

## ESSAY

# Ann Patchett on Why We Need Life-Changing Books Right Now

By Ann Patchett

- March 30, 2020

Here's how it happened: In early November 2018, Kate DiCamillo came to Nashville while she was on tour for her novel "[Louisiana's Way Home](#)." It's the middle book of a trilogy that started with "[Raymie Nightingale](#)" and ended last year with "[Beverly, Right Here](#)."

Kate and I had crossed paths a few times over the years and had a kind of, "Hey, hi, how are you?" relationship, which is to say we had met but didn't know each other. She was doing her event for "Louisiana's Way Home" at an elementary school in town; I picked up lunch for her and her publicist and drove it out there. I did it because Niki, our events manager at Parnassus Books, asked me to. She told me Kate was a big fan of mine. Niki very rarely tells me what to do, but when she does I listen because she's always right.

Kate and her publicist and I sat in tiny chairs at a tiny table in the school library and ate our salads. They made a big fuss over how nice I was to bring them lunch. The whole encounter lasted less than 30 minutes. Then Kate gave a talk in an auditorium packed with kids and their parents. I hadn't meant to stay but then I did. She talked about [her mother's vacuum cleaner](#). She was great.

That would have been the end of the story, were it not for the fact that the very next day I got an email from Nell Freudenberger, a terrific novelist whose books I love. Nell asked me if I knew Kate DiCamillo.

"Strange you should ask," I said. "We had lunch yesterday."

Nell went on to tell me that she had just finished reading "The Miraculous Journey of Edward Tulane" to her son, and that it had cracked them open and made them better people. "You have to tell her that for me," Nell said. "Will you do that?"

I didn't have Kate DiCamillo's email address but I was pretty sure I could find her, except that I didn't want to find her. I had never read any of her work. I don't have children and frankly it never occurred to me to read middle-grade novels. I was a jerk. Instead of going to look for the author, I went to Parnassus to look for the book.

That night I read "The Miraculous Journey of Edward Tulane," and, well, it changed my life. I couldn't remember when I had read such a perfect novel. I didn't care what age it was written for. The book defied categorization. I felt as if I had just stepped through a magic portal, and all I had to do to pass through was believe that I wasn't too big to fit.

This beautiful world had been available to me all along but I had never bothered to pick up the keys to the kingdom.

And so I started to read more of Kate's books, until in the end I had read every single one of them. There are a lot, but most have pictures. It was one of the most satisfying literary adventures of my life. It was also incredibly calming, which is why I mention it now. There's something about being able to read an entire book in one sitting that's emotionally very satisfying. Not only are the books beautifully written, the stories have gorgeous arcs. They twist in ways you never see coming and do not shy away from despair or joy or strangeness. They are, each one, sui generis, each one extraordinary.

So maybe you don't have children, or they're not small or not in the house. It doesn't matter. Read them anyway. Maybe you do have children and you can read these books together as a family. My point is this: Don't miss out. Do not make the mistake I nearly made and fail to read them because you are under the misconception that they are not for you. They are for you.

The novelist Yiyun Li is [hosting a "War and Peace" book club](#) called Tolstoy Together on the website of the literary magazine A Public Space. You're asked to read 12 pages a day. It's a great idea. But my very different idea is also great, and it might make you feel better.

You can read Kate's books in any order you like. I break the novels into two categories: the realistic books of childhood (of which the Raymie Nightingale trilogy and "Because of Winn-Dixie" are prime examples) and the magic animal books ("The Magician's Elephant," "The Tale of Despereaux" and, of course, "The Miraculous Journey of Edward Tulane." There are more). I lean toward magical animals but that's just my thing. I loved them all.

There are also the chapter books of Deckawoo Drive for younger readers, and of those I urge you not to miss "Where Are You Going, Baby Lincoln?" and "Eugenia Lincoln and the Unexpected Package." For even younger readers there is the Mercy Watson series about a well-meaning pig who likes hot buttered toast. Who doesn't like hot buttered toast? There are also picture books.

Believe me when I say I started out intending to read "The Miraculous Journey of Edward Tulane," just that one book. I couldn't stop. In the end I read them all because I wanted to keep the genius of Kate DiCamillo in my head. Somewhere in this epic adventure I tracked Kate down. I delivered Nell Freudenberger's message. I delivered my own message: These books that you've written, these books that I love? They've made my world a better place. They changed my life.

Ann Patchett is the co-owner of Parnassus Books in Nashville. Her most recent novel is "The Dutch House."