear more "real." Arnold, whose jeans are unfaded, has a crooked collar. Bet does not fix it, because she thinks it makes him look more real, like other children. Later in the story, Bet is concerned that Arnold remain clean. She begs him not to get messy. She then tidies his collar. She wants anyone who meets him to see that he has been well cared for, "cherished." Appearance is a clue to economic comfort and love, but it is contradicted by Bet's need for Arnold to appear "real." Those elements that are not tidy in the story are manifestations of economic hardship, but they are also manifestations of real living and personality. Ultimately, Bet shuns this reality and the messiness of life. When the mayor's entourage arrives in their clean gray suits with their bunting and microphone, Bet feels she can surrender herself to them. The well-dressed government people represent comfort and an ease in life, both economic and emotional, that Bet is ready to embrace, even if, ultimately, it is a betrayal of her true identity.

Style

Setting

Throughout "Average Waves in Unprotected Waters," the settings of different scenes augment the plot by mirroring Bet's feelings. Bet Blevins's apartment is crumbling and provides the "feeling of too many lives layered over other lives, like the layers of brownish wallpaper." The description of the place mirrors Bet's feelings of suffocation and loneliness. Though there are "too many lives," she is living hers alone and must act alone.

Later, in the train, the movement of the engine lulls Arnold and provides Bet with an opportunity to travel back into her memory. The journey motif occurs on two levels, on a physical level as Bet and Arnold travel to Parkinsville, and on a more symbolic level as Bet travels back in her own memory to find answers about herself and her life. When they arrive at the state hospital, everything is sterile and white and the story states that "there wasn't a sign that children lived here except for a tiny cardboard clown picture hanging on one vacant wall." The environment elicits some action in Bet, who begins to tell the nurse that her son is a child who needs his "special blanket" and that he is not "vacant" but that "there's a whole lot to him." The sterility of the environment mirrors Bet's perception of her son's personality. She finds him vacant and sterile, and she attempts to explain away these characteristics and prove that he is special and that he does have a personality.

At the conclusion of the story, the train station is described as "bombed out—nothing but a shell." This mirrors Bet's life now that her son is gone. She has found identity as his mother and earlier as Avery's wife and her parents' daughter, but now, all these roles are completed and she is abandoned in a "bombed out" train station, without any of the roles that have defined her. Like the train station, she is empty, suddenly void.

Symbolism

Though on many levels setting plays a role as symbolism in "Average Waves in Unprotected Water," by mirroring and representing characters' feelings and actions, the largest symbolic reference is expressed in the title of the story. The title, "Average Waves in Unprotected Waters," speaks to Bet's memory of her childhood at the shore, when her father "couldn't arrange his day till he'd heard the marine forecast. . . the height of average waves in unprotected waters." The marine forecast and the height of waves determined if the water was safe for swimmers. As a child, Bet's father tried to teach her to body surf in these average waves, but she couldn't do it. She just stood in the waves, "as if standing staunch were a virtue." How does this tie into her life now? Instead of water, the "average waves" that appear in her life are the average troubles that appear in every life. They are the loss of a husband, the loss of parents, and ultimately, the institutionalization of her son. She is not the only one who has dealt with

such troubles. Such troubles are "average waves" in the water of life. The symbol of "average waves in unprotected waters" acts as a metaphor. It simultaneously represents the true oceanic waves of her childhood memory and the rather ordinary troubles she faces in her current life.

Point of View

"Average Waves in Unprotected Waters" tells Bet's story from a third-person point of view. In "Average Waves in Unprotected Waters" this perspective accomplishes two things. First, it allows the reader to fully empathize with Bet's motivations and understand her position as she institutionalizes her son. Second, it allows Bet to suggest the motivation of the other characters. Bet's perspective induces the reader to believe that Arnold is both completely catatonic and potentially violent, that he has no personality and then that he may indeed have some distinguishing characteristics. Because of point of view, the reader is taken on a labyrinthine journey through Bet's psyche on this difficult day. The perspective provides unique insight for the reader into the inner workings of Bet's mind, while leaving doubts about Arnold, the nurse who is to care for him, and even the absent husband. Are their personalities and actions accurately portrayed as they are filtered through Bet's perception and memory? Tyler's choice of this point of view speaks about her motivations as a writer as well. She chose to look at the day through Bet's eyes and engage the reader through Bet's thoughts and feelings.

Historical Context

When "Average Waves in Unprotected Waters" appeared in the *New Yorker* in the winter of 1977, it arrived in a climate of economic instability and social sobriety. The 1970s, the post-Vietnam years in America, were marked by feelings of disillusionment. Working-class people lost faith in government, believing that their vote would not make a difference, and high unemployment created a sharp contrast between the wealthy and the poor.

Households headed by women, similar to Bet Blevins's in Tyler's story, were especially hard hit economically. Salary discrepancies for women and men working in similar jobs became a focus of the feminist movement, and efforts of the movement elicited slow change for economically disadvantaged female workers. The positive news for working mothers was a shift in social perspective that freed women to work and raise families without feeling social ridicule. More and more mothers entered the workforce out of financial obligation, but increasingly, women entered the workforce as they searched for self-fulfillment.

The search for self-fulfillment became a prominent theme in 1970s life, one that Bet shares in the story. She questions her identity and feels a palpable need to escape her current life and its hardships. Many Americans felt that need in the post-Vietnam era and, like Bet, were hindered in their quest by socioeconomic situations that greatly limited their possibilities.

The search for self-fulfillment led, for many, to a shift in priorities that placed personal needs ahead of family. This shift would ultimately mark the birth of the "Me Generation" that became prevalent in the 1980s. In the late 1970s, this growing attitude had a negative impact on marriages, resulting in a dramatic rise in the divorce rate. A society that had once admired marriages in which difficult circumstances were endured and obligations to others were placed ahead of personal happiness gave way to disillusionment and the normality of divorce and abandonment. Bet's absent husband, Avery, is an example of this trend and the relational wreckage that scarred many lives.

Self-fulfillment also led to rampant self-expression, which came in many forms, some of them unlikely, such as denim jeans. For rich and poor, the personalization of jeans in the 1970s provided contrast to the plain jeans and black, beatnik sweaters of the 1960s. Whereas only collegians and rebels wore jeans in the 1960s, jeans in the 1970s became a national uniform. In "Average Waves in Unprotected Waters," Bet worries that Arnold's jeans are not faded or worn enough, and that this makes him appear unreal. The use of jeans to symbolize her worries about her son's character is an apt one for the 1970s, an era when jeans helped defined the person.

The person of the president was defined in the decade first as Republican Richard Nixon, who resigned from office after the Watergate scandal and was later pardoned by his former vice president, Gerald Ford. In 1977, Ford relinquished his inherited presidency to a man many people called "the non-politician," Jimmy Carter. Formerly a

peanut farmer, then Governor of Georgia, Carter won the election as a Washington outsider. At the end of the decade, just as at the end of "Average Waves in Unprotected Waters," an ambiguous view of government and patriotism took the stage. Bet is "saved" by the mayor in what she believes is a kind of act of fate. She believes that the government people "had come just for her sake." As the decade came to a close, there was a similar public attitude toward government. The Democratic Party was leaving office and the country was welcoming Ronald Reagan and the Republican Party to Washington along with a new era of politics that promised to focus on individual needs.

Tyler's "Average Waves in Unprotected Waters" manifests 1970s ideologies, cultural phenomena, and values, but what is most notable about the story is that its time and place are relatively irrelevant. Tyler's story, and much of her other work, has a distinct universality about it that allows it to speak across generations. This is one reason this story, in particular, keeps cropping up in anthologies. Students of the text still find something relevant in its message and find the historical and cultural framework of the story easily adaptable to the current day.

Critical Overview

Like most of her short stories, Anne Tyler's "Average Waves in Unprotected Waters" has been largely ignored by literary critics. Though very little has been written about the text, the story does encapsulate the Tyler reading experience as it focuses on themes of family, self-discovery, and the elevation of the ordinary to writers' material. Broad criticism of Tyler's work is therefore relevant to the story and certainly pertains to the growth of Tyler's writing career.

Criticism began to really shape Tyler's literary success in the late 1960s, when her work was reviewed and praised by critics John Updike and Gail Godwin. John Updike, in particular, provided a certain amount of fuel for Tyler's career in his review of *Searching for Caleb*, as printed in *Anne Tyler as Novelist*, in which he says that Tyler is "not merely good, she is *wickedly* good." Charlotte Templin in her article "Tyler's Literary Reputation" in *Anne Tyler as Novelist*, says, "It seems safe to say that with one well-made phrase, Updike provided the nudge that raised Tyler to the rank of 'important writers.'" Templin suggests throughout her piece that Tyler's success has been influenced by critically timed reviews from literary giants and that her work's themes provide an "ideological and sociocultural 'fit'" for the American readership that makes them widely accepted and praised.

Tyler has been called a humanist, naturalist, and a romantic, whose influences are diverse. Alice Hall Petry, writing in her 1990 book, *Understanding Anne Tyler*, writes, "It would appear, indeed, that Tyler's true literary forebears, the figures within whose tradition she seems most clearly to be working, are the writers of the Concord circle, the great Russian playwrights and novelists of the nineteenth century, and the writers of the modern South." Petry also claims Tyler shares a connection to the romantics with her frequent focus on nurturance of self and self-reliance. The Anton Chekov connection that links Tyler to the Russian school of literature, says Petry, is apparent in Tyler's "skewed dialogue, non sequiturs, illogical trains of thought."

One of Tyler's self-acknowledged influences is the southern writer Eudora Welty. Robert W. Croft, in his book, *An Anne Tyler Companion*, recalls Tyler's essay "Still Just Writing," in which Tyler discusses Welty's influence on her work. Welty, "whose stories," Croft says, "taught her the importance of carefully chosen details and showed her the possibilities of writing about ordinary life," provided Tyler with a model for writing the ordinary that has become implicit in her work. Templin recalls a review by Brigitte Weeks in Ms., in which Weeks made reference to Tyler's use of the ordinary and called Tyler's characters "Everyman" characters, or characters reminiscent of medieval morality plays in which the main character represented all humankind.

The realism and ordinariness of Tyler's work has been disputed by other critics. Templin writes, "Tyler has been charged with a tendency to present a false or sentimentalized view of reality and an inability to sound the depths of human experience." Even Updike, one of Tyler's long-time supporters, posits that her books may lack substance. Templin discusses a Vivian Gornick review from the *Village Voice* in which Gornick attacks

Tyler's lack of depth and calls attention to fear of experience in Tyler's work. She writes, "A pity: A good writer being rewarded for making virtue out of the fear of experience." At the same time, critic Frances H. Bachelder, in her article "Manacles of Fear: Emotional Affliction in Tyler's Works" in *Anne Tyler as Novelist*, defends the fear found in Tyler's work. She says, "Over and over, these people are driven by fear, and their adaptation to that fear is one of Tyler's central concerns."

For the most part, Tyler's work has become popular with critics, scholars, and recreational readers. Templin states that "Tyler is sometimes called an apolitical novelist, but it would be more accurate to say that she shares the politics of the American majority." Themes of ordinary life and broad political views have created a universal appeal and a mass popular audience for Tyler's work. From the academic and literary side, Tyler's psychology appeals to psychoanalytic critics just as her use of memory appeals to those critics writing about Jacques Lacan's treatment of the unconscious. Even anthropologists find something in Tyler's use of kinship to write about. The inclusion of "Average Waves in Unprotected Waters" in many high school and college anthologies is one example of how Tyler's fiction has been adopted by academic circles, and the thousands of paperbacks in print speak to her success with a general readership.

Criticism

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- Critical Essay #3
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Critical Essay #1

Taibl is an English instructor and a writer. In this essay, Taibl discusses the difficulty of defining Tyler's work using traditional literary classifications.

Contemporary writers arrive on the literary scene with a force of history behind them. They arrive after major literary movements and eras and are sometimes compared to the romantics, the humanists, the southern school, or the Victorians. Sometimes a writer fits neatly into a category or the melding of a few categories. Anne Tyler, in a career that began in the 1960s and continues today, has been compared to all of these seemingly disparate schools and eras of literature. Not only can critics not agree on what category she belongs to, but they also cannot agree on how to read her work. Her prose has been called at once "brilliantly funny," by Robert McPhilips in his review of *Breathing Lessons* in *The Nation*, and "cute till it cloys . . . schmatlz," by John C. Hawley in his review of *Back When We Were Grownups* in *America*. Paul Gray, in his review of *A Patchwork Planet* in *Time*, calls Tyler's fiction "a fragile place sustained by hope and love," while Carol Iannone, in a review of Tyler's work in the *National Review*, calls her stories "faceless and thin." With so many conflicting adjectives used to describe Tyler's work, a reader may have a difficult time determining just where she fits. Alice Hall Petry, in her book, *Understanding Anne Tyler*, notes that critical attention "has consisted of efforts to fit her work into traditional literary classifications." She suggests that this is a difficult if not impossible task because of what many critics, including Laura Shapiro in her *Newsweek* review of *Ladder of Years*, call Tyler's "literature of daily life." The widespread acknowledgement of Tyler's knack for portraying the ordinary is the complicating factor when trying to fit her into a category or even the amalgamation of a few. The ordinary, a focus Tyler shares with one of her major influences, Eudora Welty, can be all of the things mentioned above. It can be deep and it can lack substance. It can be schmaltzy and brilliantly funny.

Ordinary life in "Average Waves in Unprotected Waters" is the life of Bet Blevins, a single mother living with her son in a "rented room in an ancient, crumbling house." Really, there is nothing extraordinary here at all. Bet is simply dealing with a day in her ordinarily difficult life. Frances H. Bachelder, in her article "Manacles of Fear: Emotional Affliction in Tyler's Works" in *Anne Tyler as Novelist*, generalizes the roles of many of Tyler's characters, including Bet, as people "perpetually struggling to live decent lives despite the handicaps of a tormented inner world and a troubling outer one." At the beginning of the story, the reader knows only that something is happening on this day that is different than other days. Otherwise, Bet's concerns are normal, daily concerns. She is concerned that her son, Arnold, look clean. She worries that he not become agitated. She worries that they will miss their bus and frets over giving him gum on the train. All of these are the worries of an ordinary mother.

Most ordinary lives contain a twist, and it is not until Bet is on the train that the reader truly learns, though he or she may have suspected, that Arnold is handicapped. The twist in Bet's life is this burden, and the reader is meeting this ordinary woman on the day in which she is to institutionalize her son. Through characterization, or the way a

character is portrayed, a reader may have guessed that there was something different about Arnold, but not until Bet begins to remember his birth is the full truth about Arnold revealed. Bet questions the "evil gene" that caused Arnold's disability. She wonders if it came from her or from her husband, Avery, who left when they found out Arnold was handicapped. Ultimately, in questioning the gene, Bet questions the beginning of life and identity. Throughout the story, Arnold's identity is vague. His jeans are too blue. Bet worries that he does not "look real." It is his lack of identity and the origin of this lack that concerns Bet. Is it her fault? Did this handicap and vacancy come from her? As she recalls, "she never could do anything as well as most people," and this revelation seems to include not only her biological contribution to Arnold's life but also her role as Arnold's caregiver.

As Bet wonders about her son and her worth as a mother, she also questions her own identity and the road she has taken to arrive at this time and place in her life. Bet recalls her "old life" that was "beautifully free and spacious." The beauty and spaciousness of her remembered home is juxtaposed, or set in opposition, with her current life. As Croft states about many of Tyler's characters, "the individual sometimes begins to feel restricted or even imprisoned." Because her life is restricted, Bet chooses memory as a way to understand. She recalls her father trying to teach her how to body surf, how before he could "arrange his day" he had to listen for the tides and the "height of average waves in unprotected waters." Bet recalls being unable to body surf instead, just standing "staunch" and letting the waves "slam into her." This whole series of images acts as an extended metaphor, or a story that ultimately illuminates another story. Here, Bet's past life illuminates her present life. Like herself as a child, Bet has yet to learn how to live flexibly, how to body surf over the waves, which are the ordinary problems that make a life. She stands staunch "as if standing staunch were a virtue." She even stayed in the apartment after Avery, her husband, left her because she "took some comfort from enduring." The average waves in unprotected waters are the ordinary problems and challenges that characterize every life. Instead of rolling over them and adapting to change, Bet lets these challenges hit her full force. Bet lets them "slam into her." As Croft states, "What to do in a world of change becomes a critical question for Tyler's characters." Bet's answer thus far has been to do nothing except to simply endure.

The act of remembering is critical for Bet as she deals with change. Croft says that Tyler rarely ventures far from themes of home and family, yet the journeys her characters make "are nevertheless far-ranging, for they are journeys of self-exploration. During these journeys Tyler's characters attempt to learn more about themselves and their places in the world." Bet's journey through memory parallels the actual journey Bet and Arnold are taking on the train. As Bet's life literally changes, her memories help her determine how to live beyond this point. The journey on the train and the act of remembering are also necessary for the reader in understanding Bet's character and motivations. As Croft says,

"As she (Bet) rides along in the train, the reader becomes aware of the hardships and isolation that this brave woman has had to endure. Thus, Bet's decision to give up her son for his own good becomes more sympathetic and her action as an act of heroism."

Ultimately, however, the action of institutionalizing her son paralyzes Bet. Arnold will finally get the care he requires from trained individuals, but Bet, who has identified herself as a mother and caregiver and has endured hardship, no longer has a son to raise or a hardship to endure. In one day, she has lost the things that define her, thus, it is her identity that is in peril.

At the conclusion of "Average Waves in Unprotected Waters," Bet indicates that she is prepared to disengage from life. Life has become "just something on a stage for her to sit back and watch." Bet's pivotal journey through memory has led her to a kind of understanding that does not initiate action but creates a kind of paralysis. Karen Levenback in her article "Function of (Picturing) Memory" in *Anne Tyler as Novelist*, says, "The key to using memory wisely and well has less to do with realizing the significance of memories today than with what we do with this sense tomorrow." Bet's choice for tomorrow is to let go of life, to watch it rather than live it. For one who has defined herself in terms of endurance and standing staunch in adversity, the sudden freedom coupled with her perceived failure as a mother, creates paralysis. She idealized her "old life" as one that was "spacious" and free, but when provided with these very things, the decision to live spaciously and freely is too great a burden. She is the one, not her son, who ends up losing identity, because her identity has been so tied to the things she has just lost: her son, her family. Charlotte Templin, in her article "Tyler's Literary Reputation" in *Anne Tyler as Novelist*, cites a review by Vivian Gornick in the *Village Voice*, that talks about Bet's very decision to disengage. Gornick writes, "A pity: A good writer being rewarded for making virtue out of the fear of experience." Gornick's reflection on Tyler's use of fear pertains to Bet, who finds the possibility of experience paralytic. But, the question about virtue remains. What is the reader to understand about Bet? Is she a hero? And is Tyler truly making virtue of Bet's fear?

What readers glean from this text has been and will continue to be a response to the elements of their own ordinary lives found within it. Gornick seems to suggest that literature should provide role models, or people from whom the ordinary person can model behavior. With Bet, Tyler seems to suggest that daily decisions are difficult decisions and sometimes they simply get the better of people. Through Bet, Tyler teaches that learning to surf through the difficulties of life is perhaps the only way to ensure a future in which a person has enough energy and hope to remain actively engaged. Bet never learned to live flexibly, or body surf. She stood staunch and took every slam life had for her, and the end of her story finds her in a bleak kind of nothingness. A reader may not find something in Bet to emulate or model but may empathize with her hardship and realize that her choice is not the choice to make and not the life to emulate, but to avoid.

Tyler has been criticized for being either too rosy or too bleak, opposites that ultimately must be resolved by her reading audience. Just as Bet can be read as a hero and coward, so can many of Tyler's characters. The reader is the final arbiter of truth, and hence literary categories, which have emerged to explain the writing of contemporary authors and place them in tidy categories, do not work for Tyler. Her work defies pre-defined categories and does so under the guise of writing about average life. The ordinary life, it seems, is a multifaceted, nuanced endeavor that thousands of readers

have found and identified with in Tyler's fiction. Readers of her stories and novels meet in Tyler's words what Croft calls the "typical Tylerian situation—a person attempting to endure the hand that life has dealt him or her." Critics are conflicted about the typical Tylerian situation, offering both praise and criticism, which Tyler seems to suggest, throughout all her work, is just one of ordinary life's complications.

Source: Erika Taibl, Critical Essay on "Average Waves in Unprotected Waters," in *Short Stories for Students*, The Gale Group, 2003.

Critical Essay #2

Pool has published poetry and reviews in a number of literary journals. He teaches Advanced Placement and International Baccalaureate English in Austin, Texas. In this essay, Pool identifies themes and imagery in the short story which are characteristic of the author.

Anne Tyler is a prolific novelist who has developed a strong literary reputation. Writing in the *New York Times Book Review*, Gail Godwin has said,

"Her fiction is filled with displaced persons who persist stubbornly in their own destinies. They are 'oddballs,' visionaries, lonely souls, but she has a way of transcribing their personalities with such loving wholeness that when we examine them we keep finding more and more pieces of ourselves."

The short story "Average Waves in Unprotected Waters," first published in 1977 in *The New Yorker*, centers on one episode in the life of Bet Blevins, a single mother who places her mentally disabled son in a public institution after having exhausted herself trying to care for the child. Although Tyler dramatizes only the trip to the institution, the reception Bet and Arnold experience there, and the wait in the station for the train to arrive, the author uses Bet's reminiscences to place the traumatic moments of the story in the context of her life and her character.

Most of the story consists of the mother's memories and reflections about her son, her marriage, her parents, and the anxiety and guilt she feels in having to institutionalize the boy who has grown too large and too wild for her to control. It is apparent from the outset that her son Arnold is profoundly different. In the initial paragraph Tyler, describes the boy as "a knobby child with great glassy eyes and her own fair hair," emphasizing both his distance from the world and his closeness to her. Unlike normal children, he never wears out his clothes, and he seldom changes his expression. Although the precise nature of Arnold's problem is never explained, it is evident that he is utterly incapable of growing into a self-supporting individual. Unaided by husband or family, Bet has been worn out by the efforts she has made to care for her son. Tyler typically shows Bet or other characters speaking or in action; then she makes a transition into Bet's thoughts and imagination, preoccupied as they are by her son's predicament.

Bet struggles both with her son and with a shabby, depressing poverty. They live in rented rooms in an old house, where "there was always the feel of too many lives layered over other lives." She wears a worn beige dress that visually echoes the brownness of the wallpaper that Arnold peels from the corner. The color brown also appears in the corduroy coat he wears, one he does not like, but which has set her back half a week's pay.

Tyler's imagery further reinforces the emotional bleakness of the piece. "She felt too slight and frail, too wispy for all she had to do today." This early in the story, it is still unclear to the reader what will happen, but Tyler foreshadows the outcome by

portraying the emotional devastation of a neighbor, old Mrs. Puckett, who, with tears in her eyes, presents Arnold his favorite cookies, though he is too distracted to take them. Bet hopes Arnold might make his "little crowing noise" to the old woman. Bet immediately feels guilty again, but she tells herself that she has done the best she could, only giving up when the child grew to be too much for her to handle.

On the bus and train to their destination, Bet constantly worries that Arnold will make a scene. As Arnold becomes more quiet, fighting against sleep, Tyler explains that the child has never slept well, leading her to remember her husband's abandonment of the child soon after they learned of his disabilities. Bet alternates between guilt and resentment, alternately blaming herself, then her husband, for the boy's condition. This complex mix of emotions makes Tyler's story remarkable.

An author telling such a poignant tale must be careful to steer clear of sentimentality. If the reader comes to suspect that he or she is being manipulated into pity, then the story fails. In this story, Bet must be sympathetic but not pathetic. She has made some mistakes of her own, especially marrying too early, against her parents' wishes. She had wanted to get away from life at home with her parents, but now she remembers her parents, both dead, with a longing fondness she had not known as a girl. In retrospect, her life in a trailer near the harbor of Salt Spray, Maryland, seemed free and idyllic. Going far back into memory, Bet thinks of her father, who ran a boat that took tourists on fishing expeditions, and how for him "everything had been run by the sea."

It is at this point in the story that Tyler introduces the phrase that becomes the title. As a man who went out on the water, her father regulated his life by the weather forecasts, "the wind, the tide, the small-craft warnings, the height of average waves in unprotected waters." Good authors almost always choose titles that are significant to their stories, and this line is no exception. We may ask the significance of this phrase apparently unrelated to the main narrative of the exhausted mother and disabled child.

This central image, the key word being "unprotected," parallels the conflict of the story. Bet is utterly unprotected, having no husband, father, or mother to shelter or support her. Neither does she possess the financial resources that might partially alleviate the situation. She is a woman, presumably still fairly young and lacking advanced education, with a needy child and stuck in a low-paying job. She is average in all respects but one: her dogged devotion to her son. This determination proves to be in character, as Bet remembers her childhood, when her father tried to teach her to body surf. She failed to learn how, because she could not let the breakers take her away; instead she stood rigid against them, letting them slam into her "as if standing staunch was a virtue, really. She couldn't explain it. Her father thought she was scared, but it wasn't that at all."

Robert McPhilips, writing in *The Nation*, says, "Tyler's strongest card is her ability to orchestrate brilliantly funny set pieces and to create exasperating but sympathetic characters." There is certainly much that is sympathetic and admirable about Bet. She would never have left her husband, even before Arnold's birth, not even when the marriage had "turned grim and cranky." Her efforts to raise a profoundly disabled son,

alone and unprotected, are nothing less than heroic. Additionally, though, Tyler suggests another side to Bet, a stubbornness of personality, a tenacious rigidity in the face of forces larger than herself. Perhaps her tragic flaw and her greatest virtue arise from the same source. She is a woman who "took comfort from enduring." It is difficult to fault her for her love and her determination to cherish and protect her child, and perhaps simple endurance might not have been her most fruitful strategy, but she acts according to the best that is in her. Tyler often writes of characters who manage to endure what life throws at them. In her novel *Saint Maybe*, the protagonist, Ian Bedloe, takes upon himself the burden of raising his brother's orphaned children. As he moves from a golden childhood to a harried middle age, he searches for redemption from his guilt over his small role in his brother's suicide. Bet Blevins also is consumed with guilt, yet she, like other Tyler characters, appeals to us through her humanity.

Following this passage of exposition, in which the author provides important information about the past, Tyler adroitly switches back to the present, dramatizing a little scene in which the conductor berates a small black woman in a purple coat for not paying her fare. This episode is simultaneously funny and sad and a bit grotesque, an illustration of Tyler's keen eye and ear for humor. Bet is mortified at the confrontation before her, but suddenly, inexplicably, Arnold starts to laugh. Something about what he has seen strikes him as funny, and he reacts the same way he does to "Sesame Street." This abrupt juxtaposition of embarrassment and laughter epitomizes the author's ear for the absurd and incongruous situations that make for off-beat humor in a very grim situation indeed.

Bet's plans, it seems, involve admitting her son to Parkinsville State Hospital and leaving just as quickly as she can. Something eccentric, even odd, emerges from her desperate attempts to flee. She nervously asks the taxi driver to wait for her outside the hospital, and she must reassure herself repeatedly that he will be there. Once at the institution, she is met by a nurse, who is brisk and polished though not particularly sympathetic. Bet lingers, trying to say things about her son. She adjusts a picture of a clown, the only evidence that the barracks-like room where her son will sleep was meant for children. The institution is cool and efficient, and Bet is conflicted and exhausted. On her way out the door, "she heard a single, terrible scream, but the nurse only patted her shoulder and pushed her gently on through." She rushes to the train station, expecting to get on the train at the last minute, only to discover that the train is twenty minutes late. She asks the ticket agent in despair what she will do for twenty minutes. Her obsession with getting away is not very rational, but she's a mother in extreme emotional pain. "'Twenty minutes!' she said aloud. 'What am I going to do?'"

She finds relief in an unexpected source. A crew comes in and sets up a lectern, some red, white, and blue bunting, and a public-address system so the mayor can make a twenty-minute speech. Bet is grateful for the diversion. The story ends poignantly. "They were putting on a sort of private play. From now on, all the world was going to be like that—just something to watch on a stage for her to sit back and watch." Tyler's protagonist has en-dured the unendurable. She has been so involved with watching out for Arnold for so long that now she disassociates herself from life, which becomes a thing to observe. She is still in unprotected waters, though the storm has passed, and she faces life with detachment and endurance.

Source: Frank Pool, Critical Essay on "Average Waves in Unprotected Waters," in *Short Stories for Students*, The Gale Group, 2003.

Critical Essay #3

In the following essay excerpt, Evans provides an overview of "Average Waves in Unprotected Waters" and explores the idea of the frailty of human safety in Tyler's works.

Critical Essay #4

When Tyler deals with the ever-precarious state of human safety and well-being, she shows how mysteriously disaster awaits us, whether in the genetic makeup of an infant or in the presence of a dangerous intruder. One of Tyler's best and most moving stories, "Average Waves in Unprotected Waters" (1977), confronts the problem of a mentally deficient child and follows the mother, driven to the limit of her resources, as she commits her son Arnold to the state institution. The disorder of agoraphobia is pervasive in Tyler's fiction, from the severe condition Jeremy Pauling suffers in *Celestial Navigation* to the somewhat lesser form of this disorder that Ira's sister, Junie, suffers in *Breathing Lessons*. Jeremy has not left his Baltimore street block for years; Junie will not step out of the Baltimore apartment unless she has dressed in full disguise, replete with a flaming red wig. As irritating and serious as their conditions are, they do not touch Arnold's severe malady, a tragedy for Bet, the anguished mother in "Average Waves on Unprotected Waters," who "felt too slight and frail, too wispy for all she had to do today."

When Arnold's problem had become evident, Avery, the boy's father, abandoned the family. For a long time Bet agonizes over the reason for Arnold's condition: Was it from a bad gene her husband possessed? that she possessed? Was it because she and Avery married too young and against their parents' advice? No answers, of course, come, and she is left with the arduous daily routine of caring for Arnold and providing a living. On the day the story takes place, Bet dresses the child carefully and frets to keep him neat and clean during the train ride to the state institution—her gesture to show that Arnold *was* special, was cherished. As the nurse locks doors that will keep Arnold inside, Bet hears "a single, terrible scream"—this unearthly sound is the last contact with her child.

With few exceptions, Tyler uses her story and novel titles within the texts themselves, thus deepening and layering the titles' significance. The title "Average Waves in Unprotected Waters" comes from Bet's childhood, when she lived with her parents in Salt Spray, Maryland. Her father operated a fishing boat for tourists and could not set out for the day until he received the pertinent weather information: "the wind, the tide, the small-craft warnings, the height of average waves in unprotected waters." So, the title suggests, by arming ourselves we may avoid danger, may ensure safety. Bet, however, cannot protect herself or Arnold from the fate that was his from birth. Precaution cannot always guarantee safety. Tyler suggests by the conclusion of the story that Bet has suffered an extreme loss. As she waits out a 20-minute delay for her train home, local figures scurry about, setting up for the mayor's plan to take "about twenty minutes of your time, friends." Bet watches, sensing that "they were putting on a sort of private play. From now on, all the world was going to be like that—just something on a stage, for her to sit back and watch." Her real self was tied to Arnold, who is hers no longer.

Frequently in Tyler's fiction, characters must face the absurd twists of fate—those inexplicable chance moments that create an Arnold who, locked in his mental chaos, finally goes beyond his mother's reach. Or the irony of time that in "A Misstep of the Mind" causes what the rape victim, Julie Madison, describes as the worst minutes of her

life. In this story Tyler exposes several layers of contemporary life in a world where neighborhood safety is no longer a fact and where the violation of rape is made worse by the indignity the police cause the victim, and even by the hapless blunders of neighbors.

Rape, the story insists, implies the total loss of innocence, an episode that opens and closes the story. Tyler begins, "Julie Madison was raped and robbed on a Tuesday, a warm and sunny noontime when you would least expect anything to go wrong," and ends, "Yet what she remembered, after everything else had gone, was the packed feeling that the air has when an intruder lies in wait, the capacity for betrayal in a cheerful world where dust floats lazily in sunbeams, the knowledge that it is possible to die." The private trauma is counterpointed by the public dilemma: the police bombard Julie with questions about the man's physical description and his gun, their concern less over her experience than in their capturing the intruder, "because Baltimore had recently had a plague of burglaries by someone fitting the same description: tall and black, very young, wearing a pale yellow windbreaker." The old problem of racial tension comes full circle after Julie identifies the man in a lineup (his scar had floated persistently in her dreams), because she must on leaving the police station pass "a black family all dressed up and sternly erect." If this is the rapist's family, they give a picture of dignity far removed from the crime that has occurred. The racial tension that society endures is manifest in the reality of city life, where each day someone like Julie Madison discovers that "safety had crumbled in a second, as if it had never been more than a myth."

In concrete detail Tyler describes the plight of a private citizen caught in the world of police investigation. Julie must examine mugshots as a bored policewoman, ignorant of manners, "sighed and cleaned her fingernails with a door key." Then closed in the booth alone to view the lineup, Julie must obey these instructions: "If you can positively identify any of these men as having done you harm, you have ten seconds to call out his number." The real world, Julie discovers in this moment, is a far cry from the world of television, where a victim viewing the lineup could, if she chose, just take all the time in the world. This experience has marked Julie's educated, dignified, and sensible family for life, and Tyler's point hits hard: Julie Madison's mother has worked with the Urban League to find better jobs for blacks. Now she can only say of Julie's ordeal, "Oh, it's ironic." Ironic indeed, and regardless of the complicated social conditions that precipitate such crimes, for Julie Madison, the safety she had assumed and enjoyed had indeed crumbled in a second.

Source: Elizabeth Evans, "The Short Stories," in *Anne Tyler*, Twayne Publishers, 1993, pp. 21-43.

Adaptations

The Accidental Tourist was adapted as an Academy Award-nominated film and released by Warner Brothers in 1988. The film stars Kathleen Turner and William Hurt.

Almost all of Tyler's novels appear as books on tape from Random House, including *Back When We Were Grownups*, which appeared in 2001. Other Random House audio books include *Breathing Lessons, The Clock Winder*, and *Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant.*

Topics for Further Study

The story "Average Waves in Unprotected Waters" appeared in the *New Yorker* in the late 1970s during an important time in the feminist movement. What was happening in the feminist movement during the late 1970s? Using examples from the story, explain how the story portrays or does not portray the feminist values and objectives of the time. Would you call Tyler a feminist writer? Why or why not?

In "Average Waves in Unprotected Waters," Bet's husband, Avery, has abandoned her and their son. What was life like for single mothers in the late 1970s? How does Bet's life compare to your findings? Use examples from the story to explain your conclusions.

In the story, Bet questions whose genes caused her son's disability. What do geneticists say about genes and developmental disabilities? Are disabilities genetic? Explain your findings.

In the story, how does Bet handle her son? What do her actions reveal about her attitude toward him? Does it appear that Bet loves her son? Explain and justify your answers using examples from the text.

"Average Waves in Unprotected Waters" is told from Bet's point of view, in which a reader gains full access to the thoughts and feelings of Bet Blevins. Explain how the story might change if it were told from Arnold's perspective or Mrs. Puckett's point of view. What elements in the story present a bias that a reader may not trust as absolute truth?

Compare and Contrast

1970s: The 1970 census reveals that three million women are raising families by themselves.

Today: The 2000 census reports that over ten million women, many of them by choice, raise families as single mothers.

1970s: Late in the decade, British scientists report that they have determined, for the first time, the complete genetic structure of a living organism.

Today: Scientists from the Human Genome Project finish drafts of the human genome, one of the largest scientific undertakings of all time, and determine that the human genome contains between 26,000 and 40,000 genes.

1970s: Post-Vietnam America, plagued by economic instability, widespread civic distrust of government, and an energy crisis, begins to rebound as government agencies concentrate on the domestic agenda.

Today: Post-September 11, 2001, America, plagued by economic instability, concerns over national security, and threats of bioterrorism, focuses on a domestic agenda that strives to make America safe and economically stable once again.

1970s: "Let's talk about me," a line borrowed from author Tom Wolfe, becomes the unofficial slogan of America, creating an atmosphere in which people begin to publicly share personal history, strife, sacrifice, and turmoil. Complete disclosure becomes a distinctive national style.

Today: American citizens tell their personal stories on daytime television programs and sell their stories to national magazines, while nightly news is criticized for featuring private glimpses into the lives of elected officials and celebrities.

What Do I Read Next?

Anne Tyler: A New Collection (1991) contains three of Tyler's most critically acclaimed books published between 1976 and 1988: *The Accidental Tourist, Breathing Lessons*, and *Searching for Caleb.*

In *Anne Tyler as Novelist*, David Salwak has collected seventeen essays by highly respected contemporary critics writing about the distinctive features that have earned Anne Tyler a body of devoted readers and critical admirers. The 1994 collection addresses major themes, characterization, and style in Tyler's work.

Robert W. Croft's *An Anne Tyler Companion* (1998) provides a comprehensive look at Tyler's work and includes a listing of annotated characters, themes, and works. Croft also provides a comprehensive chronology of Tyler's life and influences.

The 1970s (2000), a collection of essays written by respected historians and academics and edited by Mark Ray Schmidt, provides an overview of the major political, social, cultural, and environmental themes that shaped the 1970s.

The Misunderstood Gene (2001), written by Michel Morange and translated by Matthew Cobb, provides a history of the gene. The book investigates what genes actually do and how they affect behavior and control life and death.

The Role of the State Hospital in the Twenty-First Century (1999), edited by William D. Spalding, is a collection of critical essays that investigate the evolution of the state hospital and its future role in American society.

My Children, My Gold: A Journey to the World of Seven Single Mothers (1994), by Debbie Taylor, discusses the experiences of single mothers from a cross-cultural perspective.

Further Study

Chekhov, Anton, *The Comic Stories*, edited by Harvey Pitcher, Ivan R. Dee, 1999.

The Comic Stories includes forty of Chekhov's stories from the simple and unsophisticated to the sophisticated and complex. As a student of Russian, Tyler read Chekhov's work, and many critics have observed a connection between the two writers' styles.

Hicks, George L., *Experimental America: Celo and Utopian Community in the Twentieth Century*, University of Illinois Press, 2001.

Hicks explores American utopian communities and the effort to revitalize America using these models in the 1930s and 1940s. His exploration largely revolves around the Celo Community in North Carolina, where Tyler spent five years of her childhood.

Welty, Eudora, *The Collected Stories*, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1980.

This volume includes work from *The Curtain of Green and Other Stories, The Wide Net and Other Stories, The Golden Apples, The Bride of the InnisFallen and Other Stories, and two uncollected stories*. Tyler has said that Welty's ability to write the lives of ordinary people was a tremendous influence on her own work.

Women Writers of the Contemporary South, edited by Peggy Whitman Prenshaw, University Press of Mississippi, 1984.

Prenshaw has collected twenty-one essays from respected authors and critics about contemporary southern women writers, including an essay by Doris Betts about Tyler and her work.

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Short Stories for Students (SSfS) 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, SSfS 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 SSfS 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 SSfS 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 SSfS 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 SSfS 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

SSfS 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 Short Stories 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 SSfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SSfS 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 Short Stories for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Short Stories 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 SSfS 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.□ Short Stories for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

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

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Short Stories 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 SSfS, 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 Short Stories 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 SSfS, 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 Short Stories 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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