

The avoidances and silences of family life in 'French Braid'

By Laurie Hertzell

Star Tribune

"French Braid," Anne Tyler's 24th novel, spans three generations of the Garrett family of Baltimore. At its heart are Robin and Mercy Garrett, married in the 1950s, tacitly separated 20 years later.

Robin is a plumber and Mercy is first a housewife and mother, and then an artist. She paints portraits of people's homes, focusing on one modest detail — a doorstep, a newel post, or the fringed trim of a curtain. "Am I missing something? she

thought every now and then. Am I overlooking something?" It's a perfect Anne Tyler metaphor.

Once David, their youngest, heads off to college, Mercy quietly moves into her studio a few miles from home.

She plans the move carefully, avoiding confrontation. She packs lightly. "Not all her clothes. Oh, no. To look in her bureau drawers ... you would never suppose anything was missing."

Gradually, Mercy begins spending occasional nights at her studio until eventually she is there full time. She never

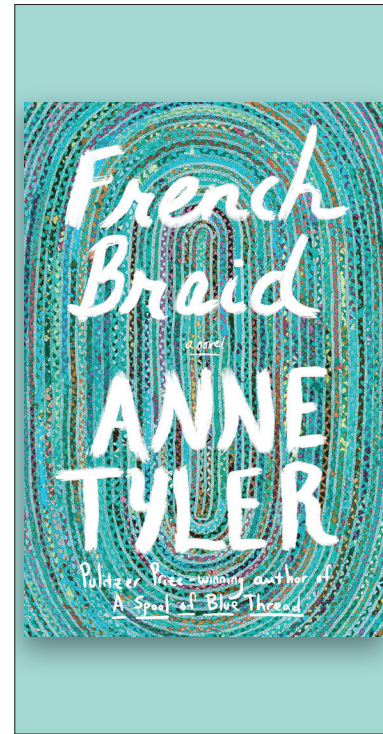
discusses any of this with her husband. He never asks.

Life is easier with no confrontation, no arguing. The surface remains smooth, the marriage endures.

Families, as Tyler has shown so brilliantly over her long career — she is 80 now — are private, convoluted things, twisted and knotted together over generations like a braid. And not even a simple three-strand braid; more like a complicated French braid, one that takes in more and more strands as it progresses.

Behaviors and attitudes from one generation are braided into the next, and so the Garrett children and grandchildren absorb their parents' need for avoidance. "Oh, the lengths this family would go to so as not to spoil the picture of how things were supposed to be!" Tyler writes.

It is lines like that one — seemingly tossed off by the omniscient narrator, a great skill of Tyler's — that bring heft to this largely plotless book. "French Braid" is filled with piercing observation.



Alfred A. Knopf/TNS

Robin and Mercy's children grow up wary. It's easier, David figures, to avoid the family than to confront them, and so, like his mother, he leaves without ever saying he is going. He spends college summers away from home; he gets married without telling a soul. He just — drifts away. Like so many Tyler characters, he is active through passivity.

The whole complicated arrangement of keeping secrets and not asking questions filters down to Mercy and Robin's grandchildren. Their grandson Eddie doesn't tell anyone he's in a romantic relationship with his longtime partner Claude, so Eddie's aunt does her frantic best to pretend to be in the dark.

"Oh, babe," Claude finally tells Eddie. "She knows. She knew all along."

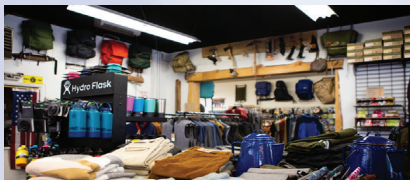
Late in the novel, Robin tells himself that the greatest accomplishment of his life was that "not a single one of his children guessed that Mercy wasn't living at home anymore."

Of course, earlier, their son-in-law had noted, "It was bizarre ... how something so obvious was never, ever talked about."

Without trust, without confidences, family members unbraided themselves from each other and drift apart. But the ties are not so easily undone, and the effects of family are lasting. "You think you're free of them," David notes, "but you're never really free; the ripples are crimped in forever."



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