



In Patchett's new book, an avoidable tragedy changes the fates of two families

## FICTION

## A death in the family inspires two works of art

THE PARTY SCENE THAT OPENS Ann Patchett's new novel unspools like a home movie. A lawyer from the L.A. district attorney's office, Albert Cousins, crashes the christening celebration of baby Frances, second daughter of L.A. cop Fix Keating. Bert brings a bottle of gin; Beverly, Fix's wife, halves oranges from the backyard for cocktails. Their collaboration on an assembly line of freshly squeezed drinks leads to an affair that breaks up two families—and joins them. It's chaotic in the moment, but the patina of time reveals a graceful choreography.

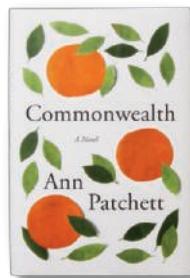
*Commonwealth's* family saga, which follows the six Keating and Cousins kids over five decades, spirals around the secret tale of a child's death and the migration of that tale, lightly disguised, into an award-winning novel by an outsider who was told the story. If you like your fiction to be *about* something, you could say this novel is about the morality of profiting from someone else's experience. You could also say it's about being human—speaking human words, making human choices, messing up with human fallibility and making

amends with your hopeful human heart.

We don't see the novel within the novel, but it's hard to imagine better execution than Patchett's. Moving effortlessly among her people and their pasts, she devotes attention as lovingly to a character whose life in this story spans two paragraphs as she does to Franny, the book's linchpin. Although the death that devastates the clan ostensibly drives the plot, none of the 322 pages lacks a prize-worthy revelation in Patchett's vibrant prose—about parents and siblings and what it means to grow up and let go, and what a bad idea it is to date a novelist.

At the christening party, one of the guests, Father Joe Mike, ruminates on the sudden proliferation of gins-and-juice among the revelers: "He wanted to tell the congregation, the few who were not presently in the Keatings' backyard, how the miracle of loaves and fishes had been enacted here today, but he couldn't find a way to wring enough booze out of the narrative." Patchett could wring fiction from a stone. It's delightful to read what she gets from Valencia oranges.

—RADHIKA JONES



## MEMOIR

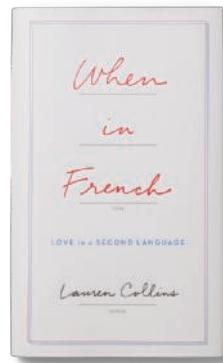
## Bons mots in a new language

WHEN LAUREN COLLINS left her provincial North Carolina hometown, she writes, "no one would have guessed that I would become an American living in Switzerland with a Frenchman I'd met in England." But that's exactly what happened. And when one falls for a Frenchman, one must learn French.

In her emotional, erudite memoir *When in French*, the *New Yorker* writer documents her linguistic labors, including the missteps—she accidentally tells her mother-in-law she gave birth to a coffeemaker—on the road to mastery. At times she expounds on the history and philosophy of language; at others, it feels like catching up with a clever friend you haven't seen since college.

But the most intriguing question posed is as much about identity as language: Are you someone else when you speak and live in a non-native tongue? "I wanted to speak French and to sound like North Carolina," Collins writes. "I was hoping, though I didn't know whether it was possible, to have become a different person without having changed."

—SARAH BEGLEY



PATCHETT: HEIDI ROSS

## MUSIC

## Lady Gaga returns to a changed mainstream that's moved on

LADY GAGA SURFACED AS A FULLY FORMED POP STAR IN THE summer of 2008, fusing ironclad hooks with a theater nerd's avant-gardist sensibility. Her meta-narrative was all about celebrity, which is exactly what she became when a string of monster hits elevated her to icon status in a matter of months. In recent history, no other artist has had such a dizzying ascent to the top of mainstream music's pyramid, a success she sustained with a string of killer albums.

But the past three years have seen Gaga, born Stefani Germanotta, step away from churning out chart toppers. Instead she has made jazz music, including a well-received duets album with Tony Bennett (2014's *Cheek to Cheek*), and delivered a Golden Globe-winning performance on *American Horror Story*. The Sept. 8 release of her new single, "Perfect Illusion," announced a return to the style that made her a star overnight.

Or does it? "Perfect Illusion" is a big song, but it's not a modern one. It's anchored by a roaring refrain and features an unhinged, theatrical vocal performance and a militant drumbeat. It even has a key change on the final chorus—an appealingly old-fashioned diva flourish. This is all out of step with the trends. Since Gaga stepped away from the charts, a new sound has overtaken radio: many of today's biggest hits have a breezy, aerobic quality, often a collaboration between a singer you've probably heard of—Justin Bieber, Rihanna—and a DJ you probably haven't—DJ Snake, or Zedd. The No. 1 single in the country right now, "Closer," was recorded by a pair of DJs called the Chainsmokers along with the Internet-famous singer-songwriter Halsey, and it succeeds by way of a shimmering effortlessness. A song like "Perfect Illusion," with its sludgy production and glam-rock urgency, is as unhip as can be.

Yet there's something timely about the sentiment, if not the execution, of Gaga's song. "Perfect Illusion" is about the way a love affair can suddenly seem fraudulent; even though it's not political, the song plays like an anthem for the disenfranchised, and it arrives as the U.S. threatens to boil over with frustrations about systemic injustices and the nagging sense, across party lines, that everything is a scam. The rage that ripples through "Perfect Illusion" gives voice, uncomfortably, to something simmering in the zeitgeist.

When Gaga came up, it was also a moment of transition for America—at the height of the Great Recession. But back then, her message was uniting, a rallying cry so simple it felt like a salve: *Just dance*. —SAM LANSKY

After several years away from making radio hits, Gaga is back in the game



## ROCKER CRED

Gaga wrote her new single with Tame Impala leader Kevin Parker, the producer Bloodpop and Grammy-winning artist and songwriter Mark Ronson



LADY GAGA: GETTY IMAGES; HIGH MAINTENANCE: HBO

## TIME PICKS



## TELEVISION

**High Maintenance**, which follows a pot dealer as he makes deliveries to a diverse array of New York City customers, makes the leap from web series to HBO on Sept. 16.

## MOVIES

In the heartfelt comedy **My Blind Brother** (Sept. 23), a man (Nick Kroll) and his coddled blind brother (Adam Scott) compete for the affections of the same woman (Jenny Slate).

## BOOKS

In Carl Hiaasen's new novel **Razor Girl** (Sept. 6), a series of unfortunate events befalls a colorful cast of characters in the Florida Keys, from a Hawaiian-shirt-wearing mafioso to a reality-star accordionist.

## PODCASTS

On **"Who? Weekly,"** hosts Lindsey Weber and Bobby Finger divide celebrities into "thems" (the ones you know) and "whos" (the ones that make you go "Who?"), offering a primer on the interconnected web of semifamous D-listers.

