

Book Review: Tom Lake
By Ann Patchett

She had me. Until page 297, she had me. And then ... well, we'll save that for later.

In the summer of 2020, the Covid pandemic had pretty much locked down everything and everyone. For Lara Nelson, her husband Joe, and their three daughters – Emily, Maisie and Nell, all in their 20s – that means isolation on the Nelson family farm in northern Michigan.

And because the pandemic is keeping most of their seasonal help away, it also means long hours working to bring in the first harvest of their cherry orchard.

To help pass the time, the girls implore their mother to tell them the story of Peter Duke, a famous actor (we soon learn has passed away) with whom she shared both a stage and a brief romance years earlier doing summer stock at a theater company called Tom Lake.

That's the springboard off which author Ann Patchett dives into her novel "Tom Lake." It's a beautifully written story of love and life, the paths we take (and those we don't), and how even when it seems the world is going to Hell in a handbag, family, sharing, and the little things in life can see us through.

Lara starts at the beginning, recalling for her daughters the unexpected manner in which she was cast as Emily in a high school community theater production of "Our Town." It's a role she would reprise several times, culminating with her performance at Tom Lake – which coincides with her short-lived romance with Duke. While Lara recounts her past for her daughters, she reflects on how memories are replaced over the

years by “different joys and larger sorrows . . . until one morning you’re picking cherries with your three grown daughters and your husband.”

But that doesn’t mean Lara regrets her past decisions.

Patchett neatly segues between Lara’s storytelling and the rise and fall of her daughters’ emotions as people, places and their role in their mother’s past are revealed. They (especially Nell) share their mother’s pain when they learn an injury forced her out of the production, and likely solidified her decision to leave the profession. It drives home the point that we never know the impact a single moment in time can have on our lives.

As Lara, the narrator, explains, “The thing about picking cherries is that you can look only at the tree you’re on, and if you have any sense, you’ll just look at the branch you have your hands in.”

Okay, back to my earlier comment.

Patchett’s narrative flows smoothly throughout, and character behaviors align with their respective personalities. But on page 297, that copacetic relationship abruptly comes apart, and in a very disorienting manner. (WARNING: Mini-spoiler alert)

Lara has moved on from acting, returning first to her roots in New Hampshire to help with her grandmother’s sewing business, and later to New York City as a costume seamstress for theater productions. She receives a phone call from Peter Duke, who is currently in a rehab facility in Boston. He wants her to visit. She goes. And the result is a brief, but (in my opinion) disturbing and out-of-character carnal knowledge experience.

For my money, I wish Patchett had omitted pages 297 and 298. They’re two pages that – again, in my opinion – add nothing to the story. Their removal would have had no

impact on continuity. But their inclusion disparages Lara's character based solely on an absolutely inconsequential action.

Still, it's a well-written and worthy read. I give "Tom Lake" 4 out of 5 stars. And as always, I welcome your feedback.