

French Braid, by Anne Tyler

Reviewed by Cindy Kennedy

When it comes to depicting complicated family relationships, Pulitzer Prize winning novelist Anne Tyler has few equals. *French Braid*, her latest book set in Baltimore, is vintage Anne Tyler, with intriguing characters and a subtle plot.

In essence, *French Braid* is a multigenerational saga centered on the Garrett family. The novel begins in 2010 at the Philadelphia train station. Graduate students Serena and her boyfriend James are returning to Baltimore after a visit to his parents' home. Serena was struck by the closeness and warmth James's siblings and parents had exhibited in contrast to her own distant and chilly family.

While they are waiting for their train, Serena spots a young man who resembles her cousin Nicholas Garrett, whom she hasn't seen in years. The fellow indeed turns out to be Nicholas, the son of Serena's Uncle David. Serena and Nicholas have an awkward conversation before the two cousins catch their trains. "I have to say," James later tells Serena, "You two give a whole new meaning to the phrase 'once removed.'"

In the second chapter, the novel's narrative abruptly reverts to the summer of 1959, well before Serena and Nicholas would be born. Robin and Mercy Garrett (the cousins' grandparents) leased a rustic lakeside cabin. Robin managed the family plumbing supply business, and he reluctantly agreed to go on a vacation with his wife Mercy and their three kids. Their seven-year-old son David was excited about the trip. Alice and Lily, their teenage daughters, however, were past the age where traveling with family meant fun.

During the vacation, each family member seemed to go his or her own way. Mercy, an amateur painter, spent her time sketching with art supplies she had brought along, leaving Alice, the elder daughter, to run the household and prepare the meals. Fifteen-year-old Lily became involved in a budding summer romance. David was content to build sandcastles, but Robin was insistent that the boy learn how to swim.

Each ensuing chapter of *French Braid* advances the storyline ten or so years. Alice, Lily, and David grow up and have families of their own. However, the events of the Garretts' 1959 lakeside vacation continued to cast a long shadow on the family's strained relationships.

The novel's title is a metaphor comparing the undoing of a French braid with the unraveling of fractious family issues. "That's how families work," David tells his wife in the book's final chapter. "You think you're free of them, but you're never really free; the ripples are crimped forever."

(Note: *French Braid* is part of the Heritage Hills Library and Somers Library collections. For a list of new books at the Heritage Hills Library, please see page 8.)