About This Book

Maryam Yazdan has accompanied her son, Sami, and daughter-in-law, Ziba, to the Baltimore airport to welcome the newest member of their family, a baby girl from Korea. Bitsy and Brad Donaldson, at the airport with their large, boisterous clan to pick up their own adopted infant, invite the Yazdans back to their home to celebrate. The "arrival day" party becomes an annual affair, one of many get-togethers the families share over the years. Maryam, an Iranian who came to America as a young bride more than thirty years earlier but still thinks of herself as an outsider, participates in these events with a mixture of pleasure, curiosity, and disdain. Her American-born son and his wife, who quickly embraced American culture when she came from Iran as a teenager, move more easily in the Donaldsons’ world. Tyler captures this world perfectly, conveying in wry and telling detail the combination of unstinting devotion, obsession, and competitiveness Sami and Ziba and Bitsy and Brad bring to their roles as modern American parents.

Maryam, who has come regard the Donaldsons with restrained but genuine affection, is taken aback when Bitsy’s widowed father, Dave, begins to court her. As their intimacy grows, Maryam finds herself caught between her attraction to Dave’s open, spirited charms and her desire to hold fast to the separateness that has defined her life in America. Their story, like the stories of their children and grandchildren, becomes in Tyler’s deft hands a wonderful exploration of the meaning of identity, home, and family.

Author Biography

Anne Tyler was born in Minneapolis, Minnesota, in 1941 and grew up in Raleigh, North Carolina. She is the author of seventeen novels, including Breathing Lessons, which was awarded the Pulitzer Prize in 1988. A member of the American Academy of Arts and Letters, she lives in Baltimore, Maryland.
Discussion Questions

1. In calling their baby Susan, the Yazdans "chose a name that resembled the name she had come with, Sooki, and also it was a comfortable sound for Iranians to pronounce" [p. 10]. The Donaldsons keep their baby’s Korean name, Jin-Ho. What is the significance of these choices, both within the context of the novel and in the context of adoption in general? Is it important for an adoptive family to give children from another country or ethnic group a sense of their heritage? What insights does Ziba and Bitsy’s fractious disagreement about "Americanization" [p. 46] offer into this question?

2. Right from the start, Maryam feels a deep connection with Susan -- "something around the eyes, some way of looking at things, some onlooker’s look: that was what they shared. Neither one of them quite belonged" [p. 13]. Does Maryam’s pleasure in bonding with Susan hint at needs or emotions that she is unable or unwilling to acknowledge? To what extent does her insistence that she is "Still and forever a guest, on her very best behavior" [p. 15] serve as a convenient excuse for remaining aloof from other people?

3. What aspects of her heritage does Maryam value most and why? Why is she so unsettled by her visit to Iran and her reactions to Iranians in the country [p. 39]? Why is she annoyed when her cousin’s American husband sprinkles bits of Farsi into his conversation [p. 147]? Why has she raised Sami to be "more American than the Americans" [p. 83], even as she clings to her otherness?

4. Does Maryam’s behavior show that she feels not only estranged from American society but also in some way superior to it? What specific incidents and conversations bring this aspect of her personality to light?

5. In addition to being a wonderfully amusing vignette, what is the import of Sami’s "performance piece" [pp. 80-81]? Why does Tyler use humor and mockery to convey a serious point about Americans and how they appear to immigrants? Does the fact that Sami is American-born and-raised make his criticisms more credible (and perhaps more acceptable) than they would be if a newcomer to the country expressed them?

6. How does Maryam differ from Ziba’s parents and her cousin Farah, the other Iranian immigrants depicted in the novel? What factors, both practical and psychological, influence the characters’ desire and ability to make a place for themselves in American society? What do these varying portraits show about the process of assimilation? Are there inherent contradictions between accepting the culture of an adopted homeland and retaining one’s ethnic identity?

7. Compare and contrast Ziba and Bitsy. How do they differ as women? As mothers? Which woman is more sympathetically drawn? How does Tyler use both negative and positive attributes to bring each woman to life? How do the women’s individual approaches to motherhood influence the way they regard and evaluate each other? Is Ziba overly susceptible to Bitsy’s criticism and suggestions? Does her friendship with Ziba, as well as her frequent encounters with Maryam, affect Bitsy’s beliefs or behavior? Does the relationship between Ziba and Bitsy change over the course of the book?
8. How do the portraits of Sami and Brad compare to those of their wives? Are their personalities as richly described? Do they play parallel roles within their families? Is their behavior in relation to their children and wives a reflection of their personalities and the nature of their marriages, or do cultural patterns, expectations, and values also play a part?

9. Does the romance between Dave and Maryam unfold in a realistic way? In addition to Dave’s moving reaction to Connie death, what other events or conversations show that he contains a depth and a self-awareness that Maryam and the others seem oblivious to?

10. What does Maryam’s description of her courtship and marriage [pp. 155-160] add to our image of her? Why has she chosen to keep the story to herself, not even sharing it with Sami? 11. Discuss Maryam’s reaction to Dave’s proposal [pp. 211-214]. What does her conversation with Sami and Ziba reveal about her difficulties in reconciling her prejudices about Americans and her affection for Dave? In what ways do her protests also bring to light her ambivalent feelings about who she is and what she is willing to give up at this stage of her life? Why do you think Maryam makes the decision she does at the end of the book?

12. To what extent does Digging to America echo the themes and concerns Tyler explored in her previous novels? Do Tyler’s views on marriage and family here differ in significant ways from those presented in her earlier works? How does Digging to America compare to other books you have read that portray women trying to establish an identity apart from what is expected--or demanded--of them?