

Discussion Questions for *These Precious Days*

1. I put heavy weight on the first sentence/paragraph when searching for a new book to read. And I try hard to remember that in my writing. Ann's (I admire her so much I like to pretend we're friends) first sentence is a winner: "*I can tell you when it all started because I remember the moment exactly.*" Don't we want to find out what started? (**Judy Wood**). Aside from that sentence, does the beginning work for you and why? It is, after all, sort of dull: narrator, Ann, can't sleep, decides to read Tom Hank's book. (**Maribeth Fisher**)
2. Along with the intro, I found it interesting that Ann (I want to think of her as my friend too!) doesn't begin with Sooki though the essay is mostly about her. Ann doesn't even remember Sooki's name when they first meet, only notices her coat. Yes, this is how it happened, but another writer might have said something like, The first time I met Sooki, I didn't even remember her name...as a way to indicate the essay's focus. Why do you think Ann began this way, and can you see yourself starting a work in a similar fashion? In workshop wouldn't we have criticized this, maybe called the beginning "throat clearing." (**Maribeth Fischer**)
3. I'm wondering about the breath of the piece. How does Patchett's discussion of writing fiction strengthen or weaken the essay? Does Patchett try to cover too much ground? (**Kim Burnett**).
4. The essay is successful on many levels, though it's dealing with some huge potentially abstract topics: writing, friendship, marriage, fame, books, bookshops. And the biggy: death. Yet it doesn't feel like a lecture, and it doesn't feel abstract. It feels like a love story. (**Judy Wood**)

Or does it?

What happens when a personal essay dealing with the big issues (like death) approaches those issues from a perspective or frame that is not the reader's? For instance, my frame for conversations about death is extreme fear. Patchett's apparently is not. So when she finally speaks to the issue, I found the discussion "surfacy" and unsatisfactory (**Judy Catterton**). What is the balance between treading lightly (not lecturing about a big subject) and skimming the surface, and does Patchett achieve it? (**Maribeth Fischer**)

5. After a while, did anyone else get annoyed with Sooki being "perfect"? Or is it the case that she was only described as perfect? I might have liked to see Patchett interrogate that question (**Judy Catterton**). Along those lines, Karl comes off as

pretty perfect too. This is a struggle a lot of writers have when writing about real people. Of course Patchett isn't going to offer negative views of a dying woman, but does this hurt the essay? Would it be a better piece of writing if we had a more nuanced view of Sooki? (**Maribeth Fischer**).

6. **Sarah Barnett** maybe asks this question in a different way: Patchett is puzzled, feeling as if she doesn't really know Sooki. We learn that Sooki is petite and has a glamorous, multi-colored wardrobe. But there is no other physical description. Do we need one? Sooki's name indicates Asian ethnicity, and about halfway through the essay, we learn that her "home" was the Ukraine. Do we ever get a "complete" picture of Sooki? Do we need one?

7. Another writing gem Ann uses is intimacy. She's telling us her story, her thoughts, her emotions as if we're right there together. How does she do this? (**Judy Wood**) And yet, the intimacy is not confession. I never felt that Ann was TRYING to reel us in, TRYING to hook us with secrets. What then makes this feel intimate (or doesn't it?) (**Maribeth Fischer**)