

*A Spool of Blue Thread*, by Anne Tyler

reviewed by [LaVonne Neff](#) in the [April 29, 2015](#) issue

## In Review



### **A Spool of Blue Thread**

By Anne Tyler  
Knopf

Anne Tyler's 20th novel is, like her previous 19, about a mildly dysfunctional Baltimore family of loyal yet infuriating people who love one another, but not always helpfully. It is about youth and age, parents and children, brothers and sisters,

ambitions and disappointments. It is about four generations of the Whitshank family and the house they inhabit for some 70 years. Most of all it is about home.

In the opening scene, Red Whitshank is on the phone with his third child and elder son, Denny, who has just announced that he is gay. A few weeks later Red and his wife, Abby, learn—not from Denny—that he has withdrawn from college.

Denny . . . had withdrawn from the family years ago. What other middle-class American teenager lived the way he did—flitting around the country like a vagrant, completely out of his parents' control, getting in touch just sporadically and neglecting whenever possible to give them any means of getting in touch with him? How had things come to such a pass? They certainly hadn't allowed the other children to behave this way. Red and Abby looked at each other for a long, despairing moment.

Fast forward a couple of decades. The other children still live close to home. Amanda is an attorney; Jeanne and Stem work in their father's construction business. All three are married with children. Denny, on the other hand, has had a succession of short-lived jobs. Apparently not gay after all—his parents can't bring themselves to inquire—he has a failed marriage and a daughter who only occasionally joins family get-togethers in Baltimore. Red and Abby are still fretting about him.

And then the family dynamics begin to shift. Red, now in his midseventies, has a heart attack. His hearing deteriorates. Abby sometimes blanks out. She starts calling the dog Clarence after a dog that died long ago. At one point she wanders outside in her nightgown and gets lost. The children aren't sure how to respond: after all, "Abby's 'usual' was fairly scatty. Who could say how much of this behavior was simply Abby being Abby?"

Yet clearly something is amiss, and something must be done. Should Abby and Red downsize? Should they hire help with their daily tasks? Should one of the children move in with them—and if so, which one? And is anybody paying attention to what Abby and Red themselves want?

The caregiving dilemma allows festering resentments to surface. The long-standing push-pull relationship between Abby, "so intrusive, so sure of her welcome, so utterly lacking in self-consciousness," and Denny, her beloved but baffling prodigal son, has set the stage for intense sibling rivalry to erupt whenever major decisions must be made. Over and over, the two older sisters and the younger brother

wonder: Why, when we have stayed nearby and minded the family business, does Denny get all the attention? Why does nobody kill a fatted calf for *us*? At the same time Denny feels unwanted and disrespected, not only by his siblings but also by his parents. And then tragedy strikes.

*A Spool of Blue Thread* could have been a novel about the trials of the sandwich generation or the loneliness of old age. Tyler, however, inserts lengthy backstories that distract from what appears to be the main story. “In the Whitshank family, two stories had traveled down through the generations. These stories were viewed as quintessential—as *defining*, in some way.”

The first story is about how Red’s sister, Merrick, contrived to marry her best friend’s very wealthy fiancé. The second is about how Red and Merrick’s father, Junior, bootstrapped his way out of a three-room cabin in West Virginia, eventually building a thriving business and the house of his dreams in one of Baltimore’s most prestigious neighborhoods. Patience, Tyler writes, “was what the Whitshanks imagined to be the theme of their two stories—patiently lying in wait for what they believed should come to them.” Envy, she suggests, might be a more accurate theme. Or disappointment, because neither Merrick nor Junior finds lasting happiness in what they have acquired.

Abby tells a third story, about the day she fell in love with Red. She tells the story often, always beginning with the same words: “It was a beautiful, breezy, yellow-and-green morning.” Her story is not about patience or envy, but rather about seeing the goodness in an ordinary young man she has known for years. Her story leads to many complications, but never to disappointment: Abby is fundamentally happy. For some reason the Whitshank family does not see her story, along with the two others, as defining.

In Tyler’s books, character is always more important than plot. That doesn’t mean that *A Spool of Blue Thread* has no plot. Each chapter could, with minor adaptation, be a well-plotted short story on its own, and by the end of the book the longest story—that of the aging parents and their children—is pretty well wrapped up, though book groups will still have plenty of opportunity to debate what’s likely to happen next.

Still, the sudden shift two-thirds of the way through the book from story to backstory, and then to even further backstory, is jarring. At first I thought the book

would have been stronger without those interjections, interesting though they were. And then I realized that the book is not just about the Whitshank family; it is also about the house on Bouton Road. Lovingly built by Junior, loved by Abby, inherited by Red, lived in or visited by every Whitshank since 1942, the house becomes a metaphor for the family it shelters. It is a sacramental house, an outward and visible sign of the home within—a place that makes home real, even though each family member has a vision of home that differs from or even conflicts with the vision of other family members.

It is at the end of chapter 4 that Abby begins telling her familiar love story:

On the porch, everybody relaxed. Their faces grew smooth, and their hands loosened in their laps. It was so restful to be sitting here with family, with the birds talking in the trees and the crosscut-sawing of the crickets and the dog snoring at their feet and children calling, “Safe! I’m safe!”

In spite of misunderstandings, irritations, rivalries, and even grief, they are—for a time at least—safe at home.