

Oct 14, 2015 16:44 BST

## COMMENT: Review: A Spool of Blue Thread by Anne Tyler

[Julie Scanlon](#), Senior Lecturer in Twentieth to Twenty-First-Century Writing, reviews Anne Tyler's Man Booker Prize shortlisted book *A Spool of Blue Thread* for [The Conversation](#).

Anne Tyler's Booker short-listed [A Spool of Blue Thread](#) is an exquisite meditation on family life. It spans across several generations, taking in one family's secrets and losses, its changes and constancy.

Tyler's characterisation and her attention to descriptive detail are perfect: from the very opening of the novel we're transported into the time and place of the story, eavesdropping with Abby Whitshank on one side of a telephone conversation between her husband Red and their 19-year-old son, Denny.

We visualise Abby's "no-color chenille that had once been pink"; we're there as she subsequently questions Red on the content of the conversation. Abby's character and the Whitshanks' home are neatly captured as we observe her "pacing back and forth, up and down the Persian runner that was worn nearly white in the middle from all the times she had paced it before". Such descriptions are typical of Tyler's novel; her language feels unforced, gently rippling with meaning. From this image alone, we begin to get a sense of Abby as a seasoned worrier, concerned with the problems of her family.

Complex family relationships and difficulties in communication between family members are central threads of the novel's world. The opening scene perfectly sets up the novel's exploration of the intrigue of family dynamics. Denny appears to tell Red he is gay and puts the phone down after Red's laconic and disappointing response of "What thehell".

The novel touches on the lives of four generations of the Whitshank family, exploring issues related to generational change and aspiration. Tyler traces the lines of a recognisable tradition in American fiction by exploring the illusionary nature of the American dream, the idea that progress can be made by anyone by means of hard work.

We hear of Red's father, a tradesman desperate to better himself, who is obsessed with a house he built for a man of higher social standing. When Mr Whitshank Sr. is eventually able to live in the Baltimore house we witness the pains he goes through to secure the appearance of his "new" social status, and those he puts his wife and children through.

Red and his family inherit the house, which, like the slightly worn runner of the opening pages and the family itself, symbolises stability and endurance while exhibiting signs of storms weathered. Red and Abby hold the traditional values of working for a living and enjoying some comfort as the reward, values shared by most of their offspring. But Denny's apparent haphazard employment situation, unreliability and attitude leaves the rest of the family nonplussed and sometimes angry.

The novel also questions what constitutes a family. Secrets emerge that at times fracture and at times consolidate the Whitshanks' sense of identity.

There is a sad commentary upon the social norms of privacy and reserve, norms that are in part reinforced by the perceived boundaries of the family unit, demonstrated through the Whitshanks' lack of connection with a family whom they spend their holidays next to every year. After many years of playing with his children and getting involved, one year the father of this family is seen only on the porch with a blanket over him. The next year he is not there. The Whitshanks can only surmise his death, never having spoken to the family once over all the years.

Despite the fact that "Whitshanks didn't die, was the family's general belief", the novel deals beautifully with responses to the loss of a loved one and with diverse forms of grief. Tyler succeeds in effectively conveying the oscillations of life, capturing harshness as well as absurdity. At one point we see Red, hard of hearing in later age, mishear a neighbour's tale of discovering her dog dead on the door mat; Red thinks she is talking about her grandson.

This is a novel that entices tears of laughter and of sorrow from its readers. It

is immensely engrossing; to read it is to sit on the house porch swing in Baltimore and absorb the story unfolding around you.

This article was originally published on [The Conversation](#). [Read the original article.](#)

---

Northumbria is a research-rich, business-focused, professional university with a global reputation for academic excellence. To find out more about our courses go to [www.northumbria.ac.uk](http://www.northumbria.ac.uk)

If you have a media enquiry please contact our Media and Communications team at [media.communications@northumbria.ac.uk](mailto:media.communications@northumbria.ac.uk) or call [0191 227 4571](tel:01912274571).

## Contacts



### **Rik Kendall**

Press Contact  
PR and Media Manager  
Business and Law / Arts, Design & Social Sciences  
[rik.kendall@northumbria.ac.uk](mailto:rik.kendall@northumbria.ac.uk)  
07923 382339



### **Andrea Slowey**

Press Contact  
PR and Media Manager  
Engineering and Environment / Health and Life Sciences  
[andrea.slowey@northumbria.ac.uk](mailto:andrea.slowey@northumbria.ac.uk)  
07708 509436



### **Rachael Barwick**

Press Contact  
PR and Media Manager  
[rachael.barwick@northumbria.ac.uk](mailto:rachael.barwick@northumbria.ac.uk)  
07377422415



**James Fox**

Press Contact

Student Communications Manager

[james2.fox@northumbria.ac.uk](mailto:james2.fox@northumbria.ac.uk)



**Kelly Elliott**

Press Contact

PR and Media Officer

[kelly2.elliott@northumbria.ac.uk](mailto:kelly2.elliott@northumbria.ac.uk)



**Gemma Brown**

Press Contact

PR and Media Officer

[gemma6.brown@northumbria.ac.uk](mailto:gemma6.brown@northumbria.ac.uk)