

***Tom Lake*, by Ann Patchett**

Reviewed by Cindy Kennedy

This past year, several fiction writers have infused their novels with characters and storylines of classic works. Barbara Kingsolver, for example, won a 2023 Pulitzer Prize for *Demon Copperhead*, a modern-day version of Charles Dickens' iconic *David Copperfield*. *Tom Lake*, Ann Patchett's latest novel, is a nod to *The Cherry Orchard*, Russian playwright Anton Chekhov's most famous drama.

Set in a Michigan cherry orchard, *Tom Lake* begins in early 2020, just as the global pandemic was emerging. Lara and Joe, owners of the aptly named Three Sisters Orchard, anticipate a difficult year: "It was an anxious spring for the world, though from our kitchen window it played out just as every spring in northern Michigan; wet and rainy and cold followed by a late heavy snow, a sudden warm spell, and the spectacle of trees in bloom."

The couple's three 20something daughters return to the orchard to help their parents through the crisis. Emily, the oldest, is engaged to a local farmer and she doesn't mind "being trapped with my family on an orchard while the world goes up in flames." Middle daughter Maisie, studying to be a veterinarian, uses her skills to help ranchers. When Nell, the youngest sister, is summoned home from college, she chafes at the isolation on the orchard.

With few seasonal laborers available during the shutdown, the five family members work long hours at their cherry orchard. To pass the time, the three sisters implore their mother Lara to tell them about her early romance with the celebrity actor Peter Duke before he made it big in Hollywood.

Lara had starred in high school and college theater productions of Thornton Wilder's *Our Town*, perfecting the lead role of Emily Webb. In 1988, when she was 24, the budding actress was offered the part of Emily in a summer stock production of *Our Town* at Tom Lake, a regional theater in Michigan. Among the performers at Tom Lake was Peter Duke, a charismatic and handsome up-and-coming actor. Lara agrees to tell her daughters segments of her relationship with Duke, "knowing full well that the parts they're waiting to hear are the parts I'm never going to tell them." Intrigued, the three sisters urge their mother to reveal more.

Tom Lake, like Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard*, is brimming with reflective dialogues between its characters. Acclaimed actress Meryl Streep, who voiced the *Tom Lake* audio book, is the perfect choice to read a novel that's ripe for a theatrical presentation.