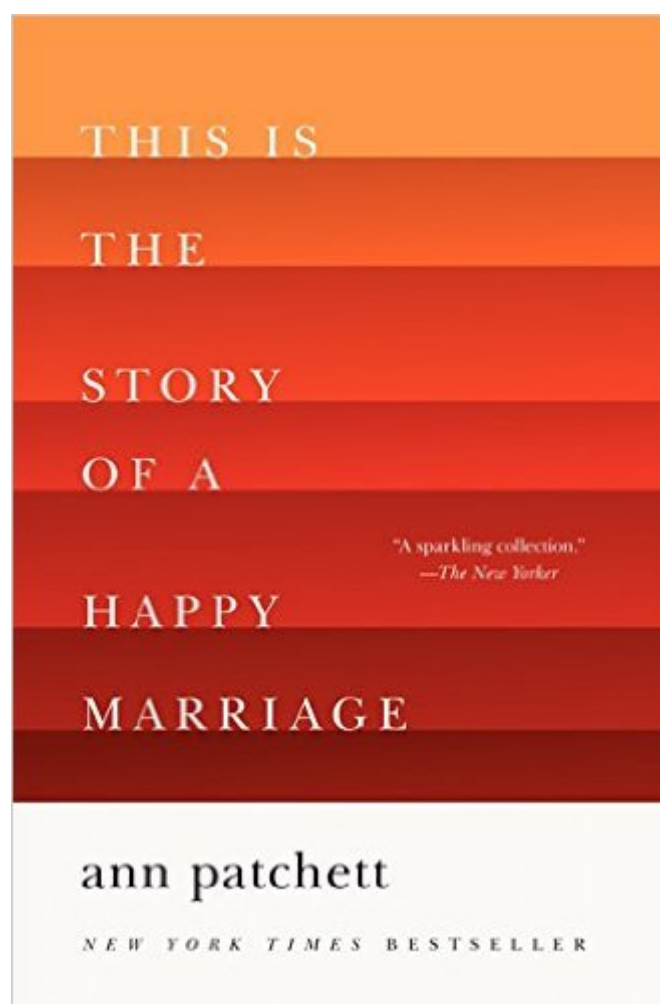


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# This Is The Story Of A Happy Marriage



## Synopsis

Blending literature and memoir, Ann Patchett, author of *State of Wonder*, *Run*, and *Bel Canto*, examines her deepest commitments—to writing, family, friends, dogs, books, and her husband—creating a resonant portrait of a life in *This Is the Story of a Happy Marriage*. *This Is the Story of a Happy Marriage* takes us into the very real world of Ann Patchett's life. Stretching from her childhood to the present day, from a disastrous early marriage to a later happy one, it covers a multitude of topics, including relationships with family and friends, and charts the hard work and joy of writing, and the unexpected thrill of opening a bookstore. As she shares stories of the people, places, ideals, and art to which she has remained indelibly committed, Ann Patchett brings into focus the large experiences and small moments that have shaped her as a daughter, wife, and writer.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Before Ann Patchett achieved fame as a novelist, she honed her writing skills as a contributor to *Seventeen*, where she worked for eight years. She also wrote articles for such publications as *Elle*, *Vogue*, *Gourmet*, and the *New York Times Magazine*. These free-lance jobs paid Ann's bills and taught her self-discipline, flexibility, and humility. "This is the Story of a Happy Marriage" is a compilation of Ann Patchett's most memorable essays. All of Patchett's pieces are nicely done, but some are particularly meaningful. I was deeply moved by the author's account of the time she spent with her aging grandmother, who was gradually losing her sight, memory, and ability to think clearly. "The Mercies" is a wonderful tribute to the nuns, especially Sister Nena, who taught Ann to read and

write when she was slow to catch on and thought no one would notice. Years later, Sister Nena and Ann reconnected; the two became close friends. Ann supported her former teacher with money for needy children and also offered her time, effort, and comradeship. She no longer regarded Sister Nena as a forbidding and judgmental presence. Instead she recognized her as an exemplary human being to be reckoned with--an independent, compassionate, hard-working, and indomitable force of nature. With self-deprecating humor, refreshing candor, and lovely, expressive writing, the author generously shares details about her past and reveals what her experiences have taught her about relationships, intellectual freedom, and personal growth. The best entries in this collection are wise, witty, poignant, and refreshingly down-to-earth. Patchett discusses how challenging it is to find a partner who appreciates your strengths and is tolerant of your weaknesses; how fortunate people are who spend each day doing the work that they love; how important family is (even when our relatives disappoint us, they influence who we become); and what a great gift it is to offer others solace, a helping hand, and friendship when they need it most. "This is how we change the world," she says. "We grab hold of it. We change ourselves." (Four and a half stars.)

Over the past several years I have spent many enjoyable hours in the company of Ann Patchett's fictional characters and their joys and travails. I rank her "Bel Canto" among my top five fiction faves and probably always will. Now I find myself here, greatly enjoying getting to know her real-life world--how she knew from childhood that she would become a writer, and used the profits from writing for magazines and newspapers to buy herself time to write fiction...the long history and impact of divorce in her family...why it took a crisis and an 11-year courtship to persuade her to have a second go at wedlock...why she hates Christmas, loves dogs and probably couldn't live without one, and loves kids but has never wanted any of her own...the many influences of Catholicism and Tennessee in her life...tales of adventures she's set out on as part of her research for books and magazine articles--like vacationing in a Winnebago and training for and passing the rigorous physical tests for becoming an LAPD cop....and the uproar that ensued at Clemson after it assigned its incoming freshman class to read "Truth and Beauty," her book about her friendship with Lucy Grealy, and how she handled that. At this writing, I've read about three quarters of this collection of pieces written for or adapted from magazines, newspapers and speeches--most of them running about five or six pages, and a couple, including the title story, about 25 or 30. It's my plan to parcel out the remainder in smallish bits for those times when I'm looking for a quick read that's sure to be interesting and seasoned with food for thought. I can just about always count on Patchett for that.

Once begun on these essays, I finished them in a couple sittings, sorry to have my time with Ann Patchett come to an end. Written between 1996 and 2012 for a variety of publications (Gourmet to Wall Street Journal) the author describes diverse experiences: touring in a Winnebago; watching Met operas in her home town at a big screen theatre; going on book tour; taking the exam for the Los Angeles Police Academy; staying at the Bel-Air hotel; opening her bookstore, Parnassus, in Nashville. The title of the collection is from the essay that describes how the author came to marry Karl after over 10 years of on/off commitment but refusing to wed. She'd been married before years ago ("My divorce began less than a week before we were married.") and vowed never to divorce again. Because Patchett's life is the background for many essays, Karl is a part of several: the RV trip, the rescue of the dog who became her beloved Rose, a memorable meal in Paris. The author knew she wanted to be a fiction writer from an early age. Other decisions grew out of her early life. She and her sister "weren't the products of our parents' happy marriages; we were the flotsam of their divorces....I was still in high school when I decided I didn't want children....I would never inflict childhood on anybody..." This is not to imply Patchett is an uncaring person. The two essays about her grandmother show patient loving support as the women declines. The final essay in the volume is about her relationship with 78 year old Sister Nena who as a young nun had a life-altering role in young Ann's life. Rose, the rescue dog, was a big part of the author's life. During the pet's last year when she couldn't walk any more, Patchett wheels her out every day in a stroller because the animal still enjoys the scents, the breeze, the motion. When Patchett finally mourns enough after losing Rose and mentions to her sister the possibility of getting another dog, sister responds: "Some little dog out there has won the lottery and she doesn't even know it yet." One of the longer pieces in the book deals with the process of writing. Patchett goes into some of what she learned from writing teachers. The need to practice writing she describes thus: "Think of a sink pipe filled with sticky sediment. The only way to get clean water is to force a small ocean through the tap. Most of us are filled up with bad stories, boring stories, self-indulgent stories, searing words of unendurable melodrama. We must get all of them out of our system in order to find the good stories that may or may not exist in the fresh water underneath." Having written several successful novels the author understands her own particular writing process. It starts in her head and for a long time there's no words on paper, not even notes. "It's like walking through a field in a snowstorm and for a long time I see nothing but the snow, but then in the distance there's something, a tree or a figure or smoke, I just don't know. I always have the sensation that I'm straining to see what's in front of me. The snow lessens for a minute and I catch a glimpse of an idea, but when I get closer the light starts to fade. I

squint constantly. It goes on like this for a long time."In introducing the collection the author writes, "The job of these essays had been to support art, not to be art, but maybe that was what spared them from self-consciousness."Perhaps that's what makes these essays so enjoyably readable. The topics are explored in a lively, thoughtful way without being "arty." For example, about some advice a teacher once gave her, "It worked its way into my brain and then stuck it's foot in the door so that other bits of wisdom might follow."This book is like spending time with an interesting person. I think other readers will find it so too.

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