

Anne Tyler

*Back When We Were Grownups*

Toronto: Penguin, 2002. Pp. 309. \$10.99

Reviewed by Nora Foster Stovel

Anne Tyler, author of fifteen novels—*If Morning Ever Comes*, *The Tin Can Tree*, *A Slipping-Down Life*, *The Clock Winder*, *Celestial Navigation*, *Searching for Caleb*, *Earthly Possessions*, *Morgan's Passing*, *Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant*, *The Accidental Tourist*, *Breathing Lessons*, *Saint Maybe*, *Ladder of Years*, and *A Patchwork Planet*—must surely be one of the best novelists writing in English today. Tyler's fiction is distinctive. Nothing much happens, and yet it grips the reader all the way through the narrative and leaves the reader with an inexplicable sense of well-being, a sense that all really is all right with the world. How is one to explain this phenomenon? Tyler's characters are down-home, low-key, all-American people persons with nothing particularly remarkable about them except for their basic decency, essential humanity, sense of community, and individual courage. Often they are confronted with a difficult dilemma, such as how to cope with the death of a loved one, but they all find the strength, with a little help from their friends, to carry on.

*Back When We Were Grownups* does not disappoint the devoted reader of Tyler novels. It is a novel about a middle-aged woman's search for her true identity. It begins, "Once upon a time, there was a woman who discovered she had turned into the wrong person" (1). Rebecca—called "Queen Rebecca" (15) by her college roommate for her crown of golden braids, regal carriage, and serene sense of dignity—finds herself, at the age of fifty-three, transformed into "Beck," a grandmother and professional party-giver. Beck makes this discovery in the middle of a picnic celebrating the engagement of her step-daughter NoNo to Barry Sanborn, father of Peter. When Beck steps into the river to rescue Peter, she is baptized into the quest for her missing self, her lost past. She is both Demeter, earth mother, and Persephone, the lost daughter, rolled into one. "How on earth did I get like this? How? How did I ever become this person who's not really me?" (21).

She searches her past for clues. She once was Rebecca Holmes from Church Valley, a nineteen-year-old student at Macadam College with a boyfriend named Willard Allenby who was—her mother still insists—her "true soul's companion" (88) when her life changed. Attending an engagement party for her former roommate at "The Open Arms," she was accosted by Joe Davitch, who said, "I see you're having a wonderful time." She ruminates, "Wasn't it strange how certain moments, now and then, contained turning points in a life—contained the curled and waiting seeds of everything that would follow? ... And from that day forth she seemed to have confirmed his view [that she was a natural-born celebrator]; although really she had been the very opposite sort of person, muted and retiring, deeply absorbed in her studies, the only child of a widow in little

Church Valley, Virginia, and engaged-to-be-engaged to her high-school sweetheart" (44).

She had gone from wife to widow in six short years when Joe Davitch died in a car crash, leaving her with his three little girls—Biddy, Patch, and NoNo—and her own daughter, Min Foo. Now, in middle age, she is the matriarch of an extended Davitch family, including the four daughters' husbands and children, not to mention Joe's brother Zeb, a pediatrician, and his uncle, the hundred-year-old Poppy. Beck also inherits the Davitches' Baltimore row house. As sole proprietor of the Open Arms, Beck becomes a professional party-giver: "*All of Life's Occasions from the Cradle to the Grave*, as their ad in the Yellow Pages put it. *For Your Next Important Social Event, 'Experience the Charms of the Open Arms'*" (23).

"Life went on" (45), but sometimes Rebecca felt that "life had treated her unfairly" (52). She dreams she is traveling on a train with her teenage son, as a wash of love engulfs her (22). Min Foo interprets: "you were dreaming how things would be if you'd chosen a different fork in the road" (40). She begins to consider what might have been if she had not let Joe change her life: "she began to lead a whole other life—an imaginary, night-have-been life flowing almost constantly underneath the surface of her day-to-day existence.... Her true real life, was how she thought of this scenario. As opposed to her fake real life, with its tumult of drop-in relatives and party guests and repair men" (92, 94–95).

Beck decides to go home to Church Valley to quest her lost self: "I'd like to go home and sort of ... reconnoiter. Check out my roots" (58). She begins by visiting her mother, and telephoning her old boyfriend, Willard Allenby, Professor of Chemistry at Macadam College. They commence a peculiar courtship as she compares her past and present selves by introducing Will to the extended, eccentric Davitch clan. The question Tyler poses is: can we return to the crossroads where our lives diverged and choose the other path? Few novelists are better equipped than Tyler to explore the ramifications of such a quest. Readers of Tyler will not be disappointed by *Back When We Were Grownups*. And, for those who have never read Tyler's novels, *Back When We Were Grownups* is as good a place to start as any.

Pauline Kaldas and Khaled Mattawa, eds.

*Dinarzad's Children: An Anthology of Contemporary Arab American Fiction*

Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 2004. Pp. 336. \$24.95

Reviewed by Carol Fadda-Conrey

In 1990, in her introduction to *Food for Our Grandmothers: Writings by Arab-American and Arab-Canadian Feminists* (1994), Joanna Kadi aptly called Arab-Americans "the most Invisible of the Invisibles," thus relegating them to the