Run by Ann Patchett

Discussion Questions

1. How would you characterize Teddy and Tip's relationship as siblings? How does it compare to their relationship with their brother, Sullivan?

2. At the Jesse Jackson lecture, Doyle reviews the personalities of his three sons and thinks about which of them would be most able to lead. Which of the boys do you think would make the best politician? Do you think Doyle's assessments of their characters are accurate or biased?

3. Discuss the concept of nature versus nurture. Do you think that Sullivan, Tip, and Teddy are who they are, or would they have turned out differently had Bernadette lived? How would those differences manifest themselves?

4. Discuss the different meanings of the title. How many different ways does the word Run work for you?

5. Run includes several incidences of doubling—two brothers who get adopted, two mothers who die, two men named Sullivan, two Tennessee Alice Mosers, two accidents involving hospital stays. What is the effect for you as a reader of seeing similar characters and events repeated over the course of the book? Can you think of any other examples of doubling in literature?

6. Why is Kenya the one subject that Sullivan and his father can agree on? How does her adoption into the family help Teddy and Tip understand Sullivan and what he went through growing up?

7. Towards the end of the story we see images of four mothers (including the Virgin Mary) on Kenya's dresser. What is the author saying about women and mothers to have them all there together?

8. Why does Kenya's mother conceal her true identity from her daughter? Do you think that she imagines the conversation in the hospital with Tennessee Alice Moser after surgery or do you think it really happened?

9. What does Father Sullivan's encounter with Tennessee in the hospital suggest about his ability to heal?

10. Doyle is very invested in politics on both local and national levels, but he falters at the idea of taking home a stray child. What does this book say to you about social responsibility?

11. Of the many characters in Run, which did you feel most connected to on an emotional level? How do you explain that connection?

12. How did you react to Bernard Doyle's decision to bestow the heirloom statue on Kenya, a daughter who has literally shared nothing with his former wife, Bernadette? Do you think he made the same decision his wife would have made? (Questions issued by publisher.)
Run by Ann Patchett

About the Author

- Birth—December 02, 1963
- Where—Los Angeles, California
- Education—B.A., Sarah Lawrence College, 1985; M.F.A., University of Iowa, 1987
- Awards—Guggenheim Fellowship, 1995; PEN/Faulkner Award, 2002; Orange Prize, 2002
- Currently—Nashville, Tennessee

Ann Patchett was born in Los Angeles but raised in Nashville, Tennessee. While at Sarah Lawrence College in New York, she studied with such notable authors as Russell Banks and Grace Paley before getting her first short works published. She labored long and hard in the trenches of Seventeen magazine (where her talents went largely unrecognized), before striking gold with her ambitious first novel, The Patron Saint of Liars, which was named a New York Times Notable Book of 1992 and subsequently made into a major motion picture.

Since her auspicious debut, Patchett has crafted a handful of elegant novels, garnering several accolades and awards along the way. But her real breakthrough occurred with 2001's Bel Canto, a taut, psychological thriller set in the claustrophobic confines of an embassy under siege in South America. Winning both the PEN/Faulkner Award and the Orange Prize, Bel Canto catapulted Patchett into the ranks of bestselling authors.

As if to prove her versatility, Patchett departed from fiction for 2004's Truth & Beauty, the heartbreaking account of her longstanding, difficult friendship with the late Lucy Grealy, a gifted writer whose disfigurement from cancer precipitated a tragic descent into addiction and death. This memoir won several literary awards and appeared on many end-of-year best books lists. Her novel, Run, followed in 2007.

Success breeds success; and with each book, Patchett's reputation grows. Perhaps the secret to her popularity has been captured best by Patchett's friend, Pulitzer Prize winner Robert Olen Butler. "She is a genius of the human condition," he says. "I can't think of many other writers, ever, who get anywhere near her ability to comprehend the vastness and diversity of humanity, and to articulate our deepest heart."

Extras

From a 2004 Barnes and Noble interview:

- In 1997, The Patron Saint of Liars was adapted into a TV movie, and Patchett also helped to write the screenplay for Taft, which was optioned by actor Morgan Freeman for a feature film.
- Patchett knew absolutely nothing about opera before writing Bel Canto; she began her research with Fred Plotkin's book Opera 101.
- She has never had a television.... She brushes her dog's teeth every morning.... After she received a pig for her ninth birthday, she hasn't eaten red meat since.
- When asked what book most influenced her life as a writer, here is her response:

Humboldt's Gift by Saul Bellow. "I think I read it in the tenth grade. My mother was reading it. It was the first truly adult literary novel I had read outside of school, and I read it probably half a dozen times. I found Bellow's directness very moving. The book seemed so intelligent and unpretentious. I wanted to write like that book."

(Author bio and interview from Barnes & Noble.)
Run: A Novel (2007)

Ann Patchett (Author)

Bernadette and Bernard Doyle wanted to have a big family but had only one son, Sullivan, so they adopted two African-American boys, Tip and Teddy. Bernadette died when the boys were four years old. Bernard is a former mayor of Boston and wants Tip and Teddy to follow in his political footsteps. One night during a heavy snowstorm Bernard and the boys get into an argument while Tip is walking backward down the road. From out of nowhere a car appears and a bystanding woman, Tennessee, pushes Tip out of the way and gets hit herself. Tennessee is taken to the hospital, and her daughter Kenya stays with the Doyles. The story takes place over a 24-hour period and illustrates how lives interweave and how family is more than just a blood tie.

MAIN CHARACTERS:
Bernard Doyle, Father (adoptive, of Tip and Teddy), Tip Doyle, Adoptee (of Bernard), Teddy Doyle, Adoptee (of Bernard)

SETTING(S):
Boston, Massachusetts, Atlantic States, East, New England, North America, Northeast, United States

SUBJECT:
Adoption, Children, Family, Responsibility

RECOMMENDED SIMILAR TITLES
Daughter of Providence - Julie Drew
Island of Bones - Imogen Robertson
Pigs in Heaven - Barbara Kingsolver
This Time Tomorrow - Michael Jaime-Becerra
The Time of Our Singing - Richard Powers
The Vanishing Act of Esme Lennox - Maggie O'Farrell

BEST SELLERS LIST
Los Angeles Times Book Review (Southern California): Hardcover Fiction
Total Number of Weeks: 6
First Appearance: 10/14/2007
Last Appearance: 12/2/2007
Highest Position Achieved: 1

New York Times Bestseller List: Hardcover Fiction
Total Number of Weeks: 5
First Appearance: 10/14/2007
Highest Position Achieved: 7

Publishers Weekly Hardcover Bestsellers: Fiction
Total Number of Weeks: 5
First Appearance: 10/8/2007
Last Appearance: 11/5/2007
Highest Position Achieved: 9

Wall Street Journal Bestsellers: Fiction
Total Number of Weeks: 3
Last Appearance: 10/19/2007
Highest Position Achieved: 11

Washington Post Book World Hardcover Bestsellers: Fiction
Total Number of Weeks: 4
First Appearance: 10/7/2007
Last Appearance: 10/28/2007
Highest Position Achieved: 7

Gale Document Number: GALE|M1300147285

Gale Database: What Do I Read Next?, 2012

About the Author

Full text biography:

Ann Patchett

Birth Date: 1963

Place of Birth: United States, California, Los Angeles

Nationality: American

Occupation: Novelist

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Awards
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Awards:

Award for fiction, Trans-Atlantic Henfield Foundation, 1984; Editor's Choice Award for Fiction, Iowa Journal of Literary Studies, 1986, for "For Rita, Who Is Never Nice"; Editor's Choice Award for Fiction, Columbia, 1987, for "The Magician's Assistant's Dream"; residential fellow of Yaddo and Millay Colony for the Arts, both 1989; James A. Michener/Corpusnicus Award, University of Iowa, 1989, for work on Patron Saint of Liars; residential fellow, Fine Arts Work Center, Provincetown, RI, 1990-91; Mary Ingraham Bunting fellowship, 1993; Janet Heidinger Kafka Prize for best work of fiction, 1994, for Taft; Tennessee Writers Award of the Year, Nashville Banner, and Guggenheim fellowship, both 1994, both for The Magician's Assistant; National Book Critics Circle Award nomination in fiction category, 2001, and PEN/Faulkner Award finalist, and Orange Prize for fiction, both 2002, all for Bel Canto; Alex Award, Margaret Alexander Edwards Trust and Booklist, 2005, for Truth and Beauty: A Friendship.

Personal Information:


Career Information:


Writings:


NOVELS
• *Taft*, Houghton Mifflin (Boston, MA), 1994.


**Media Adoptions:**

The story "All Little Colored Children Should Learn to Play Harmonica" was adapted as a play; *The Patron Saint of Liars* was filmed for television by CBS, 1997.

**Sidelights:**

Author Ann Patchett has been hailed as one of the most interesting and unconventional writers of her generation. Patchett's power as a writer seems to derive from her unusual ability to make believable the voices of a sweeping array of characters. In 1984, on her twenty-first birthday, Patchett published her first story, "All Little Colored Children Should Learn to Play Harmonica," a narrative set in the 1940s about a black family with eight children. Patchett, a white woman from Nashville, Tennessee, had actually written the story two years earlier when she was a sophomore at New York's Sarah Lawrence College. "Because I was nineteen, I had the courage and confidence to approach such a subject matter with authority," she told Elizabeth Bernstein in an interview for Publishers Weekly. Patchett described the origins of her diverse characters as occurring in moments of fantasy. "I never thought it was strange to pick these topics," she recounted to Bernstein. "I just really believe that using your imagination is the one time in your life you can really go anywhere."

*The Patron Saint of Liars*, Patchett's first novel, shows such imagination. It tells the story of a young pregnant woman who flees from a dull marriage, driving across the country to find a new, different, and unexpected sense of family at St. Elizabeth's, a Roman Catholic home for unwed mothers in Kentucky.

Critics pointed out that the novel may strain belief at times, in particular because it provides no contextual sense of hotly debated social issues surrounding marriage and reproduction in the Catholic Church. However, as Alice McDermott, reviewing the novel in the *New York Times Book Review*, pointed out, Patchett's project is to write "a made up story of an enchanted place." Comparing *The Patron Saint of Liars* to a fairy tale, McDermott explained that "the world of St. Elizabeth's, and of the novel itself, ... retains some sense of the miraculous, of a genuine, if unanticipated, power to heal."

Patchett's next novel, *Taft*, also received critical praise, though reviewers' opinions differed as to whether or not this work exceeded Patchett's achievement in *The Patron Saint of Liars*. *Taft's* action centers around a Memphis blues bar called Muddy's. The black, middle-aged bartender, Nickel, who narrates the story, becomes imaginatively and practically entangled in the life of a white working-class teenager, Fay Taft, and that of her family. Focusing on their relationship, Patchett weaves a multilayered narrative about unconventional kinds of love and improvisational familial lies.

In her critically acclaimed third novel, *The Magician's Assistant*, Patchett continues to explore the themes of unorthodox love, abandonment, and transcendence and the surprising places people go to feel at home. The protagonist and title character, Sabine, has long been in love with the gay magician she assists. As the narrative unfolds, Patchett's writing has been affiliated with *ABC News* and *The New York Times*. Sabine and Patchett had...
. opens, Parsifal, the magician, who is afflicted with AIDS, dies suddenly from a stroke. Sabine and Parsifal had entered into an unusual marriage, and upon his death, she is embraced by his family, which she had not known existed. Sabine meets her estranged in-laws, and together they try to put together the pieces of Parsifal's past. As Sabine shares her grief, she finds a hint of redemption and a way to transform herself.

Veronica Chambers, reviewing The Magician's Assistant for Newsweek, called it "a '90s love story wrought with all the grace and classic charm of a 19th-century novel."

By the time her fourth novel was released, Patchett had earned a reputation for quality fiction, and that reputation was sealed with the publication of Bel Canto. Loosely based on a real-life 1996 hostage crisis in Lima, Peru, Bel Canto--an opera term that means "fine singing"--takes place in an unnamed South American country where the vice presidential palace is the setting for a birthday reception honoring a prominent businessman, the chair of a huge Japanese electronics concern. "The poor host country was throwing a birthday party of unreasonable expense, hoping that Hosokawa might help with training, trade, a factory--something that will make it look like the nation is moving away from drug trafficking," according to Seattle Times contributor Valerie Ryan. One of the star guests at this party is Roxane Cross, a revered American opera soprano who has agreed to perform for her biggest fan, Hosokawa. As the lights dim following her aria, the peace is shattered by the invasion of terrorists. The electronics tycoon, the diva, the vice president and sixty dignitaries are taken hostage. "In a marvelously loopy touch," noted David Kipen in the San Francisco Chronicle, "the president has begged off to watch his favorite telenovela."

Negotiations reach a stalemate, but inside the mansion, hostages and guerrillas are oblivious to the action. Instead, as the siege stretches to four-and-a-half months, hostages and terrorists form bonds of friendship and even love inside the mansion; "pretty soon, nobody wants to kill anybody," Kipen observed. However, some characters are not destined to survive.

Thematically, Bel Canto is "similar to my other works in that people are thrown together by circumstance," Patchett told David Podgurski in a Milwaukee Journal Sentinel interview. "But I wanted to write a truly omniscient third-person narrative, a 'Russian' novel." The author continued: "I wanted all of the drama as I saw it unfold on television--it seemed so operatic--and to have all that and yet keep it within a narrative that wasn't a potboiler."

Bel Canto received positive notices from many reviewers, among them Salon.com's Laura Miller. "With this scenario, you'd expect [Bel Canto] to be populated by the kind of romantic figures found in books and movies like Chocolat, cartoonish outlines that invite the reader to stop inside and fancy herself the embodiment of, say, Joyous Sensuality or the Human Spirit. Instead, the characters Patchett has created are just that, characters; they're not empty enough to 'identify with.' Guardian contributor Alex Clark applauded Patchett's range. "With bravura confidence and inventiveness she varies her pace to encompass both lightning flashes of brutality and terror and long stretches of incarcerated ennui," he wrote. "The novel's sensibilities extend from the sly wit of observational humor to subtle, mournful insights into the nature of yearning and desire."

What was it about the real-life crisis that inspired Patchett's interest in a fictional retelling? In an essay on the BookPage Web site, she recalled her absorption in the unfolding events of 1996: "Very few disasters happen in slow motion: plane crashes, school shootings, earthquakes--by the time we hear about them, they're usually over. But the story in Lima stretched on, one month, two, three." During that time, she added, "I couldn't stop thinking about these people. There is no such thing as a good kidnapping, but I heard the hostages played chess with their captors. I heard they played soccer. There were rumors of large pizza orders." To Patchett, the story had "all elements I was interested in: the construction of family, the displacement from home, a life that was at once dangerous and completely benign."

Following the death in 2002 of Lucy Grealy, Patchett's longtime friend and author of Autobiography of a Face, Patchett wrote the memoir Truth and Beauty: A Friendship. In an interview with Publishers Weekly contributor Elizabeth Millard, the author explained: "I give talks about my belief in fiction and the importance of the imagination, and I always say that one thing about my novels is that ... I'm not a character in my books and I like that." Shortly after the death of her emotionally troubled friend, however, in an attempt to deal with her grief, Patchett wrote a piece for New York magazine and found herself wanting to write more; Truth and Beauty was the result. "When I look back now,"
she told Millard, "I think it really was a way to sit shive for a year, to stay on her grave and be unwilling to get up and go on with my life." The author continued, noting that "going over the good times we had together, because things ended on a very bad note, I think it really gave me all the time I needed to feel terrible and to celebrate her. I feel it would be melodramatic to say the book saved my life, but it certainly put me in a better place."

Jennifer Reese described Truth and Beauty in Entertainment Weekly as a "powerful ... portrait of a fascinating, understandably tormented woman—and of a great friendship. ... Patchett's voice—perfectly modulated, lucid, and steady ... makes it both true and beautiful." Donna Seaman, writing for Booklist, called it "dazzling in its psychological interpretations, piquant in its wit, candid in its self-portraiture, and gracefully balanced between emotion and reason."

Patchett also served as guest editor of The Best American Short Stories 2006. The collection features twenty short stories from a wide range of American writers, from well-known popular writers such as Tobias Wolff, Ann Beattie, and Alice Munro to lesser-known writers such as Jack Livings, Aleksandar Hemon, and Katherine Bell.

"Where a short-story collection by a single author tends to repeat patterns, rhythms and themes, there's a much greater sense of serendipity and surprise here," wrote a Kirkus Reviews contributor. Ellen Loughran, writing in Booklist, noted that the author's "introduction provides a graceful entry into the main event."

Most of Patchett's next novel, Run, takes place over a weekend. It features protagonist Bernard Doyle, a widower whose wife, Bernadette, died of cancer sixteen years earlier, and the father of three sons, two of whom are adopted. Bernard's natural son, Sullivan, dragged Bernard into a scandal that cost him his political career, but Bernard continues to practice law in Boston. His adopted black sons are twenty-year-old Teddy, a dreamer who is leaning toward the priesthood, and Tip, one year older, who is studying at Harvard with the intention of becoming an ichthyologist. They are named for Massachusetts Democrats Ted Kennedy and Tip O'Neill.

As the novel begins it is snowing, and Bernard, who would like his sons to enter politics, has invited Tip and Teddy to a Jesse Jackson lecture. The reluctant brothers purposely arrive late, but Bernard wins out, as he lied about the start time of the event, saying that it was earlier than it actually is. Tip resents his father's efforts, and following the lecture, when Bernard asks them to attend the reception, he expresses his anger, steps off a curb, and is knocked to the ground by Tennessee Alice Moser, a black woman from the poor Roxbury neighborhood. Alice is hit by the SUV that threatened to collide with Tip, and she is rushed to the hospital with serious injuries. The Doyles accompany Tennessee's eleven-year-old daughter Kenya to the hospital, then take her home with them. As the story unfolds it becomes apparent that Tennessee has been connected to the family for many years, as has Kenya for her short life.

Central to the story is a wooden statue of the Virgin Mary, a family heirloom with a dark past from Ireland. Mary so closely resembles Bernadette that, placed in the boys' room, she seemed to watch over them. New York Times Book Review contributor Leah Hager Cohen noted that themes include "absent mothers who are not entirely absent; present mothers who are not what they appear to be." Cohen noted the issues introduced from the beginning of the novel, including Boston's volatile political and racial history, interracial adoption and the closeness and divides that occur within families.

Cohen commented on a number of questions she felt were not answered by Patchett, including why a healthy and intelligent black mother would give up her sons for adoption. "What does it mean when a white politician adopts black sons in a city where many black constituents live in poverty? How has their upbringing informed Tip and Teddy's sense of themselves as black men? If Patchett had exhumed her characters' motivations more thoroughly, she might have persuaded readers of the circumstances that led to such a choice. And in so doing she might have elicited deeper sympathy and interest." An Economist reviewer wrote: "The novel is well plotted and Ms. Patchett's universally sympathetic portraiture produces engaging characters. The writing is seamlessly smooth but never ostentatious, pushing a story to the fore." Publishers Weekly contributor Andrew O'Hagan wrote that the book "is lovely to read and is satisfyingly bold in its attempt to say something patient and true about family." Janet Maslin, also writing in the New York Times Book Review, declared that Run "shimmers with its author's rarefied eloquence, and with the deep resonance of her insights."
In Patchett's next novel, *State of Wonder*, pharmaceutical researcher Marina Singh is sent to Brazil by her boss and love, to discover what happened to her coworker, Anders Eckman. Anders had been sent to check on Annick Swenson, a woman who is conducting fertility research among the Lakashi tribe of Brazil. Anders never returned from that trip, however. What returned in his place was a letter announcing his death. Because Swenson's exact location in the Amazon is unknown, Marina encounters many obstacles in her efforts to find her.

In a review of the work in the *New York Times Book Review*, contributor Fernanda Eberstadt provided: "*State of Wonder* is an immensely touching novel, although as with much of Patchett's work, its emotional impact is somewhat muted by her indefatigable niceness. Her corporate executives are invariably meek as lambs. Even the unscrupulous Dr. Swenson, Patchett's great shot at a megawattiness, turns out to be a woman blinded by love."

Reviewing the work on the Chicago Tribune Books Web site, contributor Laura Ciolkowski said: "*State of Wonder*, Patchett's sixth novel, is a riveting variation on that tightly plotted journey from darkness to light." *A Kirkus Reviews* contributor described the work as "thrilling, disturbing and moving in equal measures—even better than Patchett's breakthrough Bel Canto." A *Publishers Weekly* contributor remarked: "Patchett's fluid prose dissolves in the suspense of this out-there adventure."

**Related Information:**

**BOOKS**


**PERIODICALS**

- *Gazette* (Cedar Rapids, IA), February 10, 2008, Jessica Musil, review of *Run*.

bna.galegroup.com/bna/short_bio../Patchett, Ann&down=yes&print=yes&print_btn=no

5/7
• Newsweek, October 13, 1997, Veronica Chambers, review of The Magician's Assistant, p. 78; October 15, 2007, Barbara Kantrowitz, review of Run, p. 83.


• Star Telegram (Fort Worth, TX), October 3, 2007, Catherine Mullette, review of Run.

• Star Tribune (Minneapolis, MN), October 7, 2007, "Setting Her Own Pace," interview, p. 1F.


• WWD, September 25, 2007, Vanessa Lawrence, review of Run, p. 16.

ONLINE


• Blackbird, http://www.blackbird.vcu.edu/ (June 6, 2007), "An Interview with Elizabeth McCracken and Ann Patchett."


• Guardian Unlimited, http://books.guardian.co.uk/ (August 11, 2004), Alex Clark, "Danger Arias."


Ann Patchett  
**Interview**

Ann Patchett on *Run*

**Q:** Why did you decide to compress the action of this novel into twenty-four hours, an exceedingly short period of time by novel standards?

**A:** For all of the characters in the book this car accident set in motion a series of life-changing events. They were all so overwhelmed by what was happening that I never found a point at which I could take a break from the action and say, "Three days later . . . " Because Sullivan has jet lag and Tennessee is in the hospital, their sense of time is shaken up. It meant that at least one of the characters was awake through the entire 24 hour period. By switching the point of view from person to person I could keep the story going around the clock.

**Q:** How did you prepare as an author for Tip’s encyclopedic knowledge of fishes? Is ichthyology a private interest of yours?

**A:** No, I’m not a closet ichthyologist. I read a lot of evolutionary biology and books about fishes to prepare. Karsten Hartel at the Museum for Contemporary Zoology at Harvard, and Jack Baughman, an old friend of mine who had studied ichthyology in college, were both extremely helpful to me.

**Q:** If you had to isolate one of the characters from *Run* as the book’s protagonist, which would it be, and why?

**A:** The book really started with the character of Tip because I had always wanted to write about someone who was very smart and obsessed with fishes. I don’t think that Tip is necessarily the protagonist but for me he’s the emotional center of the story.

**Q:** How does the process of writing your fifth novel differ from the process of writing your first?

**A:** I understand my own process now. I know how long it takes me to get started. I know there will be long stretches when I think that what I’m writing is awful. I know how to ignore the voices in my head that tell me to dump the whole book and go get a regular job. When I wrote my first book I was tortured by all of my doubts. Now the doubts come and I just think, oh, you again.

**Q:** Can you describe how the book’s central idea— that of how political responsibility plays out in the smallest and most intimate scale of family life—first came to you?

**A:** I keep reading the newspaper and looking at all of the hardships in the world and it makes me think about issues of sacrifice and social responsibility. I wonder about the idea of being so privileged that a person as smart as Tip would want to spend his days in the basement of a museum or someone as kind as Teddy wouldn’t get farther than his uncle’s room in a nursing home. Do we have a moral obligation to use our gifts to help people? Doyle has very clear ideas about this, both for himself and for his sons, but when he’s asked to take in a stranger (and a pretty appealing little stranger at that) he doesn’t want to do it. These aren’t questions that have a right and wrong answer, but I think they are ideas worth struggling with.
For Ex-Mayor’s Family, Everything Is Political

By JANET MASLIN

To appreciate the silken agility with which Ann Patchett constructs her fiction, consider the way the opening sequence in her new novel, “Run,” invokes the Virgin Mary. On the book’s first page Ms. Patchett reveals that one of her story’s central characters, Bernadette Doyle, died two weeks earlier. Now Bernadette’s sisters have arrived to grapple with a family tradition.

A statue of the Virgin, adorned in blue robe and halo, portable enough to be placed on a bedroom dresser, has been passed down from generation to generation in this family. It has an unusual history. The Italian sculptor who created it used the delicate beauty of Bernadette’s great-grandmother as part of his inspiration. Through the generations there has been an enduring resemblance between the iconic, red-haired image and the family’s real women.

Tradition dictates that the statue be handed down to a worthy relative. But Bernadette spoiled the pattern. She had no daughters, only sons. The oldest, Sullivan, has the statue’s hair color but none of its virtue, as he is the family ne’er-do-well. The younger two boys look even less like the statue, because they are black. But Bernard Doyle, Bernadette’s husband, overrules his sisters-in-law by insisting that his younger sons are entitled to the precious family artifact, appearances notwithstanding.

One thing that makes this political maneuvering so intriguing is that it is political. (Bernard Doyle is a former mayor of Boston, well-schooled in the art of bending others to his will.) Another is the lovely ease with which Ms. Patchett shifts her characters through time.

In the first few pages of “Run,” without apparent effort, she glides through time. She glimpses Bernadette as a bride, telling her husband the history of the statue, and then Bernadette as a mother who eagerly adopts two more sons when Sullivan is 12. A visit to the pediatrician, who notices a lump on Bernadette’s neck, swirls the chapter back to its starting point. She is gone, survived by one holy statue and a household full of men, as united by nurture as they are different in nature.

No stranger could glance at the Doyles and figure out what they have to do with one another. This author specializes in delving beneath the surface of such incongruity. As she did in the beautiful “Bel Canto,” Ms. Patchett once again thrives on juxtaposing wildly different characters and creating volatile chemistry among them. (Nothing so exotic is liable to happen in the workaday fiction of Ann Packer, with whom Ann Patchett should not be confused.) At the same time she creates an entirely credible set of dynamics for the Doyle family.
Then, long after Bernadette's death, the Doyle men are quite literally shaken by a new arrival. In the midst of a Massachusetts snowstorm, a Chevy Tahoe plows into Tip, the more scholarly and coldblooded of the adopted brothers. He might have been killed without the intervention of a black woman, an apparent stranger named Tennessee Moser, who shoves him out of harm's way and is then badly hurt herself.

The woman is hospitalized, and that leaves her 11-year-old daughter, Kenya, with nowhere to go. When the Doyles take charge of the girl, they begin to suspect that Kenya was secretly part of their family all along.

In place of the shock and sibling rivalries that might be expected in such a story, Ms. Patchett provides room for contemplation. She dispenses with her material's least interesting prospects by making the Doyles deeply devoted to one another in ways that make racial divisions meaningless, and by making Kenya, Tip and Tip's genetic brother, Teddy, exemplary and accomplished people. Although Bernard Doyle was accused of political opportunism at the time he adopted Tip and Teddy, he has proven to be the most devoted of fathers, despite the usual pangs of fatherly frustration.

As their names indicate, Tip and Teddy were raised to be Massachusetts politicians and fulfill their father's dreams. But Tip is an aloof Harvard ichthyologist, "the kind of kid who could hang from your neck and still maintain a critical distance," and he is impatient with the family ambitions. Teddy contemplates becoming a priest like his 88-year-old Uncle Sullivan, who is said to be a miraculous healer.

The other Sullivan, Tip and Teddy's older brother, is the son who destroyed his father's career. He has spent years lying low in Africa but reappears suddenly on the night of the accident to somehow, uncannily, become the Doyle who understands Kenya and her mother best.

"Run," with a title that suggests many things (including Kenya's athletic prowess and Doyle's political drive), and with a watery looking cover that reflects the whole book's aura of a human aquarium, becomes an elegant mélange of family ties. Ms. Patchett gives her readers much to contemplate when genetics, privilege, opportunity and nurture come into play. And to her credit she is neither vague nor reductive about any of these things; she creates a genuinely rich landscape of human possibility. If she does not wildly exploit the drama of colliding fates on a snowy night and subsequent life-or-death medical crisis, there are plenty of other writers who tell such stories.

"Run" is muted only insofar as its characters are all so accomplished, their natures so decent and their barbs so civilized. It's as if the story's racial nuances, which are rendered almost nonexistent, are still present enough to preclude any rough edges.

Ms. Patchett showed no such restraint in "Bel Canto," a more astonishing book and a less inhibited one. But "Run" still shimmers with its author's rarefied eloquence, and with the deep resonance of her insights. When Kenya arrives at the Doyle home, a place she has looked at with longing all her life, and is given one of the boys' white T-shirts to sleep in, Ms. Patchett invokes the image of a ship's sail. That's an exquisitely simple image of how much Kenya's life has changed overnight.