Character map iv

Introduction 1

Background & context 2

Genre, style & structure 5

Chapter-by-chapter analysis 10

Characters & relationships 32

Themes & issues 41

Questions & answers 52

References & reading 58
CHARACTER MAP

Family A
- Alicia
  The Learys’ mother
- Macon Leary
  Travel writer
- Rose Leary
  Macon’s sister
- Julian Edge
  Macon’s publisher at Businessman’s Press
- Charles and Porter
  Macon’s brothers, both divorced and living at home
- Edward
  Ethan and then Macon’s dog

Family B
- Sarah Leary
  Macon’s wife. English teacher
- Ethan Leary
  Sarah and Macon’s son. Shot dead at Burger Bonanza
- Alexander Pritchett
  Muriel’s son by Norman
- Muriel Pritchett
  Dog Trainer

Family C
- Rose Leary
  Macon’s sister

Note: similar relationship structure – both boys have no siblings.
Anne Tyler was born in Minneapolis, Minnesota, in the United States of America in 1941. Her parents were Quakers, and for a time the family lived a simple life based on religious values in an isolated community. During this time Tyler was home-schooled, and taught skills in farming and folk crafts. Later, she attended Duke University in North Carolina and then went on to do graduate work in Russian Studies at Columbia University in New York City. Her creative writing talent was first spotted at university, where her short stories were published in literary magazines. Tyler currently lives in Baltimore, Maryland.

Anne Tyler is the author of sixteen novels. Much of her work centres on family relationships and ordinary small-town characters bound by prescribed roles. In 1964 at the age of twenty-two Tyler published her first novel, *If Morning Ever Comes*. In 1988 she won America’s most prestigious literary award, the Pulitzer Prize, for her novel, *Breathing Lessons*. Her most recently published novel is *The Amateur Marriage* (2003). She cites Eudora Welty’s *The Golden Apples*, Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice*, Leo Tolstoy’s *Anna Karenina* and Gabriel Garcia Marquez’s *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, as having a significant influence on her writing. Welty’s writing is particularly significant because through it Tyler discovered that mundane everyday life could be the subject of interesting fiction.

*The Accidental Tourist*, published in 1985, won the American National Book Critics Circle Award. It received popular and critical acclaim, with many reviewers praising Tyler’s eccentric characters. “Comic ... sweetly perverse ... a novel animated by witty invention and lively personalities” (*Time*). Detractors have criticised it for being “predictable, soap operatic, and sentimental” (cited in Petry, p.228).

Displaying reclusive tendencies similar to Macon Leary, Anne Tyler is known to protect her privacy ardently, often refusing publicity and interviews. Her childhood in a Quaker community meant isolation from the wider world. Her adult life as a writer also means that she has an outsider’s perspective on society. She says of herself: “I like routine and rituals and I hate leaving home; I have a sense of digging my heels in” (cited in Evans, p.6).
BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

Baltimore and the South

*The Accidental Tourist* is set in Tyler’s current hometown of Baltimore, in Maryland. Baltimore is distinct for its rows of brick townhouses and leafy tree-lined streets. Maryland is a state lying between northern and southern states of the USA. During the American Civil War (1861–1865) Baltimore citizens had strong sympathies with the South and consequently the city was occupied by Union (Northern) troops, even though Maryland itself did not secede from the Union. Historically, the Southern states were different to the North as they relied on a rural economy and slavery. In contemporary times, Southerners are seen as more genteel or old-fashioned in their manners and as having a love of oral story-telling. It is this type of character that is a focus in Tyler’s fiction. As she says, “I love the South … I could sit all day and listen to the people talking…. And they tell stories constantly” (cited in Evans, p.9). The manners of Baltimore residents make for interesting social commentary: ‘in Baltimore all classes appear to be settled, if not cemented, in grooves of neighborhood and habit so deep as to render them impervious’ (McMurty). These people, rather than plot, drive Tyler’s narratives.

Tyler’s emphasis on the city of Baltimore in particular, means that her novels are often rather insular in scope, avoiding an explicit global social, historical, and political context. For instance, while the contrast between the working-class and middle-class inhabitants and neighbourhoods of Baltimore is a focus in *The Accidental Tourist*, racial issues, so crucial in the history of the South, are not a subject. All the protagonists are Anglo-Americans, despite the fact that 59 per cent of Baltimore’s population are African-American. While *The Accidental Tourist* sees Macon travel outside the United States to England, Canada and France, Macon’s personal geography directs the journey. These places exist from his perspective. Tyler’s priority is to focus on small groups of characters, particularly family groups, and their foibles, rather than a wider critical context.
The United States in the mid-1980s

The novel is set in the mid-1980s at a time of economic prosperity in the United States under Ronald Reagan’s second term of office as President. After a long period of economic recession in the 1970s, by the end of 1984 unemployment was at 7 per cent and inflation at 3.8 per cent (United States 1776–1992 p.407). However, during this time Reagan made drastic cuts to the welfare system and spent large sums on military arms. The depiction of Muriel Pritchett’s working-class neighbourhood of Singleton Street possibly reflects these welfare cuts as characters struggle to make ends meet without government assistance. Muriel has a series of odd jobs in order to survive. Certainly, Tyler draws a stark contrast with Macon’s middle-class comfort or complacency and Muriel’s hardships.

Implicit in the novel is the importance of business travel in contemporary Western culture and the way its transitory nature undermines the traditional family base. The Learys are traditional and conservative and still live in their grandparents’ house. They stay put and seldom move away. They represent the disappearing values of a passing generation. In the end, Rose and Macon reach a working compromise with the more modern Julian and Muriel. The novel seems to value this compromise between old worlds and new.

The novel also deals with the breakdown of traditional marriage patterns and family structures. For all their conservatism, the Leary boys are divorcees and Porter has his children stay with him from time to time. Muriel’s short and unhappy marriage is also characteristic of the times, as are the struggles she has as a single mother. Tyler is intrigued by the emerging social structures of the late twentieth century in which the nuclear family is under threat. The Leary boys respond to this crisis by returning to their childhood family home.

The role of women in society has been a primary topic for debate in Western societies since the late 1960s. Tyler engages in this debate in the creation of her two central female characters. From a feminist point of
view, Muriel Pritchett is symbolic of a younger generation of women in that she constructs an independent life for herself with her son outside conservative marriage patterns. She is contrasted with the warmer and more traditional Sarah, who does not succeed in creating an independent life outside her marriage to Macon and wishes to return to the marital home. Some feminists may criticise Tyler for insisting that Muriel needs a partner at all, but Muriel’s feisty character and her active pursuit of Macon signals her difference from the stereotype of the passive romantic heroine.

Another contrast to Muriel is Rose, who is a very traditional female character. Unlike her brothers, her role in the family is to care and nurture others to the detriment of her own independence. Rose is unable to escape the Leary household, even after she is married. Tyler shows that Rose’s life is narrow, but simultaneously that Rose is content in that world, because it suits her personality. Rather than criticising Rose for her lack of assertiveness and independence, Tyler seems more interested in exploring the nature of this type of woman.

Ethan’s brutal murder at the hands of a teenage gunman also raises issues of major concern to Americans in the 1980s. The prevalence of guns in American society, the homicide rate in cities and the breakdown of social values leading to the disillusionment of young people were all topics of public discussion. While Ethan’s death happens before the start of the novel’s action, the horror and futility of it is the starting point for Macon’s journey. The reference to Macon’s white ‘body bag’ is resonant of images from the Vietnam War (1965–1975) in which the bodies of American boys or soldiers were flown home. Thus the ‘body bag’ represents not only Ethan’s murder (a futile death), but also broader American social justice issues.
As its title suggests, *The Accidental Tourist* is a form of quest narrative, except that Macon Leary’s journey is ‘accidental.’ Macon, unlike a more proactive hero, is rather passive in his journey to self-knowledge after the death of his son and the breakdown of his marriage. Macon does not travel actively but is carried along – by planes, trains and automobiles. It is only at the final climax of the novel that he actively makes a decision about his life. His quest is for the ability to take matters into his own hands.

*The Accidental Tourist* is a classic romance in its portrayal of the triangular relationship between Macon, Muriel and Sarah. However, unlike a more traditional Mills and Boon-style romance which revolves around a central female protagonist, it is the man who must choose which of the two women is right for him. The contrast in personalities and physical descriptions between Muriel and Sarah highlights the difficulty of this choice. Rather like Jane Austen, Tyler emphasises contemporary marital and relationship mores and the understanding and misunderstandings that occur between adults. This is done with a degree of ironic wit. Tyler sees the world as tragi-comical, full of tragedy and absurdity.

The novel has serious issues at its core, but also has an enjoyable comic element. Macon’s perspectives on the people around him are often handled by the narrator with mirth. Macon’s guidebooks, shown in the text in italics, are full of his sardonic observations, such as:

> Bring only what fits in a carry-on bag. Checking your luggage is asking for trouble. Add several travel-size packets of detergent so you won’t fall into the hands of foreign laundries (p.23)

Macon’s inability or unwillingness to understand the attraction between Julian and Rose is also amusing. Macon’s own quirky personality, with his highly involved systems, leads to one of the most comic scenes in the novel when the cat gets caught in the dryer vent and Macon slips...
in the washing trolley, breaking his leg. Edward, the dog, is also a source of slapstick humour when he attack various people, particularly Julian, and with his resistance to being trained:

During the course of the evening he chewed a pencil to splinters, stole a pork-chop bone from the garbage bin, and threw up on the sun porch rug; but now that he could sit on command, everyone felt more hopeful (p.103)

The wit in the narrator’s voice is demonstrated here.

Structure

The novel is structured around the turning of a year. The story begins one year after Ethan’s murder and progresses through the autumn, to winter and spring, ending in the new summer. Sarah, who is associated with summer, is replaced by the more wintry personality of Muriel. Macon moves into Singleton Street in winter and then returns to Sarah in spring. Yet Muriel’s final association is not with winter, but with summer in that ultimate city of romance – Paris.

The narrative can broadly be divided into parts based on Macon’s movements or location. For a man who “never did like moving” (p.5) these changes are significant. The first section traces the break-up of Macon’s marriage to Sarah and his decline without her in the Rayford Road house (chapters one to four). Part two begins with Macon’s broken leg when he moves back to the Leary family home and his relationships with Muriel and Sarah fluctuate (chapters five to eleven). In the third location Macon has moved in with Muriel and becomes comfortable on Singleton Street, until he sees Sarah at Julian and Rose’s wedding (chapters twelve to seventeen). Then, after his trip to Canada, Macon moves back in with Sarah at Rayford Road (chapters eighteen to nineteen). Finally, the climax of the novel comes when the three central characters find themselves in Paris (chapter twenty). Even though his movement between Rayford Road and Singleton Street suggest that Macon has made a definitive choice between Sarah and Muriel, this is a false impression. He continues to
think of the other woman when he is away from her. For instance, when he is unfolding the sofa bed at Rayford Road in chapter nineteen, Macon is thinking of Muriel.

After Macon leaves Singleton Street both Alexander and Edward the dog fade out of the story, leaving the central characters, Sarah, Muriel and Macon, in the fore. The comedy Edward supports thus disappears in the final part, allowing us to focus on the serious issues. The reader also wonders at Macon's abandonment of Alexander when he leaves Muriel – how can he ignore their burgeoning father–son relationship? There is an uncomfortable silence in the narrative on this issue.

**Perspective**

The narrative revolves around the central protagonist, Macon Leary, and the small group of people he is in contact with (see character map). When Sarah leaves him his world shrinks even further, so that he is almost entirely alone, until he reverts to the comfort of living with his siblings. Muriel and her working-class neighbourhood of Singleton Street enlarges Macon's social network and consequently his world view. Tyler studies the ways in which Macon reacts to characters as they come in and out of his orbit.

Macon's perspective directs the narrative. We see Muriel largely through his eyes. His fluctuating attraction for her guides our reading of her. She herself notices his vacillation: “You don’t know what you want. One minute you like me and the next you don’t” (p.279). We gain a more objective picture of Muriel through her own talk when she narrates the story of her life to Macon. Macon's journey involves the changes of his perspectives on travel and the people around him.

While Macon is undoubtedly eccentric, he is also ordinary in the sense that he is a white, middle-class suburban male going through a common experience – a marriage break-up. Much of the plot involves quotidian events like meals, dog training and Macon’s job. However, something extraordinary has happened in Macon’s life – the murder of Ethan, which