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Tyler, Anne  
1988 Breathing Lessons. New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf.

### **Summary of the plot**

Maggie and Ira Moran have been married 28 years and on one particular Saturday in September they make a day trip from their home in Baltimore to the funeral of Maggie's best friend's husband in Deer Lick, Pennsylvania. Maggie and "Serena had been friends forever. Or nearly forever: forty-two years, beginning with Miss Kimmel's first grade" (Tyler 1988: 3). Ira and Maggie and the cacophony of characters we meet throughout Anne Tyler's engaging *Breathing Lessons* are windows into the soul of a people caught in the midst of a disorienting cultural shift.

Refreshingly, Tyler's characters are not caricatures; rather they convey a true to life ambiguity and virtue tainted with selfishness. Through primarily Maggie's eyes, we read how a seemingly simple day trip becomes a complex tale of relational unrest, misunderstanding, grief and regret of the past, and naïve hope for the future. Before Maggie and Ira can begin their trip Maggie has a fender-bender as she pulls out of the auto-body shop, which she promptly drives away from without stopping. After picking up Ira they continue on their way to the funeral. They get into a fight over a past wrong that Maggie holds against Ira, which she gladly tells a waitress about over coffee. This past wrong, the exodus of Fiona their (now) ex-daughter-in-law and granddaughter seven years ago, forms the underlying story of the novel. As readers we do not discover the full story till near the end of the book. Maggie fully blames Ira for Fiona's departure and is obsessed with knitting her family together again.

Eventually the road trip is resumed and the Morans eventually arrive in Deer Lick for the funeral. The funeral itself is an odd amalgam of remembrance and hopelessness. It seems as if Serena, who we discover is a bit of an odd character herself, is more interested in reliving the past than grieving her lost husband. The funeral becomes something of a high school reunion mixed with a re-enactment of Serena's wedding. The guests are almost exclusively high school friends of Maggie and Serena's, a telling indication of the lack of social roots that Max and Serena had in their adulthood. After the funeral, and a viewing of Serena's wedding film, Maggie and Ira leave suddenly after having offended Serena by attempting to have sex in Serena's bedroom (which is the closest we ever get to seeing real intimacy between Maggie and Ira).

The novel then begins what would seem to be a straight-forward narrative. It is anything but. The reader would assume that having attended the funeral, the reason for their trip, that the Morans would return home, for the following day they are to take their daughter, Daisy, to college. However, Tyler is only getting started with her meandering tale of two distracted individuals. Maggie and Ira, through a convoluted series of mishaps, end up "helping" Mr. Otis, an elderly, and somewhat senile, black gentleman. Their help is marginal at best because they, through Maggie's incontinence, cause the situation.

The next leg of their journey takes them, for which Maggie has been scheming, to Cartwheel, the home of Fiona and Leroy. Maggie believes that Fiona is remarrying after the divorce from Jesse (the Moran's eldest); this was the cause of her accident at the body-shop. Maggie thought she heard Fiona on a call-in radio talk-show claiming that the first time she married for love and now she was marrying for security. Maggie is convinced that Fiona and Jesse still love each other and that if she can just intervene, they will reunite.

Maggie convinces Fiona and Leroy to come home with her and Ira, just for the weekend. She manipulates Jesse to join them for dinner and believes that all she need do

is get them together in the same room and they will realize and confess their continued love for one another. As with most of Maggie's plans this too goes awry and Jesse and Fiona cascade into a fight, perpetuated by Ira's "truth-telling" and belittling. The novel ends almost abruptly with Maggie's family just as fragmented as when it began, Ira just as apathetic and disengaged, Daisy (who we, as readers, hardly know; likely intentionally on Tyler's part) immersed in her own world and uninvolved, Jesse and Fiona at odds with one another, and Maggie continuing to scheme a way for her family, or at least she and Leroy, to come together in an idealized familial bliss.

### **Issues being addressed**

*Breathing Lessons* is an insightful peek into the fragmented lives of modern Americans. Tyler deftly weaves an intentionally convoluted narrative that closely approximates the lived experience of persons caught in the postmodern morass of society. The story is only seems to be linear as one would expect a road trip to be. However, through the use of delving into the memories of her characters, primarily Maggie, and the multiple distractions and detours of the Moran's trip we are carried along in a seemingly random journey of false starts and missteps. As such, Tyler's storytelling is an indication of the postmodern shift away from linearity to something like layers and unresolved conflicts.

To an even greater degree, we have a ring-side seat to the emotional and relational fragmentation presently existing in contemporary culture. Maggie, Ira, Fiona, Jesse, Serena, Daisy, and even the lesser characters are all exemplars of an uncomfortable dislocation of self from others, even, maybe especially, from family. The assumed familial unit of modernity is replaced with an odd association of individual actors, each playing out their role with confused identity. Maggie desperately, obsessively even, searches for commonality and understanding. She herself wishes to be understood and to

be seen as confident, whole, and meaningful. Ira impassively and apathetically confronts life, coolly evaluating and critiquing persons on a scale of efficiency, productivity, and stability. Fiona is a lost and wounded soul, longing for connection and affirmation. She lives in an idealized world, not unlike Maggie, but is unable to deal with conflict or discontinuity. Jesse lives with a poet's sensitivities to life, but without a meaningful construct that unites his world and passions, consequently he floats through life unable to follow-through with anything because there is not really anything for which to following-through that has real worth. These desperate characters meander through life, much as the Moran's road-trip. They have no unifying purpose or meaning. They are each attempting to live out their own story with as little interference from others as possible. Maggie seems the most neurotic of them all, perhaps because the story is told from her vantage point, but likely because she actually cares about them being together as a family. Unfortunately, her solutions always involve half-truths and manipulation. She is ultimately working out of her own personal fantasy, not unlike the rest of her family.

Perhaps the most disheartening line in the entire book is the concluding one. "[Maggie] slipped free and moved to her side of the bed, because tomorrow they had a long car trip to make and she knew she would need a good night's sleep before they started" (ibid: 327). The meaninglessness of this statement is striking. Though for all reasonable accounts this day was a relational disaster there is no semblance of reconciliation or conclusion, rather the monotony of life's ongoing, repetitive drudgery marches on. Maggie has no hope for a better future. She naively assumes that tomorrow is a blank slate. She makes no acknowledgment that her relational strife will carry over into their next trip; that her life is integrally connect to those around her.

## **Critical Evaluation**

In sum, Tyler gives a poignant account of life in the postmodern milieu. She accurately and deftly captures the relational fragmentation that many in America experience. *Breathing Lessons* is an engaging and well-crafted story. By the novel's disheartening conclusion we are left longing for the some resolution for Maggie and her family, yet thankful that we are freed from her anxious yearnings. We find revealed within the pages of *Breathing Lessons* an apophatic society, a people more identifiable by what they lack than who they are. From a missional perspective we are challenged to consider how community of the People of God can form in an environment such as Tyler illumines. What does it mean to be the church in this context, with the sort of emotional and relational discontinuity that Tyler reveals? How does spiritual formation happen for these kinds of people? These and many more questions are prompted by *Breathing Lessons*.