In her latest, Tyler continues the message: 'only connect'

By Glenn C. Altschuler

Special to The Baltimore Sun

January 3, 2010

Noah's Compass, by Anne Tyler. Alfred A. Knopf. $25.95

"You're the only Baltimorean I know who leaves his front door unlocked," Liam Pennywell's ex-wife tells him. "Even though you've had a burglary. But then any time someone walks in you complain that they're intruding. ... Here's solitary sad old Liam, only God help anybody who steps in and tries to get close."

The main character in Anne Tyler's 18th novel, Liam sometimes senses that his life is "drying up and hardening, like one of those mouse carcasses you find beneath a radiator." And that he'll die alone, "among stacks of yellowed newspapers and the dried out rinds of sandwiches moldering on plates."

A promising graduate student in philosophy, Liam ended up teaching fifth grade in a private school - and has just lost his job. He's had two failed marriages, three daughters who forgot his 60th birthday, a sister to whom he seldom speaks and a mere "handful of friends - more like acquaintances, really." To add injury to insult, on the night after he moves into a little condominium on the outskirts of the city, he's clobbered and can't remember what happened.

In "Noah's Compass," Tyler captures, with grace and good humor, the shifts in the relationships between parents and children, husbands and wives, likers and lovers, wrought by the passage of time. She reminds us that although sensitive people cannot - and should not - avoid "The Great Sadness" that accompanies an existence that is fleeting and might be meaningless, they don't have to dwell there. Echoing E.M. Forster, "only connect" is the whole of her sermon.

A middle-class white Baltimorean, Liam is amusingly, annoyingly and achingly normal. Although he acknowledges that there is "something fetching" about his 4-year-old grandson's fragile little ears and "his tiny bare feet in laughingly small flip-flops," he feels no significant attachment to him.

He concludes that he has nothing to say to his father and stepmother, the home-wrecker who has turned into a "puffy pigeon shaped" 70-something. "Wasn't it amazing," Liam thinks, that the human race is still subject to biology: "here they sat - his ancient father shriveled to a husk, the femme fatale's swollen feet into calico mules."

Liam hopes his father will say "something significant, give some clue about his life." And he does. "Nothing wrong with you getting a share of happiness, too," Bard Pennywell proclaims, before wincing, "as if he had embarrassed himself."

Tyler does not allow this advice to become the deus-ex-machina denouement of "Noah's Compass." But the
ending she chooses is almost as platitudinous. To be sure, Liam remains "ambushed by complexities," especially in his liaison with Eunice Dunstead, an aide to a billionaire with Alzheimer's. "Plump and frizzy-haired and bespectacled, dumpily dressed, bizarrely jeweled, too young for him and too earnest," Eunice makes Liam "feel unspeakably lucky." And guilty.

As he makes a decision about his last chance at love, Liam learns that he'd had amnesia long before he was mugged. "All along," he realizes, "he had experienced only the most glancing relationship with his own life. He had dodged the tough issues, avoided the conflicts, gracefully skirted adventure." In repressing bad memories - about his youth, his marriages, and his daughters - he'd thrown away the good ones as well.

Realizing, with Socrates, that "the fewer his wants, the closer he was to the gods," Liam tells his daughter he's fine. He's got good health, a good book to read, a few bucks in the bank and a chicken in the oven. He means it, Tyler insists, because those he loves are with him, even when he's alone. You want to believe her. You really do.

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