**Digging to America**  
*Anne Tyler, 2006*  
*Knopf Publishing*  
*277 pp.*

**In Brief**  
Anne Tyler's richest, most deeply searching novel—a story about what it is to be an American, and about Iranian-born Maryam Yazdan, who, after 35 years in this country, must finally come to terms with her "outsiderness." Two families, who would otherwise never have come together, meet by chance at the Baltimore airport—the Donaldsons, a very American couple, and the Yazdans, Maryam's fully assimilated son and his attractive Iranian wife. Each couple is awaiting the arrival of an adopted infant daughter from Korea. After the instant babies from distant Asia are delivered, Bitsy Donaldson impulsively invites the Yazdans to celebrate: an "arrival party" that from then on is repeated every year as the two families become more and more deeply intertwined. Even Maryam is drawn in—up to a point. When she finds herself being courted by Bitsy Donaldson's recently widowed father, all the values she cherishes—her traditions, her privacy, her otherness—are suddenly threatened.

**About the Author**

- **Birth**—October 25, 1941  
- **Where**—Minneapolis, Minnesota, USA  
- **Education**—B.A., Duke University  
- **Awards**—Pulitzer Prize, 1989; National Book Critics Circle Award, 1986; PEN/Faulkner Award, 1983  
- **Currently**—lives in Baltimore, Maryland

Anne Tyler was born in Minneapolis, Minnesota, in 1941 and grew up in Raleigh, North Carolina. This is her 17th novel. Her 11th, *Breathing Lessons*, was awarded the Pulitzer Prize in 1988. A member of the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters, she lives in Baltimore, Maryland.

Anne Tyler has had a very active imagination all her life. When she was a young girl, she would spend an hour or two after being put to bed every night fantasizing that she was a doctor. She imagined conversations with patients, and pictured their lives as she did so, considering both their illnesses and the intricacies of their backgrounds. She constructed little mental plays around these characters that she would whisper to herself in the dark—much to the chagrin of her brother, with whom she shared a room. "[H]e used to call out to our parents, 'Anne's whispering again!'" she once told Barnes & Noble.com. As much as she may have vexed her brother, she also believes that these fantasies helped her to develop into the beloved, award-winning novelist she is today.

Tyler's work is characterized by a meticulous attention to detail, a genuine love of her characters, and a quirky sense of humor. Her public persona is characterized by its own quirks, as well. She refuses to grant face-to-face interviews. She has never publicly read from any of her books. She does not do book signings or tours. All of this has lent a certain mystique to her novels, although Tyler has said that her reluctance to become a public figure status is actually the result of simple shyness, not to mention her desire for her writing to speak for itself. Fortunately, Anne Tyler's work speaks with a clear, fully-realized voice that does not require unnecessary elucidation by the writer.

Tyler published her first novel *If Morning Ever Comes* in 1964, and that singular voice was already in place. This astute debut that tracks the self-realization of a young man named Ben Joe Hawkins displayed Tyler's characteristic wit and gentle eccentricity right off the bat. *Harper's* declared the novel "a triumph," and Tyler was on her way to creating an impressive catalog of novels chronicling the every day hopes, fears, dreams, failures, and victories of small-town Americans. Having come of age, herself, in rural North Carolina, Tyler had particular insight into the lives of her characters. Each novel was a little shimmering gem, winning her a devoted following and public accolades that more than compensated for her refusal to appear in public. Her novel *Earthly Possessions*, the story of a housewife who is taken hostage by a young man during a bank robbery, was released the same year she won an award for "literary excellence and promise of important work to come" from the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters. The book also went on to become a television movie starring Susan Sarandon and Stephen Dorff in 1999.
However, the most well-known adaptation of one of Tyler's novels arrived more than a decade earlier when *The Accidental Tourist* was made into an Academy Award winning film starring Geena Davis and William Hurt. Consequently, *The Accidental Tourist* is viewed by some as Tyler's signature novel, covering many of the writer's favorite themes: the push and pull of marriage, the appearance of a romantic eccentric, personal tragedy, and the quest to escape from the drudgery of routine. *The Accidental Tourist* won the National Book Critics Circle Award and hit number one on *The New York Times* Bestseller list.

Three years later, Tyler received the Pulitzer Prize for *Breathing Lessons*, which further explored themes of marriage and self-examination. Despite having won the prestigious Pulitzer, Tyler still refused to allow herself to be drawn into the spotlight. Quietly, contemplatively, she chose to continue publishing a sequence of uniformly fine novels, including *Saint Maybe*, *Ladder of Years*, and *The Amateur Marriage*.

Anne Tyler's latest novel reexamines many of her chief obsessions, while also possibly drawing upon a personal triumph -- her marriage to Iranian psychiatrist and novelist Taghi Mohammad Modarressi -- and the tragedy of his death in 1997. *Digging to America* follows the relationship between two families, the Iranian Yazdans and the all-American Donaldsons, as they become closer and closer and affect each other deeper and deeper over a succession of years. *Digging to America* is arguably Tyler's deepest and most profound work to date. It also delivers more of her peculiar brand of humor, which will surely please her longtime fans, thrilled that she continues spinning tales with the trademark attention to character that has distinguished her stories ever since she was a little girl, whispering to herself in the dark. Tyler may have decided to remain in the dark and out of the public eye, but the stories she has to tell have shed more than their share of light on the lives of her readers.

**Book Club Discussion Questions**

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 Donaldsons 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. Compare and contrast Ziba and Bitsy. How do they 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?

8. 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 do cultural patterns, expectations, and values also play a part?

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

10. What does Maryam’s description of her courtship and marriage [pp. 155-160] add to our image of her? Why has she chosen to keep the story to herself, not even sharing it with Sami? 11. Discuss Maryam’s reaction to Dave’s proposal [pp. 211-214]. 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?

12. To what extent does Digging to America echo the themes and concerns Tyler explored 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?