Book Club Discussion Guide

About the Book

Digging to America
by Anne Tyler

Tyler (Breathing Lessons) encompasses the collision of cultures without losing her sharp focus on the daily dramas of modern family life in her 17th novel. When Bitsy and Brad Donaldson and Sami and Ziba Yazdan both adopt Korean infant girls, their chance encounter at the Baltimore airport the day their daughters arrive marks the start of a long, intense if sometimes awkward friendship. Sami's mother, Maryam Yazdan, who carefully preserves her exotic "outsiderness" despite having emigrated from Iran almost 40 years earlier, is frequently perplexed by her son and daughter-in-law's ongoing relationship with the loud, opinionated, unapologetically American Donaldsons. When Bitsy's recently widowed father, Dave, endearingly falls in love with Maryam, she must come to terms with what it means to be part of a culture and a country. Stretching from the babies' arrival in 1997 until 2004, the novel is punctuated by each year's Arrival Party, a tradition manufactured and comically upheld by Bitsy; the annual festivities gradually reveal the families' evolving connections. Though the novel's perspective shifts among characters, Maryam is at the narrative and emotional heart of the touching, humorous story, as she reluctantly realizes that there may be a place in her heart for new friends, new loves and her new country after all.
Anne Tyler (born October 25, 1941) is an American novelist.

Tyler, the eldest of four children, was born in Minneapolis, Minnesota. Her father was a chemist and her mother a social worker. Her early childhood was spent in a succession of Quaker communities in the mountains of North Carolina and in Raleigh. She didn't attend a school until she was 11 and this unorthodox upbringing enabled her to view 'the normal world with a certain amount of distance and surprise'.

She graduated at age nineteen from Duke University, and completed graduate work in Russian studies at Columbia University in New York City. She worked as a librarian and bibliographer before moving to Maryland. In 1963, Tyler married Iranian psychiatrist and novelist Taghi Mohammad Modarressi, with whom she had two daughters, Tezh and Mitra. Modarressi died in 1997. Tyler resides in Baltimore, Maryland, where most of her novels are set.
1. What does the title, "Digging to America," refer to? Who is digging to America in this story?

2. How do the characters define America and what it means to be American? The Yazdans never tire of hearing Sami talk about Americans. Do you agree with his characterizations? How would you define Americans? What does it mean to be an American?

3. Maryam defines herself as an outsider. In what ways is she an outsider? Is her "outsiderness" her own doing or an inevitable part of living in a foreign country? Why does she resist attempts to be "brought in" by the Donaldsons?

4. Which other characters are outsiders? In what ways do different characters attempt to belong? Do any of them purposely isolate themselves from others?

5. Anne Tyler writes from many different perspectives. Why do you think she does this rather than telling the whole story from Maryam Yazdan's perspective or from a third person narrator?

6. Why did Maryam break off her relationship with Dave? Did she love him? Did he make her happy? Do you think they ever got back together?

7. Why was Maryam so careful not to impose on Ziba? Did their carefulness with each other help their relationship or keep them apart? Was Maryam a good mother in-law? Why did Ziba's family refer to her as "Her Highness?"

8. *Digging to America* is built around the story of two families adopting Korean infants. What roles do Susan and Jin-Ho play in the story?

9. Why does Jin-Ho ask to be called "Jo?" Why doesn't she like the Arrival Parties?

10. How would you describe the Donaldsons? Maryam realizes she loves Bitsy and her manufactured "traditions" at the end of the novel. Do you love Bitsy or find her character frustrating? Would you want her as a friend?

11. What did you learn about Iranian culture from *Digging to America*?