Anne Tyler's new novel continues her American mastery

"A Spool of Blue Thread" by Anne Tyler (From the book cover)

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By Anne Tyler

Knopf. 368 pp. $25.95

Reviewed by Glenn Altschuler

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As with most families in Anne Tyler's novels, there is nothing all that remarkable about the Whitshanks. None of them is famous or exceptionally smart or good-looking. The Whitshanks pride themselves, Tyler tells us, on their patience, but behind it is envy, disappointment, and "a talent for pretending that everything is fine."

In *A Spool of Blue Thread*, her 20th novel, Tyler reveals the hidden cracks in three generations of Whitshanks. Central to the narrative is the dream house built in Baltimore by the once dirt-poor Junior Whitshank, an ambitious carpenter who cannot hide his resentment of his wealthy neighbors. This dream house is also the place where Junior's son, Redcliffe, a contractor, and Abby Dalton Whitshank, a social worker, raised four children.

*A Spool of Blue Thread* showcases Tyler's knack for capturing thoughts and feelings unsparingly and sympathetically. By turns quirky, competitive, cruel, and kind, her Whitshanks, like many of us, do and do not know their place in their family and their world. They relish and resent residing in "one single same old never-ending spot."

The novel is filled with authentic and memorable moments, many of them achingly sad. Determined that his house will reflect the social class to which he aspires, Junior varnishes the porch swing the color of buckwheat honey, to add depth to the character of the wood. On move-in day, he discovers his wife has deceived and defied him. Junior removes the paint that Eugene, his "first colored employee," has surreptitiously slapped on the swing, but realizes that the "the walk would be marked indelibly, engraved with Swedish blue" - a color favored by poor people - "for all time."

As Linnie Mae Whitshank strolls up the walk, "with her spine very straight and her hat very level," Junior concludes that from the age of 13, his wife had "set out to snag him and succeeded without half trying" and would continue "yanking his whole life around the way she would yank a damp sweater that she had pulled out of the washtub to block and shape."

The Whitshanks have kept secrets, big and small. And some of their thoughts, feelings, and actions remain downright inexplicable, to themselves as well as others.

It seems right, therefore, for Tyler to end her novel inconclusively, with Denny, Abby's favorite child, the moodiest and most mysterious Whitshank. Denny says he's ready to love and be loved and agrees to live above a garage while he is on "one day at a time" probation. He is leaving behind the house on Bouton Road, perhaps forever, and he has or has not come to terms with his uncertain future.

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