

Review of *The Dutch House* by Ann Patchett
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Abstract

The article reviews Ann Patchett's novel "The Dutch House"

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Ann Patchett's eighth novel, *The Dutch House*, published in September 2019, has been generally acclaimed as one more literary achievement of the American author, previously a winner of several awards, such as the PEN/ Faulkner Award, The Orange Prize for Fiction (U.K.) and The Book Sense Book of the Year Award. The audio edition of the novel, narrated by Tom Hanks, has only added to its success.

A 2020 Pulitzer Prize Finalist, *The Dutch House* is a multigenerational story of the Conroy family spanning a period of, roughly, fifty years – with occasional flashbacks to the life story of another family, the VanHoebeeks, unfolding over a few previous decades. What the two families have in common is – apart from being, at different points in time, the occupants of the opulent building located in Elkins Park, a Philadelphia suburb not far from New York city – the experience of loss, understood in various senses of the word.

Ann Patchett is a novelist who has chosen to explore the ever-changing dynamics of family life over time, with its inevitable twists and turns, as well as its moments of fateful crisis as recollected by a first person (and therefore unreliable) narrator, Daniel, the son of the Conroy family. The story line is easy to follow (in spite of the narrative's continuous back and forth movement) and, from a certain point onwards, quite predictable, but the plot is not as easy to "read", as most of the characters' motivations are complex, revealed to the narrator himself decades after their actions take place, and disclosed to the reader little by little, after many narrative detours.

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Having been injured in a parachute jump during the Second World War, Cyril Conroy, a hard-up but resourceful young man of Irish descent, accidentally receives a tip about a good investment opportunity while convalescing in a French hospital, and acts on it when he returns home – a move that turns out to be life-changing for him and his family. Relying on his newfound business acumen, he continues to buy and sell land for a profit, and that is how in 1946, after a series of good transactions, he manages to purchase a sumptuous mansion, The Dutch House, so named for the ethnic origin of its initial owners, the VanHoebeeks – a family of once-prosperous entrepreneurs in the tobacco industry whose company goes bankrupt during the Great Depression and whose property eventually goes into foreclosure after the Second World War. Cyril's lavish acquisition, meant as a surprise for his wife Elna, actually leads to the gradual disintegration of the family. Elna is a simple woman with an inclination towards monastic austerity – thwarted very early in her youth as she is pulled out of the convent by Cyril, her future husband. With a heart for helping the poor, she feels out of place in a luxurious house, surrounded by its previous owners' rich possessions, as well as by servants doing everything for her. She decides to leave her husband, her three-year old son Danny and her ten-year-old daughter Maeve and go to India to pursue what she believes to be her true calling (working for the poor), reawakened by a magazine article about Mother Teresa. The trauma caused by the loss of their mother is experienced to different degrees by Danny (who can hardly remember his mother) and Maeve (who is heartbroken and falls seriously ill with insulin-dependent diabetes, a restrictive condition that does not, however, stop her from assuming a maternal role and watching over her brother for the rest of her life).

When Cyril suddenly and prematurely dies, his second wife, Andrea, who has cunningly taken measures to become his sole heiress, behaves like a typical stepmother, turning Danny and Maeve out of the house. This new trauma of losing their home further strengthens the bond between brother and sister, who end up sharing Maeve's modest apartment. Despite the time and effort invested in studying towards a medical degree and completing his medical training just to please his sister, Danny decides to follow his childhood dream of walking in his father's footsteps. Unlike Maeve, who is marked for life by the loss of her mother (she chooses to remain single, settles for an obscure clerical job that is, as Danny notes, "below" her – a brilliant graduate of mathematics – and

dedicates herself to giving moral and practical support to her brother), Danny marries his girlfriend Celeste, and becomes a prosperous businessman, showing the same flair for business as his father before him.

While Maeve is in hospital after a heart attack, Elna, the “prodigal mother” reappears out of nowhere, “like an Angel of Death” (p. 261), re-opening old wounds and wreaking havoc in the lives of her children, after an absence of forty-two years. At her insistence, Danny and Maeve accompany her on a visit to the Dutch House, where they find Andrea extremely changed in her old age and suffering from a mental disease. Elna’s decision to do “penitence” for her past mistakes by taking care of Andrea comes as an emotional shock to Maeve, who dies shortly afterwards.

The last chapter of the novel, bringing about a change of narrative rhythm, offers an account of events that happen over a period of several years: Danny’s divorce, his reconciliation with his mother (a process begun earlier, at Maeve’s request, but completed as he spends more time visiting her and Andrea at the Dutch House), and finally a more serene twist in the tale as Danny’s recollections take one more leap forward in time. After Andrea’s death, Danny’s daughter, May, already a successful actress, buys the house, which is thus returned to its rightful owners. The faster pace of the narrative in the final chapter of the novel is justified by Danny’s statement that the story of his sister Maeve “was the only one [he] was ever meant to tell” (p. 324).

The Dutch House is both a reinterpretation of the classic rags-to-riches story, and a meditation on the failure of the American Dream. One of its characters summarizes the changing fortunes of the Conroy family as “shirtsleeves to shirtsleeves in three generations” (p. 102), meaning that one generation makes money, the next generation spends it, and the third generation has to work hard again to rebuild their fortune – although the making and spending of money actually happen during the lifetime of only one generation. The VanHoebeeks, the original owners of the Dutch House, also make and lose their fortune in the course of one generation only, since their three sons do not live long enough to be able to rebuild it.

Danny and Maeve’s predicament, continuously emphasized throughout the novel by a series of literary references – Brothers Grimm’s *Hänsel and Gretel*, Frances Hodgson Burnett’s children’s novel and play *The Little Princess*, Henry James’s novella *The Turn of the Screw* (about children abandoned by their parents, orphans experiencing hardship from

an early age, all against a grim, dark, almost “gothic” background of cruelty, mystery and uncertainty) – has prompted the frequent labelling of the novel as a “dark fairy tale”. As the narrator himself notes, Elna’s leaving home ushers in “the worst part of a fairy tale” (p. 30) in the life of the Conroys. The comparison with the fairy-tale world does not go far beyond superficial similarities in story-line, though. Unlike the “flat”, archetypal fairy-tale characters (the wicked stepmother/ witch, the doting daughter, the cruel dragon, etc.), the novel’s characters are transformed by the life experiences they go through. They keep revealing new, unexpected facets of themselves – as illustrated by Danny’s decision to forgive his mother, after Maeve’s death, or by his sense of being, “at last” himself (p. 167), true to himself, no longer trying to shape his life according to other people’s standards, or to make it fit other people’s agendas, but following his own passion as he clinches his first business deal. Celeste’s evolution from a clingy, submissive wife (whose idea of a happy life is that of marrying a doctor to maintain and consolidate her middle-class status) to a woman who is finally ready to put an end to a marriage that no longer fulfils her, is also surprising, and so is Maeve’s transformation from a kind, generous little girl into a spiteful woman bearing a relentless grudge against her “usurping” stepmother and, for a time, even against her innocent stepsisters. Interestingly, the novel’s characters do not seem as much marked by the rebellious spirit of the age (the turbulent 1960s) as they are by their family history and inner trauma.

The Dutch House, a “character” in its own right at the very centre of the novel, is a modern equivalent of a fairy-tale castle, as indicated by the similarity noticed by the narrator between its interior and the magnificent set of a fairy-tale ballet show – *The Nutcracker*, based on E.T.A. Hoffmann’s fairy tale. It is also the only “character” that remains untouched by the passing of time, as the siblings can notice on the day they revisit it together with their mother, after thirty years. The spectacular mansion, built by the VanHoebeeks in the early 1920s, a decadent age of glamour and hedonistic excess, is a real work of art: a combination of architectural splendour and opulent interior design – with its gilt drawing-room ceiling, spacious ball-room, marble floors, marble-topped tables, rich chandeliers, Delft mantels, oil paintings, and wide stairs.

In addition to its material worth, the house has a twofold symbolic value, partly acknowledged by Danny, the narrator. Firstly, it stands for the aesthetic ideal of someone who – like his father – has struck it rich and

suddenly dreams of a fairy-tale life for himself and his family, only to later find out that his idea of domestic bliss cannot quite materialize as wealth alone, and especially the shock of sudden wealth (in the absence of love and shared values) cannot guarantee anyone's happiness. Closely related to this, the house, along with everything that happens inside it, may symbolize the failure of the American Dream of the self-made man, the anxiety of work and the tragic struggle to rise above hardship and achieve material success at the expense of love, parental care and overall inner balance.

Secondly, it is a representation of a childhood trauma (the loss of Danny and Maeve's parents, as well as Maeve's emotional suffering leading to serious chronic disease). The Dutch House is a silent witness to the two very different family dramas, providing a sharp contrast between its monumental stability and the mutability of human fate, between visible luxury and hidden inner sorrow, between the apparent transparency ensured by its spectacularly huge windows and glass doors laying the inside of the house open to view, on the one hand, and the secrets and emotions it keeps hidden, or shrouded in mystery, on the other.

Since the house is so closely associated, in the minds of both Maeve and Danny, with a hurtful past they cannot let go of, the brother and sister feel compelled to return there again and again, sit in the car parked in front of it, watch it from a distance, and try to exorcise their demons by talking about past events and present concerns without ever directly referring to their real loss. Here is how Danny describes these ritual visits to the Dutch House, which bring them no joy, no wistful memories, but a continuous re-enactment of their trauma, which has nothing to do with material loss:

"like swallows, like salmon, we were the helpless captives of our migratory patterns. We pretended that what we had lost was the house, not our mother, not our father. We pretended that what we had lost had been taken from us by the person who still lived inside." (p. 74)

To both of them, the past means emotional loss obsessively remembered with more or less accuracy. One of the topics of their talks while sitting in Maeve's car is the way past events are viewed in retrospect, with all the inevitable distortions and changes in perspective brought about by the passing of time.

Danny and Maeve's obsessive concern is with trying to make sense of an ever-mystifying past, as the narrator notes at one point: "I'm trying to

do the thing that you're always doing, I'm decoding the past" (p. 148). Celeste reproaches Danny and Maeve with never getting "tired of reminiscing" (p. 237).

Ann Patchett is an author whose prose works by understatement, or by stating partial truths – a type of restraint that has the opposite effect of adding poignancy to ideas and emotions. The reader "accidentally" finds out about Maeve's childhood love for the young artist who painted her portrait when she was just ten years old, a little before her mother's departure and the end of her happy childhood. In the same way, the reader is left to wonder about the nature of the relationship between Maeve and her employer, Mr. Otterson, a respectable family man who, at the same time, stands by her and visits her while she is in hospital, and is finally overwhelmed with emotion during her funeral. Certain little details in the narrative, only mentioned "in passing", may also raise questions about the special bond between Lawyer Gooch (the family lawyer) and Maeve. Danny's own comment on Maeve's death, and his reminiscences of her funeral (to which he only dedicates a six-line chapter of subdued emotion conveyed with a minimum of "literary" means) are also low-key (in keeping with Danny's personality), which paradoxically makes them all the more effective. The very laconic references to notable historical events or specific periods such as WWI, the prosperous 1920s (the Roaring Twenties, the Jazz Age) followed by the poverty and disenchantment brought about by the Great Depression, WWII, the turbulent 1960s, serve not only to contextualize the two family dramas, but also to add – by contrast – more significance to the characters' actions.

Despite the apparently limited scope of domestic drama playing out before the reader's eyes, and in the absence of any apparent intention to reach beyond the ordinary and the familiar, the novel brings to the fore universal human concerns and emotions: the devastating effects of the passing of time, human frailty and human resilience, the way the past leaves its indelible mark on people's lives, the importance of love, empathy and forgiveness, the gift of self-reliance, the joy of following one's chosen path in life, the idea of parental responsibility, and the overarching need for letting go of a burdening past to create the mental space for healing and expansion.

The novel transcends the here and the now to the extent to which it is also about "reading" and "readers", in both the narrow and the broader sense of the words. The protagonists (Danny and Maeve), as well as the

more episodic characters (the Conroy family cook and housekeeper, the children's nanny – Sandy, Jocelyn and Fluffy) embark upon the adventure of “reading” the past, viewing it through the distorting lens of the present. Elna's act of abandoning her family is interpreted differently by each “reader”: either as utter irresponsibility or as answering a higher calling. Reading itself turns out to be a source of either illumination or self-delusion. “Reading” the opulent set of the *Nutcracker* gives Danny an insight into what it is to find oneself suddenly rich and willing to invest in a fairy-tale space as a guarantee for a happy life, while blindly ignoring the emotional side of life. Elna's reading of the magazine article about Mother Teresa makes her seek to do good in a far-off part of the world while being oblivious to the numberless opportunities near at hand for doing good.

The novel is finally about story-telling: most of its characters have their own stories to tell, each of them contributing a piece to solving the family drama puzzle, and keeping the reader enthralled and engaged from beginning to end.