

Discussion Questions for *Tom Lake*

by *Ann Patchett*

We had more questions for this book than any other, so thank you to everyone who sent questions. I tried to choose the ones that would generate the most discussion (though we still probably have too many to get to).

HOW THE BOOK WAS WRITTEN

1. How can a writer, using two time frames, as Patchett does (or two points of view) ensure that they're equally compelling. I'm finding the acting story in *Tom Lake* much more interesting than the cherry situation (*Paul Dyer*). Does Patchett devote enough time to each of these stories? Were you ever frustrated to leave one for another? Are these stories sufficiently "bound" together to form a cohesive whole? (*Judy Catterton*)
2. **Gina Wilson** (a newcomer to book club, so welcome, Gina!) found the formatting of the dual narrative a bit confusing. "Patchett has Lara telling her story to the reader, then there is a short break in the text before Patchett switches into the present day where Lara is telling her story to the daughters, with no markings or indication of the switch other than the line breaks. The novel continues with this alternating intertwining of stories. Why did Patchett choose to present it in this manner? Why not just write a chapter from one perspective than a new chapter from the other, or use another technique when switching from present day to the past? Was it a nod to a script, i.e., alluding to actors' immersing themselves into a part?"
3. What can writers learn from the way the Patchett introduces her characters. They appear without backstory. For example, Benny is mentioned on **P. 27**, but the reader doesn't learn who he is until **P. 42**. Is this a useful fiction writing technique? (*Sarah Barnett*)
4. In some ways, this book felt like a craft class in writing narrative. Choices about what to leave out, what to leave in. Where to pause a story, where to speed up. "We're switching to montage now," I tell the girls. (**P.18**) There is even the commentary on **P.108**, where Pallace is introduced and Lara's daughter scolds her for objectifying her and Lara (Patchett??) pushes back on why she introduces Pallace as she does. Or on **P.61**, Emily tells her sister, "I understand narrative, idiot, but when you see it all broken down this way, step by step, I don't know it's different." Does breaking the narrative into parts give us insight into Patchett's craft? Or is it distracting, even confusing? (*Maribeth Fischer*)
5. Perhaps related to the above: Why did Lara withhold the darker parts of the story when telling the girls about Duke—the visit to Belmont, the abortion—and from her husband, yet include this for the reader? Was this Patchett's way of telling the reader that Lara had not really reconciled her past, keeping it hidden, buried? (*Gina Wilson*)

QUESTIONS ABOUT BELIEVABILITY

6. Why did Patchett choose to make Duke Mr. Webb and not George? That was a little distracting and a little weird given that they were dating at the time (*Sherri Wright*)
7. How, if at all, does the scene at the rehab center contribute to the narrative or our understanding of the characters? Why do you suppose Patchett included it? Maybe it's completely gratuitous? (*Judy Catterton*)
8. Was the plot believable? A supposedly great actor (or 2) giving it all up for the drudgery of farming? And did Patchett wind it up too neatly by forgiving Duke? (*Sherri Wright*)
9. Is it believable that Duke did not remember that Lara was with him when they drove out to the Nelson orchard? What about Sebastian's loyalty to his brother—Can the reader explain that? (*Christine Tomalin*)

THEME

10. *Tom Lake* does not give a favorable portrayal of Hollywood, the movie industry, and the accompanying lifestyle. Even New York theater ranks lower, in Patchett's view, than the simplicity of an orchard farmer's life. Does this categorize *Tom Lake*, at least in part, as a cautionary tale? (*Deborah Baker*)
11. Many readers complain that “nothing happens” in *Tom Lake*. Several critics have stated that “life happens in the small moments.” Can these notions be satisfactorily rectified? (*Deborah Baker*)
12. Patchett says the main theme (or one of the main themes) of the book is the “disconnection” between young love and married love. How does she go about developing that theme and is the contrast evident?
13. **Kathleen Schnieder** (another newcomer—so welcome, Kathleen!) might have one answer to the above: “As the narrative spun out the tale of Duke and Lara's relationship, I was struck by the way Lara continued to describe Duke's behaviors (which I found atrocious) in a way that was accurate but totally non-judgmental. I found this particularly jarring when she recounted her visit to him in rehab. Do you think the author portrayed him that way because: 1) she was bathing the events in the glow of her first love, even though she has put that in the past? or 2) she wanted to allow her daughters to form their own opinions?”

OUR TOWN

14. Did reading *Our Town* add to your appreciation of the book? And if yes, how do you feel about the other literary references in the book—i.e., *Fool for Love*, *The Cherry Orchard*, *Bartleby* (which one of the daughters uses as a verb), *Bridge of San Luis Rey*? (**Sarah Barnett**)