

# Book chronicles pitfalls of marriage

When it comes to everyday family relationships -- the small risings and fallings that over time make for a great tidal sweep -- no one writes with the power, insight and understanding that Anne Tyler brings to *The Amateur Marriage*, her 16th -- and possibly best -- book.

Here is a virtuoso performance as she first chronicles the slow but seemingly inevitable disintegration of the marriage of Michael Anton (at one time the family name was Antonezyk) and Pauline Barclay and then illuminates the emotional and familial ties that remain some 60 years after a minor accident brought them together as teenagers.

There's not a page of *The Amateur Marriage* that doesn't throb with the rich-as-life sacrifices, joys, hurts, frustrations, misunderstandings, anxieties, regrets and prideful maneuverings that impact every marriage.

The title itself evokes the universality of the book's appeal. Has there ever been a first marriage in which the partners were anything but amateurs, with one day the couple on



one side of a great divide and the next day on the other as each begins to shed the false face of courtship?

As *The Amateur Marriage* progresses, it becomes evident that Michael and Pauline are mismatched, although perhaps not hopelessly so, for they are inherently good people. Other marriages endure in the face of greater stresses than those which pull Michael and Pauline apart, a process which plays out over 30 years.

In many ways, the story of Michael and Pauline is typical. He is from a Polish-Catholic neighborhood in Baltimore; they marry across religious lines, live with his mother above the family grocery and move to the suburbs as social change takes hold. In the suburbs, Michael opens an upscale store and prospers, the

## Book Review

*The Amateur Marriage*  
By Anne Tyler  
Alfred A. Knopf (New York, 2004), 320 pp., \$24.95.  
Reviewed by Joseph R. Thomas

business having become a religion of sorts and one more bone of contention as Pauline and their three children attend the Church of Heavenly Comfort.


Slow, cautious and stodgy, Michael is nevertheless a solid, practical man although clueless in terms of Pauline's needs. Chirpy and vivacious, she is a spontaneous, brightly romantic. As distance settles upon them like a mist, family life becomes even more nettlesome with the growing rebelliousness of their eldest child, Lindy, who runs away, is caught up in the San Francisco drug culture and there gives birth to a boy the Antons take into their own home and lovingly and successfully raise.

Years later, Lindy, by now married and living a normal life, re-enters the family orbit, but by then Michael and Pauline have divorced. Even so, the family remains, and Tyler explores the relationships of each to the other exceptionally well as she carries her story along.

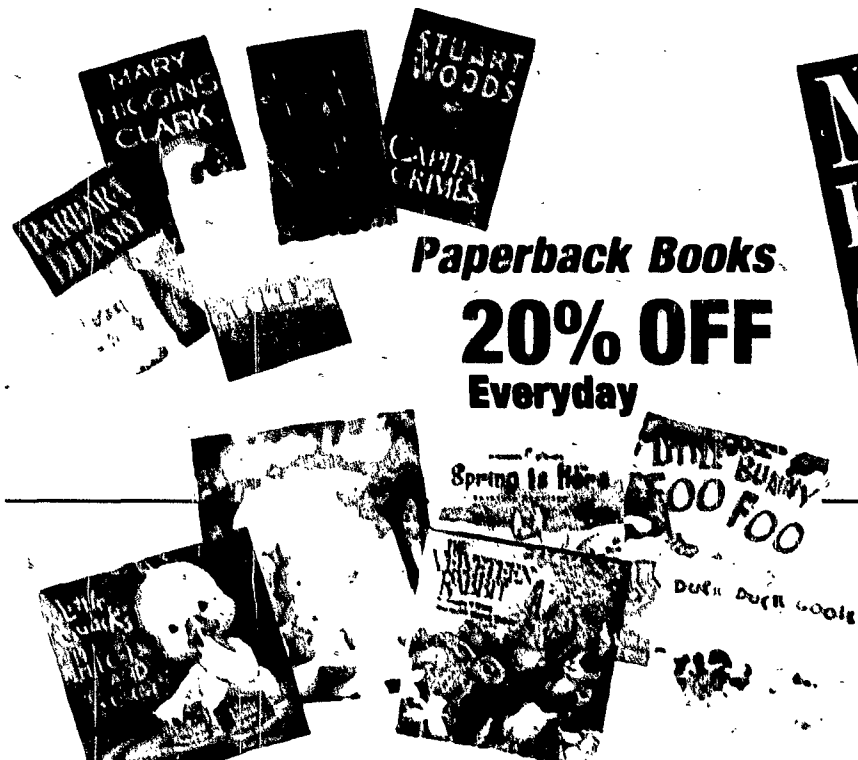
When all is said and done, *The Amateur Marriage* is a story about ordinary people -- people we all know, really -- told extraordinarily well by a writer at the top of her game after such successes as *The Accidental Tourist* and *Saint Maybe* and a Pulitzer for literature.

Here she brings all her skills to bear on a central problem of our times -- the difficulty of holding a marriage together. While the marriage of Michael and Pauline fails, Tyler's book does not. Approached with an openness to one's own shortcomings, it could well salvage an amateur marriage or two.

Thomas, retired editor in chief of *The Christophers* and a former diocesan newspaper editor, is a frequent reviewer of books.




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