

Good or just lucky?

by [Gail McGrew Eifrig](#) in the [July 29, 1998](#) issue

By Anne Tyler, A Patchwork Planet. (Knopf, 24 pp.)

Isn't it possible, maybe, that good people are just luckier people? Couldn't that be the explanation?" This thought belongs to Barnaby Gaitlin, a 29-year-old divorced father whose nine-year-old daughter doesn't care much about seeing him, whose juvenile delinquent past keeps him from accomplishing much, and whose current fascination with a golden-haired woman he sees in the Baltimore train station stems from his family's conviction that each Gaitlin will be assisted in life by an angel.

Yes, we're in Anne Tyler's world, and it's always good to visit. Here is the familiar mixture of quirky, likeable characters, a not-too-fashionable Baltimore setting, and a gentle dance into growth and change interrupted by the occasional comic slip and nearly tragic misstep. Tyler is as inspired as ever at putting together the improbable and the ordinary. Barnaby's grandfather, for instance, is a retired laundry truck driver who has given him a '63 Corvette Sting Ray coupe. It proves to be (in the approved Tyler manner) both a curse and an ultimate blessing.

One of the most engaging features of Tyler's work is the charming and strange businesses she devises for her characters' employment, like writing travel books designed to protect people from the surprises involved in travel. Barnaby works for Rent-A-Back, an agency that provides inexpensive help in doing the tasks that get harder as one gets older--putting up the Christmas tree, organizing the attic, tending to grocery shopping. These imaginary businesses (which function in the fiction partly as setting and partly as symbol) may reflect the author's wish for a world in which threats and difficulties can be smoothed away, but they are realistic enough to fit into a reasonable plot.

We are pushed through the narrative by a series of questions: Will Barnaby meet his angel? Is Sophia an angel? Will he save the money to pay back his nagging mother for the money she spent making reparations to neighbors for the things Barnaby stole as a teenager? Did he steal the \$2,960 from Sophia's Aunt Grace's flour bin? Will he and his co-worker, Martine, end up together, or will he stay with his angel? Will his daughter, Opal, ever warm up to him or will she always prefer her mother's lawyer husband?

But it is not for the excitement or entanglements of the plot that one seeks out a Tyler novel. Quite other dynamics are at work. Each novel asks serious and universal questions: Are good people just lucky? Is it true that there is one perfect mate for each person, or do long marriages create perfect mates? What is goodness? How should one be faithful and to what? What does success look like?

Tyler's particular genius is to embody these questions in situations and characters so that they are not idle speculations but the stuff of everyday moral and ethical decision-making. Though characters like Barnaby (or Mason in *The Accidental Tourist* or Ian in *St. Maybe*) do some musing, they are revealed most clearly in their moments of decision and action. What Barnaby is, morally, has less to do with what he thinks than with what he does with the '63 Corvette.

In the moral realm, characters like these may be the true action heroes of contemporary culture. Tyler remains interested in the moments when, having been frozen in hesitation and even in isolated agonies of soul, people move out of guilt into goodness. This is the stuff of grace.