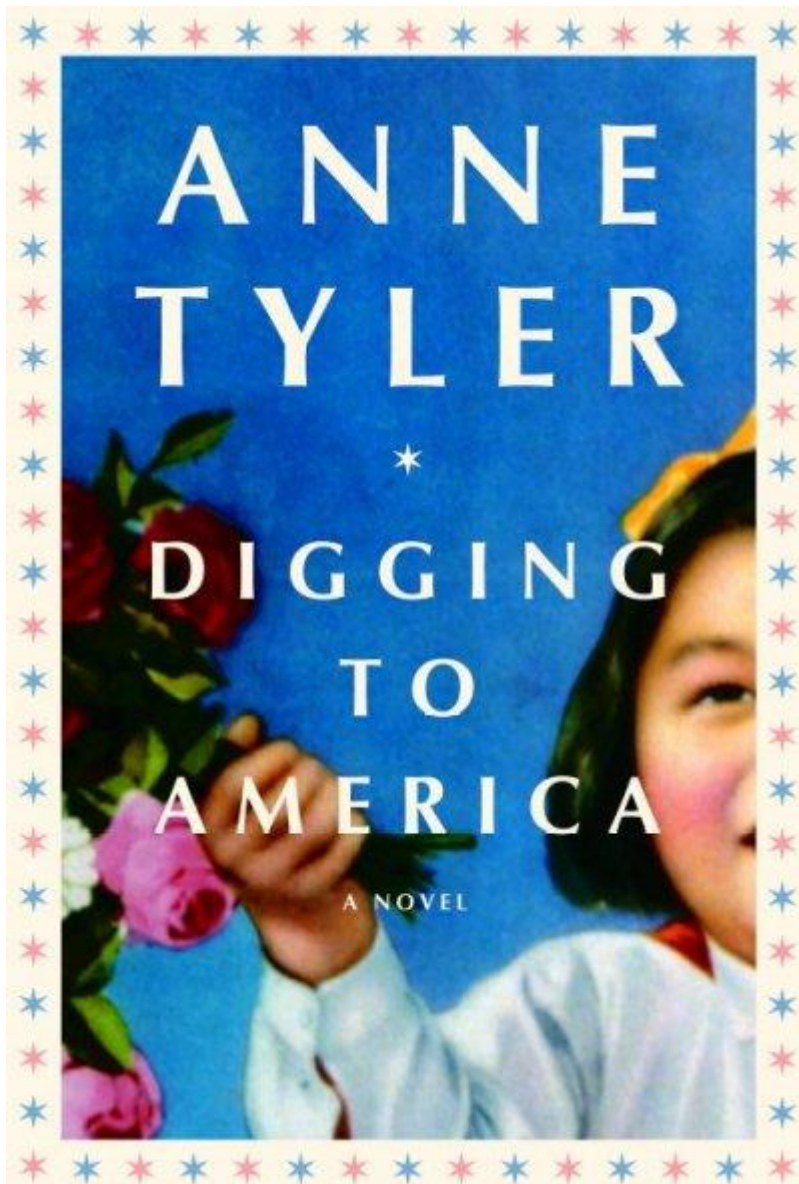


About the Book...



Two families awaiting the arrival of their adopted infant daughters from Korea meet at the airport. The families lives become intertwined after the Donaldsons, a young American couple invite the Yazdan's, Maryam, her son and his Iranian American wife to an arrival party, which becomes an annual event. Maryam, who came to this country thirty-five years earlier, feels her values threatened when she is courted by a newly widowed Donaldson. A penetrating light on the American way as seen from two perspectives, those who are born here and those who are still struggling to fit in.

Author biography (from Literature Resource Center)

Tyler was born on October 25, 1941, in Minneapolis, Minnesota. Her parents were members of the Society of Friends and long-time activists in liberal causes. Tyler lived her childhood years in various communes in the Midwest and the South with her parents and three younger brothers. As a young child, she was educated at these communes, and at the age of eleven, she began attending public school in Raleigh, North Carolina. The alienation she felt at this time resurfaces as a consistent theme in her later work. Tyler attended Duke University on scholarship, graduating Phi Beta Kappa at the age of nineteen, with a degree in Russian. While she was at Duke, she twice received the Anne Flexner Award for creative writing

and she began publishing her short stories in magazines. She then studied Russian at Columbia University for a year. In 1962 she worked as the Russian bibliographer in the Duke University Library. She married in 1963 and moved to Montreal so that her husband could continue his medical studies. While looking for a job in Montreal, Tyler wrote her first novel, *If Morning ever Comes* (1964). This was followed a year later by *The Tin Can Tree*, but her writing slowed while she raised her two daughters. In 1967 she moved with her family to Baltimore and began to focus on her writing full time. Starting with *The Clock Winder* (1972), Baltimore became the permanent setting for her fiction. Tyler has continued to write short stories and essays for periodicals. She has received several awards for her work, including an Award for Literature from the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters in 1977, a PEN/Faulkner Award for fiction in 1983, a National Book Critics Circle Award in 1985, and a Pulitzer Prize in 1988 for *Breathing Lessons* (1988)

Book Reviews:

Booklist /*Starred Review*/ The finest novelists of psychologically acute domesticity purposefully linger over the preparation of meals and the furnishing of rooms, and often turn special occasions into crucibles for conflicts and epiphanies. A master at these time-honored techniques, Tyler extends her reach in her seventeenth novel and creates two very different households that serve as microcosms for twenty-first-century American society. The two families converge at the Baltimore airport, each nervously anticipating the arrival of an adopted Korean baby girl. Bitsy and Brad Donaldson appear to be stereotypical white middle-class Americans. The Yazdans--Ziba, Sami, and Samis glamorous, long-widowed mother, Maryam--are Iranian Americans. Hoping that the families will stay in touch so that their daughters can grow up together, Bitsy invents Arrival Day, an annual celebration that grows increasingly elaborate each year. Ultimately, these amusingly awkward and contentious events become the gauge of their lives. Each of Tylers endearing characters is authentically rendered, but Jin-Ho and Susan, the two diametrically opposed young girls, are standouts, as is Maryam. As the novels reigning consciousness, she reveals what it feels like to be viewed as exotic or foreign in America before and after 9/11, and how one can become detrimentally attached to the role of outsider. Handling time with a light touch, Tyler creates many blissful moments of high emotion and keen humor while broaching hard truths about cultural differences, communication breakdowns, and family configurations. This deeply human tale of valiantly improvised lives is one of Tylers best. -- Donna Seaman (Reviewed 02-15-2006) (*Booklist*, vol 102, number 12, p7)

Publishers Weekly: Tyler (*Breathing Lessons*) encompasses the collision of cultures without losing her sharp focus on the daily dramas of modern family life in her 17th novel. When Bitsy and Brad Donaldson and Sami and Ziba Yazdan both adopt Korean infant girls, their chance encounter at the Baltimore airport the day their daughters arrive marks the start of a long, intense if sometimes awkward friendship. Sami's mother, Maryam Yazdan, who carefully preserves her exotic "outsiderness" despite having emigrated from Iran almost 40 years earlier, is

frequently perplexed by her son and daughter-in-law's ongoing relationship with the loud, opinionated, unapologetically American Donaldsons. When Bitsy's recently widowed father, Dave, endearingly falls in love with Maryam, she must come to terms with what it means to be part of a culture and a country. Stretching from the babies' arrival in 1997 until 2004, the novel is punctuated by each year's Arrival Party, a tradition manufactured and comically upheld by Bitsy; the annual festivities gradually reveal the families' evolving connections. Though the novel's perspective shifts among characters, Maryam is at the narrative and emotional heart of the touching, humorous story, as she reluctantly realizes that there may be a place in her heart for new friends, new loves and her new country after all. (May 9) --Staff (Reviewed February 27, 2006)

Library Journal: /* Starred Review */ The author's 17th novel exemplifies her skill at depicting seemingly quiet and unremarkable lives with sympathy and humor. Set in Tyler's beloved Baltimore, with some side excursions into the Washington, DC, area, the story concentrates on two middle-class couples who meet when their adopted Korean daughters arrive on the same flight from Asia. At first the new parents appear to have little in common other than the infants. The Donaldsons, who have waited many years for a child, personify stereotypical American white-bread suburbia, while the younger Yazdans are linked to a large and lively Iranian immigrant community. As years pass and the annual multicultural ???arrival party??? for the little girls becomes a shared tradition, the families and their sometimes eccentric relatives become ever more closely linked. Several perspectives spotlight the various characters' small misunderstandings, larger hurts, and shared moments of warmth, especially those between dignified grandmother Maryam Yazdan and a recently widowed member of the Donaldson clan, whose brief romance threatens the established web of relationships. A touching, well-crafted tale of friendship, families, and what it means to be an American. Recommended for all fiction collections --Starr E. Smith (Reviewed April 1, 2006)

Kirkus: The veteran novelist (*The Amateur Marriage*, 2004, etc.) extends her range without losing her essence in this tale of two families drawn together by their adopted daughters despite the friction created by their very different personalities and ethnicities.

On Aug. 15, 1997, two baby girls arrive at the Baltimore airport from Korea. Jin-Ho is swept into the exuberant arms of Bitsy and Brad Dickinson-Donaldson, who are throwing "what looked like a gigantic baby shower" in the waiting room with their extended family. Sooki is quietly handed over to the Yazdans—Sami and his wife, Ziba, accompanied by his mother, Iranian immigrant Maryam—who rename her Susan. Wanting to connect Jin-Ho with another Korean child, outgoing Bitsy pulls the Yazdans into her family's orbit and establishes the annual tradition of celebrating the girls' Arrival Day. The two couples become close, especially Bitsy and Ziba, but Maryam is dubious about these brash Americans, with their slightly tactless self-assurance and intrusive questions about Iranian traditions. The ensuing culture clash enriches Tyler's narrative without diminishing her skills as an engaging

storyteller and delicate analyst of personality. She examines the insecurities underneath Bitsy's overbearing manner, American-born Sami's amused condescension toward both his natal home and the land of his ancestors and a host of other complex aspects of her well-developed characters, including Ziba's nouveau-riche parents and Bitsy's easygoing father, Dave. Maryam is the novel's central figure: a teenaged immigrant, widowed before she was 40, who has never felt quite at home anywhere and maintains a critical distance from Americans and Iranians alike. Only Dave breaches her defenses. After his beloved wife's death—Tyler's portrait of his grieving is sensitive and touching—he unabashedly declares his need for Maryam, who reciprocates and then panics. Readers will hope that these flawed, lovable people will find happiness, but they won't be sure until the final page, so deftly has the author balanced the forces that keep us apart against those that bring us together.

Vintage Tyler, with enough fresh, new touches to earn her the next generation of fans. (Kirkus Reviews, March 1, 2006)

Discussion questions

(<http://www.randomhouse.com/catalog/display.pperl?isbn=9780345492340&view=rg>)

1. In calling their baby Susan, the Yazdans "chose a name that resembled the name she had come with, Sooki, and also it was a comfortable sound for Iranians to pronounce" (p. 10). The Donald-sons keep their baby's Korean name, Jin-Ho. What is the significance of these choices, both within the context of the novel and in the context of adoption in general? Is it important for an adoptive family to give children from another country or ethnic group a sense of their heritage? What insights does Ziba and Bitsy's fractious disagreement about "Americanization" (p. 46) offer into this question?
2. Right from the start, Maryam feels a deep connection with Susan—"something around the eyes, some way of looking at things, some onlooker's look: that was what they shared. Neither one of them quite belonged" (p. 13). Does Maryam's pleasure in bonding with Susan hint at needs or emotions that she is unable or unwilling to acknowledge? To what extent does her insistence that she is "still and forever a guest, on her very best behavior" (p. 15) serve as a convenient excuse for remaining aloof from other people?
3. What aspects of her heritage does Maryam value most and why? Why is she so unsettled by her visit to Iran and her reactions to Iranians in the country (p. 39)? Why is she annoyed when her cousin's American husband sprinkles bits of Farsi into his conversation (p. 147)? Why has she raised Sami to be "more American than the Americans" (p. 83), even as she clings to her otherness?
4. Does Maryam's behavior show that she feels not only estranged from American society but also in some way superior to it? What specific incidents and conversations bring this aspect of her personality to light?

5. In addition to being a wonderfully amusing vignette, what is the import of Sami's "performance piece" (pp. 80–81)? Why does Tyler use humor and mockery to convey a serious point about Americans and how they appear to immigrants? Does the fact that Sami is American-born and -raised make his criticisms more credible (and perhaps more acceptable) than they would be if a newcomer to the country expressed them?

6. How does Maryam differ from Ziba's parents and her cousin Farah, the other Iranian immigrants depicted in the novel? What factors, both practical and psychological, influence the characters' desire and ability to make a place for themselves in American society? What do these varying portraits show about the process of assimilation? Are there inherent contradictions between accepting the culture of an adopted homeland and retaining one's ethnic identity?

7. How do Ziba and Betsy differ as women? As mothers? Which woman is more sympathetically drawn? How does Tyler use both negative and positive attributes to bring each woman to life? How do the women's individual approaches to motherhood influence the way they regard and evaluate each other? Is Ziba overly susceptible to Bitsy's criticism and suggestions? Does her friendship with Ziba, as well as her frequent encounters with Maryam, affect Bitsy's beliefs or behavior? Does the relationship between Ziba and Bitsy change over the course of the book? How do the portraits of Sami and Brad compare to those of their wives? Are their personalities as richly described? Do they play parallel roles within their families? Is their behavior in relation to their children and wives a reflection of their personalities and the nature of their marriages, or of cultural patterns, expectations, and values?

8. Does the romance between Dave and Maryam unfold in a realistic way? In addition to Dave's moving reaction to Connie's death, what other events or conversations show that he contains a depth and a self-awareness that Maryam and the others seem oblivious to?

9. What does Maryam's description of her courtship and marriage to Sami's father. (pp. 155–60) add to our image of her? Why has she chosen to keep the story to herself, not even sharing it with Sami?

10. Were you surprised by Maryam's reaction to Dave's proposal (pp. 211–14)? What does her conversation with Sami and Ziba reveal about her difficulties in reconciling her prejudices about Americans and her affection for Dave? In what ways do her protests also bring to light her ambivalent feelings about who she is and what she is willing to give up at this stage of her life? Why do you think Maryam makes the decision she does at the end of the book?

11. To what extent does *Digging to America* echo the themes and concerns Tyler explores in her previous novels? Do Tyler's views on marriage and family here differ in significant ways from those presented in her earlier works? How does *Digging to*

America compare to other books you have read that portray women trying to establish an identity apart from what is expected—or demanded— of them?

(<http://www.randomhouse.com/catalog/display.pperl?isbn=9780345492340&view=rg>)

Read Alikes (from *NoveList*)

Practical Magic by Alice Hoffman (1995)

The Amateur Marriage by Anne Tyler (2004)

The Ponder Heart by Eudora Welty. (1954)

Things Invisible to See by Nancy Willard. (1984)

A Virtuous Woman by Kaye Gibbons (1989)

The Love Wife by Gish Jen (2004)

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