



The Magician's Assistant

Ann Patchett

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Sabine-- twenty years a magician's assistant to her handsome, charming husband-- is suddenly a widow. In the wake of his death, she finds he has left a final trick; a false identity and a family allegedly lost in a tragic accident but now revealed as very much alive and well. Named as heirs in his will, they enter Sabine's life and set her on an adventure of unraveling his secrets, from sunny Los Angeles to the windswept plains of Nebraska, that will work its own sort of magic on her.

The Magician's Assistant Details

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From Reader Review The Magician's Assistant for online ebook

Carol Moore says

The Magician's Assistant *** 1/2 Ann Patchett

I found the trio of Sabine, Parsifal and Phan all too good, too unflawed, too beautiful, and Sabine's adoration of Parsifal for 22 years was a little hard to fathom. There was apparently no heartache, no discord. In addition, Sabine had been so in love with the glamorous, gay Parsifal that she had failed to realize that she was really gay herself, and thus her attraction to Kitty at the end. That was a bit of a stretch--this beautiful, personable, intelligent, talented woman did not have a clue about her own sexual orientation. She was not living "apart" from the gay world after all. Other aspects that were too idealized: Sabine's relationship with her parents and what it's like living in L.A.

The ending was odd. There was obvious foreshadowing, which went on for too long. Kitty and her boys need to move to L.A. and move in with Sabine. The reader figures out this is where things are heading. Sabine finally realizes she should ask them to move to L.A. That's fine, but the novel then ends abruptly. It's not that the reader needed to know exactly whether they would move to L.A. It's that the ending has to be satisfying.

I did like reading about a magician's life, having known little about this before, and I did like the way Patchett used dreams in this novel to advance the story or add information that would have been hard to introduce otherwise. They weren't your usual dreams, but more like dialogues with the dead--well, mainly Sabine and Phan, leading up to Parsifal's appearance at the end. The dreams put the reader in touch with Sabine's grief and how the grief changes slowly over time. I enjoyed the way Parsifal's mysterious past was gradually revealed.

The writing is superb. One pitch-perfect sentence after another kept me hooked. I'm remembering the descriptions about magic tricks, and the times Sabine did some tricks for her "new family". I felt like I was there. I could see the family watching the same Johnny Carson segment every night. That was also a good device for advancing the story and showing the way grief slowly changed.

The narration for the recorded book was excellent. Dot, the mother/grandmother, was fabulous. Her character came alive. Descriptions of the cold and snow in Nebraska were unforgettable. The portrayal of small town life was realistic.

Book Concierge says

Digital audio book performed by Karen Ziemba

3.5***

From the book jacket: Sabine – twenty years a magician's assistant to her handsome, charming husband – is suddenly a widow. In the wake of his death, she finds he has left a final trick: a false identity and a family allegedly lost in a tragic accident but now revealed as very much alive and well. Named as heirs in his will, they enter Sabine's life and set her on an adventure of unraveling his secrets, from sunny Los Angeles to the windswept plains of Nebraska, that will work its own sort of magic on her.

My reactions:

The first book by Patchett that I read was *Bel Canto* , and I was struck with how masterfully she portrayed

those characters. Once again, I marvel at Patchett's skill in drawing fully realized characters. Even the deceased – Parsifal, Phan, Albert – are alive in the way they are remembered by Sabine, by Dot, or by Kitty.

The story unfolds in bits and pieces, much as it would in real life. You don't tell everything at once to someone you've just met, and likewise Sabine keeps some things to herself in describing her years with Parsifal to his mother, and Dot keeps key bits of information from Sabine in relating Parsifal/Guy's childhood. In this way, the reader feels the same hesitancy as these characters. And yet, their ultimate decisions seem correct and reasonable, even when relayed as abrupt and hasty.

I also really liked how the environment affects their actions. Sabine is a different person in sunny Los Angeles than she is in snowy Nebraska.

Karen Ziembra does a fine job performing the audio book. She has good pacing and a facility for voices that made it clear who each character was.

nomadreader (Carrie D-L) says

(review originally posted at <http://nomadreader.blogspot.com>)

The basics: At the beginning of the novel, Parcifal, the magician of the novel's title, dies suddenly. Sabine, the assistant of the title, is left to grieve.

My thoughts: After having loved State of Wonder, Bel Canto, and Run, I was convinced Ann Patchett was one of my literary soul sisters who could do no wrong. Sadly, I didn't connect with The Magician's Assistant at all, and I struggled to even finish the novel. My problems with this novel really begin with Sabine. While I'm normally an empathetic reader, I found myself instead wanting to shake Sabine. She fell in love with Parcifal years ago and worked as his assistant for more than twenty years. Parcifal, however, is gay, and he was in love with Phan, who died of AIDS. Parcifal was also sick with AIDS, and he and Sabine were preparing for his death, but something else killed him. As Sabine is dealing with her grief, I failed to understand her weakness. Her behavior seemed to be that of a teenager or woman in her early twenties. Patchett kept reminding me Sabine was in her forties, and I couldn't help but feel sad for her: she married a man who only loved her as a friend and has nothing else after his death but his money and the money of Phan.

As pitiful as Sabine was, I still kept hoping to connect with this novel. When Sabine learns Parcifal's mother is in fact alive and well in Nebraska, she welcomes her and Parcifal's sister when they visit Los Angeles. I hoped the preposterousness of this situation would carry humor and grace, but instead, it just seemed sad and somewhat far-fetched all around. Despite these long-held secrets about Parcifal (his family still knows him as Guy), something always felt off about the people; they never felt real either. There were a few digs at Midwestern life I didn't buy either, but I could have overlooked some of the caricature if I felt the emotional depth I have in Patchett's other works.

Favorite passage: "Most people can't be magicians for the same reason they can't be criminals. They have guilty souls. Deception doesn't come naturally. They want to be caught."

The verdict: Despite my love of Patchett's writing, I never connected with Sabine in this story, and I never felt truly engaged with the narrative. While her writing excelled, plot and character development were

lacking, and overall, this novel left me cold.

Rating: 3 out of 5

Kara says

This book surprised me. Throughout the whole thing, I was never exactly sure how much I was enjoying it, and yet I couldn't wait to pick the book back up and continue reading. By time the book was done, I wanted to read more, and wanted the story to continue.

The story itself is strange, very strange, but it draws you in immediately. It's the story of a woman named Sabine who is coming to terms with exploring the hidden past of her husband, a famous gay magician after his death. You wonder how this story is going to work, which is the beauty of how well it draws you in. It's a beautiful example of story-telling, and the writing is flowing and enticing.

A few problems: A lack of chapters. I know this is a clear choice of style, but I found it really hard to be able to start the book up again after putting it down for the night, so the book that was meant to flow so perfectly ended up being a bit choppy because there was never a good place to stop and think. Also the ending was very... abrupt, and unsatisfying.

Definitely enjoyed the book, and it convinced me to try another book of hers.

Una Tiers says

Five stars with reluctance since I couldn't describe what the attraction this book had for me. Whether it was the grass is greener concept or we're all the same, or the draw of magic. The sad life of Sabine moved to a new chapter although she will likely continue to live propelled with other people's direction.
I absolutely loved the character of the rabbit who seemed a cross between a cat and dog.

Laura says

I know you are thinking, is there a book you don't like, Laura? Here's the deal. If I don't like a book I can barely read it, much less finish it. So if I do read it-I like it, in varying degrees, but I like it. So tonight I read the Magician's Assistant, by Ann Patchett. If you have read Bel Canto, (and you should have, though I'm not sure I'm spelling it right at the moment.)then you know her style. You get hypnotised by the story, by the language, you get into this rhythm that you can't break until you finish it, so you keep reading and reading until it is 12:15 in the am and you are finally done, but then you can't believe it ends. What!! Ends!! You are not ready, but there you have it. You sit there for a while, because you're thinking if you open the book again, you will have found that you missed a chapter, that there is MORE.

When a story ends but leaves you still thinking about each character and who they are and why they do what they do, that they are probable, even if their situations aren't, and what would happen if the story kept going, then it is a story worth reading. So read it!

Audra (Unabridged Chick) says

This is my second Patchett novel, and I liked it even less than the previous one I read (*State of Wonder*).

First, I totally misunderstood the premise of this novel. I thought our heroine Sabine's lovely hottie magician husband dies, and then she discovers he was secretly gay, and *then* discovers he lied about his family being dead and seeks them out blah blah. Instead, the story is that Sabine's lovely hottie magician husband is openly gay and only marries her in the last year so she may inherit his things. He's had numerous loves despite her affection for him. When he dies, she discovers his family isn't dead and seeks them out blah blah. Slight difference, but a significant one: it put the idea of knowing more on Sabine. She knew who Parsifal was, to a point -- she'd been his assistant for 20 years -- so I found her behavior in this book to be a bit piteous and aggravating.

Disappointingly, rather than explore the source of her mental and emotional stasis, Patchett has Sabine pursue Parsifal's life -- yet another obsessive step into the life of a man who didn't love her like she loved him. Since I wasn't fixated on Parsifal the way Sabine was, this whole journey didn't capture me. That Sabine seemed to have little emotional growth and development along the way -- other than to glom onto one of Parsifal's relatives -- frustrated me, but I'm not sure that was the intent of Patchett's story. I think we were supposed to like and relate to Sabine but I found her in need of therapy and some time alone to think about who she is and what she wants from *her* life.

My next complaint is a little harder to articulate, but there was something dated, I guess, about the novel's feel regarding gays. In some ways, that makes sense -- this book came out in 1997, nearly twenty years ago -- but at the same time, I feel like there's an artificial sense of shock and surprise created by Patchett to evoke tension, maybe. I'll have to meditate on this more as I know I'm not expressing myself clearly -- while reading this, I found myself venting to my wife about how all the Midwestern gays I know (even the ones not speaking to their families) had a more layered relationship to their kin than Patchett's imagining.

And on to my final complaint about this book: I wasn't wild about Patchett's use of setting. In *State of Wonder*, I thought she evoked the Amazon beautifully, magically. In this book, I found her articulation of Nebraska and the Midwest to be little more than caricature. I suppose since I've lived in Nebraska and the Midwest for a good chunk of my life (and not the Amazon), I cared more, but I felt Patchett used stereotypical shorthand to paint the setting -- country kitsch decor, Walmart, brutish spouses -- rather than really evoke the beauty of a place that moves, lives, and breathes differently than L.A.

The writing is very Patchett-ian, I would say. I read a review about this book describing its "...dreams, flashbacks, and long, elliptical conversations..." which is spot on, and made me insane. I'm not wild about dream sequences in books; I find them a bit self-indulgent and pointless. Perhaps if I liked Sabine more, that element would have resonated, but since I didn't, I felt tired -- I kept putting this one down rather than wallow in the linguistic snakiness.

So, in conclusion, I'm a big cranky wench. Millions of others have enjoyed this novel so I'm sure it's mostly just me.

Dawn says

Is this really Ann Patchett? While the story was mildly intriguing, I couldn't really like the main character. Sabine seemed too satisfied with living a half-life (in love with a gay man, an assistant instead of a magician, a maker of architectural models rather than an architect, etc.). The literary symbolism also seemed clumsy and obvious (last name Fettters, for example). Finally, and most annoying to me as I live here, the ridiculous caricature of Midwesterners made me want to scream. COME ON - the landscape is not all flat, the kitchens aren't decorated with roosters, and husbands are not wifebeaters or mild nerds. I flipped to the back cover to read the author bio. The first sentence: Ann Patchett lives in Los Angeles...no kidding!

Yawn.

Sandie says

With *The Magician's Assistant*, Ann Patchett has performed the proverbial "Hat Trick" with a tale that is filled with beautiful writing but contains nothing new in the way of plot.

By diverting our attention with conversations with the dead, flashbacks, dreams and vicarious travel being experienced by Sabine, the title character of this piece and widow of Parsifal the Magician, she manages to make us think we are experiencing a tale of substance when, in fact, it is really all just smoke and mirrors. This story of a woman in love with a man who is in love with a man, as well as the "tragic" childhood experiences and hidden family with a trunkful of secrets are classic Hollywood fodder and not worthy of the woman who gave us *Bel Canto* and *Patron Saint of Liars*.

Okay, I get the premise. Everyone is searching for love and acceptance and at sometime in our lives we all have to deal with death, or loss, or grief or a combination of all of the above. This search, however, was boring and it's final outcome less than satisfying and definitely without true resolution. Ms. Patchett was probably going for an abstract look at one woman's spiritual journey. All I can say is you had better pack a large lunch to take along on this trip, because that is the only thing that will sustain you, since there is little in this story to feed your grey matter.

Karolyn Sherwood says

It is rare to find a literary page-turner, but Ann Patchett never fails to give us exactly that. Her writing is elegant, sophisticated and quiet; it never gets in the way of the story. The closer I got to the end of this book, the more obsessed I became with it, wanting to make sure that everyone was going to be okay, at least in some sense of the word.

The Magician's Assistant follows the same pattern of Patchett's other novels: An unsuspecting character is thrust into a world full of people he/she never even dreamed of, replete with drama and emotion and confusion—as well as hope and love. Her stories can be one-sided, but she creates sympathetic characters who come to life for me in ways that few authors can manage. I always find myself wanting to hug the protagonist like my sister or brother. In this book, Sabine could have been my best friend—the one who has suffered so much sadness. Certain passages of this novel actually made me cry; that is how well Patchett creates authentic characters with real emotions. And whether her stories take us to Nebraska or the South

American Amazon (State of Wonder), Patchett paints a picture of the environment so clearly that I almost needed a sweater to read the part of this book that takes place in the brutal cold of a Midwestern winter.

Ann Patchett is such a wonderful storyteller that I finish each of her books totally spellbound.

5 Stars.

Barbara says

In my analysis of this book, I have to remind myself that Patchett had written it prior to her amazing, "Bel Canto" and her most recent, "Run". The latter included flat characterizations, and was filled with implausible coincidences and did not meet my expectations for "suspense", as was publicized. In this novel, Patchett had already demonstrated her talent for fashioning her language to convey the complexities of her characters' emotions and actions. She was so adept at this in "Bel Canto", one could almost hear the music!

"The Magician's Assistant" is Sabine, recent widow of Parsifal, a talented, complex magician. Following his death, she discovers that he had a family, the existence of which he had never revealed. In the midst of Sabine's deep grief, she then has to contend with a new aspect of dealing with his absence. Throughout this book, Sabine's grief and sense of loss is poignantly felt. Patchett has written a tender, sad, often symbolic and sometimes humorous tale. Sabine is obviously downcast, but warm and likable. Other characterizations are vivid, varied and, for the most part, engaging.

Although the subject of mourning and grief would appear unappealing, Patchett has created a compelling, warm novel.

Julie says

I have really become an admirer of Patchett's writing, and this book was a close second to Bel Canto, which I adored. The Magician's Assistant is Sabine, and she is mourning the sudden loss of her husband, Parsifal. But the story goes deeper than that. Parsifal is gay, and shortly after the death of his lover, Phan, he marries Sabine to ensure her security in the event of his death. Sabine had been Parsifal's long-time assistant in his magic act, but more importantly, they shared a bond of friendship that was unbreakable. When Parsifal's lawyer notifies Sabine that he had a family (who he claimed were dead) and that his name is really Guy Fetter, Sabine's world gets turned on its head. Suddenly, the man she thought she knew most in the world is a stranger to her, and she wants to learn everything about his past that he has kept from her. So the Fetter family enters Sabine's life, and the book follows the development of these new relationships seamlessly.

There is a hint of magic in Patchett's writing, and not just the tricks and illusions she recalls in The Magician's Assistant. She writes relationships and dialogue in a manner that seems effortless. Her characters are entirely human – flawed and lovable. This was a great read and a touch of magic amongst the ordinary.

peefer says

This morning, my belligerent son used his well-honed fingernails to pierce a hole in my hand, drawing blood. When I felt the pain, I smacked his hand away in self defense. I don't feel like talking to him, or even looking at him, for a week. I think he feels the same. He is six, and he has beautiful eyes.

Of course, were he to be diagnosed with brain cancer, my heart would explode and die, and my will to live would wane faster than you could say *intentional overdose*. Can a person overdose on Advil? It's all I've got in the house.

I don't know what I need. Rather, what I want is impossible. What I want is to start over, not just today, but everything.

Sorry, I don't really have a point here, so I think I'll just end this aimless post mid-thought. Anne Patchett did. Why can't I?

Lisa says

I enjoyed reading the book, but after reading it I couldn't say that I loved it (hence, three stars).

Sabine, the main character, spends time with her dead husband's family, none of whom she knew existed. The reader is supposed to come along on the journey with her to discover the missing parts of her longtime friend/spouse, but I didn't gain any new insights to him from her visit back to his roots. The West Coast magician reinvented himself too well to have any connection to the Midwestern teenager (by the way, the Midwest is NOT as bleak and backward as portrayed in the book--the stereotypes were obnoxious). After a traumatic childhood, he left town and ended up with love and friendship and happiness. Ta-da. But, the novel is called *The Magician's Assistant*, and really is about Sabine's search for...something (I'm from the Midwest and not "with it" enough to figure out what). I just hope she found it because I never quite understood her living a half-life and found her contentment in always serving as the second banana tiresome.

My best description of the novel, after reading it, was that I felt like I was eavesdropping on someone else's conversation: I wasn't in earshot for the beginning and didn't get to hear the end, but it helped pass the time while I was sitting there.

Lisa says

I picked this book up a few times and lost interest before finishing the first page. But when I finally got past the first three or four pages, I was really hooked. These characters are just so, so compelling. They're actually so compelling that when I was partway through the book I almost lit a candle at church for two of the characters in it, temporarily confusing them with real people. Which I think is more a testament to how well-written and absorbing the book is than to how socially maladjusted I am.

