



The Dutch House, by Ann Patchett
Reviewed by Cindy Kennedy, December 2019

Novelist Ann Patchett perhaps is best known for writing *Bel Canto*, her perennial fan favorite. *The Dutch House*, her eagerly anticipated latest book, is well worth the wait.

As the novel unfolds, Danny Conroy narrates the story of his family's attachment to a magnificent mansion known as the Dutch House. The stately home was so named because a Dutch family, the VanHoebeeks, had had it built in 1922. The Dutch House, set on several acres in Elkins Park, a north Philadelphia suburb, was the jewel of the county.

After World War II, however, the VanHoebeeks, having lost two sons in the war and falling on hard times, began to sell off the land. In 1951, they found a buyer willing to purchase the Dutch House with all its contents: Cyril Conroy, Danny's father. Cyril, a self-made real estate developer, who had grown up poor, became a wealthy man.

Now its new owner, Cyril brought his wife Elna and their children—three-year-old son Danny and preteen daughter Maeve—to visit the Dutch House for the first time. Elna, herself from humble origins, reacted with distain and was never comfortable living in the Dutch House. She ceded her children's care to their nanny Fluffy and the running of the manor house to housekeeper Sandy and Jocelyn, their cook.

While Elna despised the Dutch House, others were charmed by it. As Danny describes, "Seen from certain vantage points, the Dutch House appeared to float several inches above the hill it sat on. The panes of glass that surrounded the glass front doors were as big as storefront windows.... Not only could you see into the Dutch House, you could see straight through it....You could let your eye go through the front doors, across the long marble floor of the foyer, through the observatory, and catch sight of the lilacs waving obliviously in the garden behind the house."

When Danny is fifteen, the Conroy family's circumstances change, and he and his sister Maeve are banished from the Dutch House. The loss of their childhood home has far-reaching consequences, impacting their careers and relationships. Years later, they attempt to make sense of their life choices. "Do you think it's possible to ever see the past as it actually was?" Danny asks his sister. "We overlay the present onto the past. We look back through the lens of what we know now."

The Dutch House is the one character that remains constant throughout the book. "The driveway wasn't as long as I remembered," Danny recalls on a later visit, "but the house seemed exactly the same: sun-lit, flower-decked, gleaming.... The world was full of bigger houses, grander and more ridiculous houses, but none were so beautiful."