



## Back When We Were Grownups

*Anne Tyler*

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The latest #1 New York Times bestseller by the Pulitzer Prize-winning author of *The Accidental Tourist* is now the subject of a Hallmark Hall of Fame television film, set to air in November 2004 on CBS, starring Blythe Danner, Peter Fonda, and Faye Dunaway.

## **Back When We Were Grownups Details**

Date : Published October 26th 2004 by Ballantine Books (first published 2001)

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Author : Anne Tyler

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### Tina says

Where is this book going? I spent half the book trying to answer this question. I finally realized that this novel's central theme was based on the main characters never ending question in her head about what could have been if only (fill in the blank). It's about the choices we make and how we choose to live with them. How they define us.

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### Katherine Marple says

"Back When We Were Grown Ups" is my first Anne Tyler book. I received it as a gift from my sister and I immediately hated the cover. However, I opened up the book and was drawn into the character of Rebecca almost immediately. She is such a well-crafted creation. She is in her mid fifties, a widow for the past 30 years and she feels at odds against who she was long ago, and who she has become. She feels like a shadow of her former self. She feels unimportant, like a cornerstone in the family- yet a stone nonetheless.

In the beginning, the names of the children were a little off-putting (Jeep, Min Foo, Patch, Troy, NoNo, Biddy, etc) but by the end of the story, I felt like I knew them and loved them anyway. Biddy is an emotional wreck of a daughter, but when needed she reacts the way that is expected. Patch is just a fight waiting to happen, but she has such passion. NoNo is meek and quiet, but once put upon, she turns into a blindly foolish tyrant. Min Foo is a free spirit, with three children by three different men and different personalities for each former husband. But, in the end, all four daughters are oblivious to the question on Rebecca's forehead. They are so caught up in their own world's, so used to Rebecca "being there", that when she starts to question her existence, they don't even notice.

Rebecca contacts her old boyfriend from high school, Will, who meant so much to her back then, but whom she left in order to run away with a new guy nearly 13 years her senior, who already had 3 children. She was with Will (yet on a schedule of not being engaged) for years, but when she met her husband, Joe, she left Will and married Joe (and his boisterous family) within a few months. Now, that Joe is deceased since she was 26, she phones Will in a pit of nervousness and they meet again. Did she make the right decision to leave Will for Joe in such a rush? Do they have a chance of reconciling now that Joe is gone?

And what of this loud, hot tempered, yet loving family that she has been adopted into? Poppy (her late husband's elderly uncle) is endearing. The warmth that she shows when communicating with him, even though he has a hard time remembering anything and tends to repeat himself a lot, is so sweet.

What stopped me from giving this five stars? Rebecca's relationship with Joe's junior brother, Zeb. I was frustrated. I wanted to read more about those two.

Even though she is in her 50s, Rebecca finds that she still has much to learn. As we all do.

"Back When..." was a wonderful book. It was almost lyrical. It has it's funny moments, it's saddening

moments, and I breezed through it in only a few days (I've been in a reading slump for the past few months and this book dragged me out) It is lovely. My sister has not yet read this one, and I plan on sending it back to her so that she can see what she mistakenly gave away!

Great novel.

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### **Laura says**

I think the reason this book has received so many negative reviews is because Anne Tyler represents life in an uncomfortable way. There is no fancy adventure, just a woman trying to live day to day with a blended family and a family business that was not even her's to start with. I have seen the lead character Rebecca described as weak. I think that causes discomfort in some readers. Some people choose to read as an escape from the day to day, and then Anne Tyler manages to adeptly make us face how we can make choices in our life that bog us down. Rebecca is not a prototypical heroine, instead she's a woman who has to learn to love the life she has. In this day and age of drive thru convenience, we sometimes forget to be thankful for what we have--that's why I really enjoyed the moments between Rebecca and Poppy. Their relationship is basically symbolic of the entire theme--life happens...you make of it what you will, and you can still love something that was not your expectation. On the surface this may seem hum drum, but isn't that life? All stories cannot be adventures to far off lands. Some stories don't lead us that far away from home.

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### **Kristin says**

This is a beautiful book about a large crazy family that a woman doesn't feel a part of, but is. I don't know if I fell for it especially because I'm all the way here in Berlin so the idea of a messy family constantly stopping in to ask favors and for advice is welcome when a bit lonely and missing my own family or if it was the dream the main character has of being on a train with a beautiful son, the type that is scholarly and kind and a little unsociable and, or if it was my identification with her, a heavyish woman who was shy and restrained in her earlier years and then becomes someone she feels she's not, this merry jolly woman, until she finally realizes in the end that this is who she, in fact, is, but I found it to be comfortable and touching, whatever the reason. And that was an amazingly run-on sentence. Possibly my longest yet.

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### **Cynthia says**

Probably one of the most memorable openings, "Once upon a time, there was a woman who discovered she had turned into the wrong person," I've read in a long time. Yet I didn't feel the novel lived up to the full potential of this opening sentence. I kept expecting Rebecca to go through some life changes, to be happier in the end. A new job, interest, travel, friends, love, whatever...instead she just concentrates on love--her first boyfriend Will. But the novel doesn't even continue in this direction.

Rebecca had a lot of interesting thoughts and emotions but she never put that into any kind of action and that's what made her a boring character. A doormat to her daughters for babysitting, organizing parties/dinners, complaints and insults --I kept expecting Rebecca to at least throw one revolt against them or her children to thank her, smile at her, or at the very least give her some kind of loving, appreciative glance. And poor Will...so dull you almost felt sorry for him. And this may sound like a petty complaint--but the

names of all these characters are all confusing. I spent the first 50 pages going back and forth wondering who was who and how they were related to Rebecca.

To end on a good note, the author had great writing style and some of her characters were likable. Poppy, along with everyone else's reviews, was my favorite. The topics he'd come up with in the middle of conversation, his love for his dead wife, his ice cream store complaint, all of it kept me interested. And unlike most of the other characters, he showed Rebecca moments of appreciation.

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### **Erin says**

Rebecca Davitch, widowed and in her 50s, suddenly feels discontent with her life and her role as head of the eccentric Davitch clan. She has a daughter, three step-daughters, multiple grandchildren, a brother in law and a 99 year old uncle to tend to... not to mention her job running the family's event business. Rebecca wonders if she is actually happy or if she ought to change some elements of her life.

I absolutely hated this book and am stunned by some of the good reviews I see online. I kept on reading it (despite how painful that was) to see if it would get better and it never did. Rebecca is a weak, wishy-washy martyr of a female protagonist who complains a lot about her life but never really tried to figure any of it out beyond wondering if she married the right man 30 years ago. Also, the book is set in 1999, but it feels more like 1899 given how unempowered and unenlightened the women in the story are. Perhaps Rebecca would have been best going back to school or asserting even the tiniest bit of independence rather than sitting around catering to a family not of her choosing. Two thumbs way down from me.

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### **Jo says**

I can't figure out why I finished this book. It was actually depressing, and feels like such a waste of time now. I'd heard that Anne Tyler is a beautiful writer, and the book has a great opening line, "Once upon a time there was a woman who discovered she had turned into the wrong person." Recently, I've been liking books with 50ish female protagonists (since I'm a 50ish female, I guess), but nothing ever happens to or, really, in her. Also I didn't like the other characters much either. It's billed as the story of a woman (Rebecca) who fears she has lost her true self, and has the honesty to face herself and find herself. But does she? She doesn't do much besides almost hook up with her former college boyfriend who has so many red flags of stultifying restrictive wimpishness about him that you wonder why she wasted so much time with him. She did finally realize he wasn't for her then AGAIN dumped him without warning or giving him a reason (yick). Her family takes her for granted, doesn't respect her & she doesn't do anything to insist they do. She just kind of wafts flatly along. Bleah. So at the end she accepts herself. Good, I guess. But nothing improves. I kept expecting Rebecca to go through some life changes, to be happier in the end. Nothing happened. I should note that a few reviews have compared the book to Austen, which means I should have known better as I really don't like Austen either.

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### **Elizabeth (Alaska) says**

Although the term was never used, this is the story of a woman in a mid-life crisis. A widow for many years,

Rebecca "suddenly" found herself facing a life she had never anticipated. Frankly, I didn't understand this part. She wanted to go back to the high school/college boyfriend she had dumped to run off and marry someone else who actually excited her. The past she wanted to reclaim was only that relationship which didn't work when she was young. She didn't seem to be seeing what kind of life she would lead if she was able to reclaim it.

I would never want to be 20 again. What I thought I wanted when I was that age bears no resemblance to what I now think of as a satisfying life. Although when I was 53 (Rebecca's age), I might have wanted to make changes, going back to 20 wasn't remotely what I wanted. (35 maybe, but definitely not 20.)

So, while I enjoy Anne Tyler, this isn't going to become one of my favorites.

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### **ANGELA says**

I can see how some would think this book doesn't live up to its potential- but I think that's the whole point and they are missing the point, as well as Anne Tyler's genius. Anne Tyler purposefully captures the lives of people who seemingly may not live up to their potential- a lot of her themes are based on how in life things hardly ever turn out how we think they should- and that this is not necessarily bad or good it's just the way it is...I think the beauty of this book is that Rebecca doesn't go out and dye her hair red and move to Hawaii and meet a new handsome divorcee and begin a new career at 53....the beauty is she accepts her life- and stops wondering, hoping, wishing, that only "if" she had made other choices she would have been the person she was meant to be...that's a propitious notion in my opinion bc she IS the person she was meant to be and she IS who she IS...and in the end I think she finds peace with that and that is a beautiful thing- bc I think that's when someone can really start be happy....this is what I love Anne Tyler for...she makes you think....

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### **Mark says**

I have only read about three of Anne's books, but in each case, I ended up feeling that she had delved deeply into my heart with lessons about life, loss, love, courage and joy, while making it seem almost effortless. This novel is no exception. The story of a woman who fears she has lost her true self, only to discover that she has been living the life she deserved all along, is just wonderful.

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### **Chalet says**

Rebecca, the main character, tries to uncover where her real life diverged from the life she was meant to live. Six CDs later, I only wish that rather than taking up with her high school sweetheart, she'd instead torched the preciously named Open Arms for the insurance money and demanded that her ungrateful, self-absorbed children show her a little respect. There were hints of interesting storylines throughout, including some suggestion that Rebecca's late husband's car accident might have been a suicide. But these storylines don't go anywhere.

Reasons I disliked this book (and am beginning to dislike Tyler's work in general) :

--obnoxious characters with names like Jeep, Patch, and Ming Fu.

--characters discover personal truths that could be cross-stitched on a pillow for sale at a church bazaar.  
Spoiler alert: We don't have one true life, we live the life we are given.

The box for my audiobook says Anne Tyler won the Pulitzer for Breathing Lessons. Was that the one about the frazzled middle-aged matriarch of a boisterous Baltimore family?

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### **Anni says**

I thought I had read all of Anne Tyler's novels, but whilst waiting for her latest from the library, I came across this one which I don't remember ever reading before (though that's not an unknown occurrence these days).

All her novels are character driven and full of pitch-perfect dialogue – so much so, that they could just as well be written as plays. The plots may be considered inconsequential by those looking for an action-packed adventure, and they can sometimes teeter on the edge of hokey, but it's no denying Tyler's novels supply the feel-good factor and sense of identification with the situations described, which makes them so engaging and enjoyable. Once immersed in Tyler's fully-realised imaginary worldscapes, I never want to leave.

Treat yourself!

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### **Helene Jeppesen says**

This book was really good because it, once again, is one of those stories that Anne Tyler is best at writing. A story about a large family with lots of dynamic going on. In this specific family, 53-year-old Rebecca has started feeling out of place and she wonders what her life would've been like if she had chosen another path. This is a story about doubt and hope. Right from the beginning, I was screaming at Rebecca that she was romanticizing the past and forgetting about all the faults she found with it back in the days. She fell into this trap which I'm sure a lot of us fall into as we get older: Which is to only remember about the good things and forget about the past.

I really liked this story throughout and was only mildly disappointed at the ending which I didn't find came with any resolution for Rebecca. It was endearing to read about her family, though - especially Poppy! And once again I was fascinated with how Tyler manages to write about everyday life and worries in such an enchanting way - same way as always :)

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### **KAOS says**

why did i finish this? why do i do that to myself - finish books that have no chance of improving? i bought this because it was marked down to like \$5 and i have heard that anne tyler is a beautiful writer and i like the cover (trite, but i do). i didn't like the first 20 pages, so what compelled me to finish is beyond me, but i hated the characters, the characters' names (all cutesy nicknames like poppy, no no, bitsy, the non-chinese min foo, jeep, patch, etc), the protagonist, and how boring the plot, dialogue, and problems were. mid-50s woman feels bad that she broke up with her college sweetheart, reconnects with him, decides she made the right choice. she was both timid and obnoxious, made dumb decisions on a whim, and was pretty much the kind of person that all women dread that they will become some day. why was i supposed to give a shit about her?

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### **debra says**

3-4 \*s I enjoyed this audio. IMO, Anne Tyler is usually an effortless and expert storyteller. This title reminded me of Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant -in that off putting characters became endearing and "charming in their dysfunction." (don't know where I got that quote from, but I do know I am not the source).

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### **Maxwell says**

Anne Tyler's novels are always enjoyable to me, not because they are necessarily happy stories—because sometimes they are quite sad but in a true-to-life kind of way. But rather because her stories are real. I've said this before in reviews of her books, but she is so observant and is able to capture moments in her stories, whether between characters or just in one's head, that make me stop and think, "Oh wow, I've definitely thought that" or "That is totally something we would do!" I can picture her characters walking right off the page, and whether you like the characters or not, you can't deny that they are like people you know or can imagine being in your life. This story was no exception to all of that, and I loved Rebecca as a main character. Her authenticity and vulnerability was admirable, and she was a delight to read about.

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### **Rebecca Foster says**

This was my fifth Tyler novel, and falls smack in the middle for me in terms of how much I enjoyed it. I'm starting to get used to her patterns: the Baltimore setting (obviously); the combination of useless males and strong, eccentric females; the splitting and blending of families; the overall sense that everything will be alright even though there's often muted tragedy and/or being wronged in the characters' past.

Rebecca is in her fifties and has become the pillar of the large Davitch family, even though she only married into it six years before her husband's sudden death. The Davitches are always renting out their home for their party business, and Rebecca has over the years developed a joyous persona that she's not sure is really her true self. What would life have been like if she hadn't become a stepmother to Joe's three girls but instead married her college sweetheart, Will?

She gets in touch with him to find out, but this plot strand doesn't seem to go anywhere, and in the end it's unclear whether this character has actually changed or learned anything. I also found all the weird family nicknames difficult to get used to (plus "Min Foo" for a white girl with slanted eyes seems pretty insensitive). So, while this is funny and warm, and a cozy read in the best possible way, it didn't really stand out for me. There are many great individual lines, though...

"The old Rebecca would never have known the woman she saw in the mirror, with the hair like a heap of cornflakes and the ramshackle face."

"she thought what a clean, simple life she would have led if it weren't for love."

"Oh, nothing in this family ever flowed from start to finish without interruption. Their lives were a kind of crazy quilt of unrelated incidents"

"It struck her all at once that dealing with other human beings was an awful lot of work."

(says Rebecca's uncle-in-law) "There *is* no true life. Your true life is the one you end up with, whatever it may be. You just do the best you can with what you've got."

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## Melissa says

When I was in high school, I read a lot of Anne Tyler novels, and with "Back When We Were Grownups," I've rediscovered my love for Anne Tyler and her tender, insightful writing about everyday subject matter.

This book begins: "Once upon a time, there was a woman who discovered she had turned into the wrong person" (p. 3).

It's a beautifully written, heartwarming story about Rebecca Davitch, who broke up with her college boyfriend to marry an older, divorced man with three daughters. Now, in her 50s or 60s, Rebecca examines the life she chose and sees the good in it. An excellent, soul-searching, satisfying read.

Quotes that struck me:

1) "Distance was the key, here: the distant, alluring mystery woman whose edges had not been worn dull by the constant minor abrasions of daily contact" (p. 87).

2) Conversation between Rebecca and Will:

"'You broke my heart,' Will said ... there she was, magically transported to that starlit evening in 1960 when everything was poised to begin, and meanwhile he had leapt forward to the very end of the story." (p. 134)

3) "When she was handed her new grandson ... 'Look,' she told the children. 'He's saying, Who are YOU? What kind of people have I ended up with, here? How am I going to like living on this planet?' She hoped they didn't notice the ridiculous break in her voice." (p. 142)

4) "But apparently you grow to love whom you're handed." (p. 157)

5) "If this turned out to be Poppy's deathbed, heaven forbid, how strange that she should be standing beside it! Ninety-nine years ago, when he had come into the world, nobody could have foreseen that an overweight college dropout from Church Valley, Virginia -- not even a Davitch, strictly speaking -- would be the one to hold his hand as he left it." (p. 159)

6) "Some people, she often noticed, had experiences in their pasts that defined them forever after, that they felt compelled to divulge to any casual acquaintance at the outset." (p. 234)

7) "'Isn't it amazing ... There I am, watching the camera when I could have been looking at Joyce. I thought I had the rest of my life to look at Joyce, was why.' (p. 261)

8) "Let's say you had to report back to heaven at the end of your time on earth, tell them what your personal allotment of experience had been: wouldn't it sound like Poppy's speech? The smell of radiator dust on a winter morning, the taste of hot maple syrup ..." (p. 273)

9) And the last line:

"On the screen, Rebecca's face appeared, merry and open and sunlit, and she saw that she really had been having a wonderful time." (P. 273)

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### **Megan Simper says**

I've known for a while now that my life will turn out to be nothing like what I thought (and currently think) it will be. Being in my early twenties betrays me as merely knowing this in theory, and I'm sure several more levels of heady realization will hit me as I age. But reading this book was a valuable experience because it made me think about the fact that at some point, I will look at my life and think: "I didn't choose this," and possibly resent it. Rebecca was thrust into a lifestyle that forced her to act differently than she was comfortable with, but because - according to Aristotle - "We are what we repeatedly do," she became that person anyway. She chose to behave as if she were happy, in many ways purely for the comfort and happiness of others. This lifestyle does not convey to me a feeling of helplessness. Her life epitomized the sentiment of Aristotle, and tells me that whatever situation I find myself, I still have the choice to behave the way I would have myself become, even if it includes the conscious choice of being happy.

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### **Bill Khaemba says**

"It struck her all at once that dealing with other human beings was an awful lot of work."

I admit that I am rarely drawn to light contemporary, I always expect the adult contemporary books I read to sort of have a darker twisted element but Anne Tyler is an exception. Her books are simply heartfelt with a realistic depiction of family and life occurrence. A Spool of Blue Thread was a book that I read at the beginning of this year and completely loved. I cared for the simple life of this one family through generations and I decided to pick up "Back When We're Grownups" to sort of see if she is still living up to my expectations, even though it didn't quite reach the other previous book I still got that special feeling through her writing.

"There is no true life. Your true life is the one you end up with, whatever it may be. You just do the best you can with what you've got."

The book follows Rebecca as she approaches a certain regretful point in her life, she literally has a nice full family with stepdaughters who love her, a party-throwing business and sort of a wholesome life for a woman her age but she keeps looking back at her life to sort of figure out why she isn't happy with her current state. Throughout the book, we get familiarised with her daughters and the families dinner surrounded by gossip and just everyday normalcy and with Anne Tyler's magical writing the reader feels like they have been invited to dine with the family. I highly recommend you try her out because her way of storytelling is a real treat ?

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