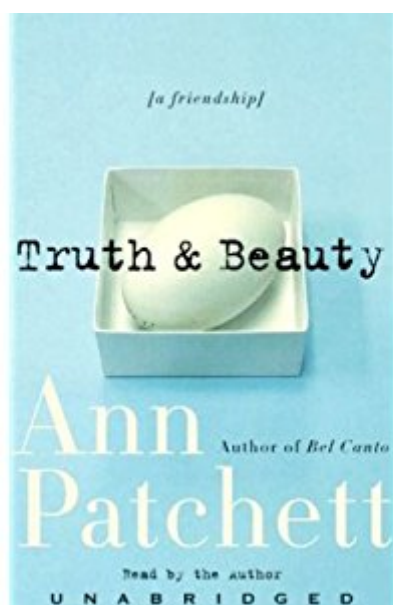


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Truth & Beauty: A Friendship



Synopsis

A New York Times Bestseller What happens when the person who is your family is someone you aren't bound to by blood? . . . when the person you promise to love and to honor for the rest of your life is not your lover, but your best friend? Ann Patchett's startlingly intimate first work of nonfiction tells the story of her friendship with writer Lucy Grealy, shining a fresh and revealing light on the world of women's friendships and showing us what it means to stand together. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

This memoir is about the friendship between two woman writers, the novelist Ann Patchett and the poet/memoirist Lucy Grealy. I randomly picked this up from my neighborhood cafe book exchange and loved it. I immediately vowed to find Patchett's novels, which is not always a response I have when I read a memoir I like, as I have not bothered to pick up novels by, say, Anthony Bourdain or Augusten Burroughs. Perhaps the difference is that in the latter two cases, the personality of the author and the milieu is half the charm, whereas the virtues of Patchett's book, which lie not just in the prose (which is excellent) but in the depiction of relationships and a character portrait of someone other than the author, would seem to translate more easily to a novel. So I was pleased to discover that I already had Patchett's *The Magician's Apprentice*, which I have no recollection of buying. I had earlier read Grealy's memoir, *Autobiography of a Face*, which is about her diagnosis of jaw cancer at the age of nine, her horrifying and lengthy treatment with chemotherapy, radiation,

and surgery that removed much of her jaw, and of her experience growing up with a disfigured face. Though it was quite poetically written and the chemotherapy descriptions in particular were almost unreadably vivid, I had hoped for more of a sense of the author as a person, or more discussion of her experiences as an adult, or something-- it read to me as if large sections were missing or opaque.

The first time I met Lucy Grealy was at a party where she didn't know anyone. My friend, a man who at the time was dying of AIDS and who had taken care to read her work beforehand, insisted we approach her to welcome her, as she stood quite alone, looking overwhelmed and not at all at ease. He smiled warmly and extended his hand, telling her how much he admired her writing. She appraised him sourly, made some reference of the "of course you admire my writing, I write well," variety, and turned sharply away. The second time I met Lucy Grealy, I was strolling through a quaint town with another friend, with whom she had gone to grad school. Upon seeing Grealy, he called out to her and crossed the street to congratulate her on her book. Seeing him approach, Grealy crossed the street at an angle to avoid him, and when they later ended up at the same award gathering for writers, she turned to him and said, "YOU? They gave YOU the same award they gave ME?" What I found amazing, then, as I read Ann Patchett's book, was that Patchett describes literally hundreds of incidents far more negative than the ones outlined above, faithfully revealing Grealy as the rude, weak, petulant, narcissistic, petty, disturbed, and yes, utterly ugly person that she was (although I would argue that her inner ugliness was far, far greater than her facial deformity) and yet, somehow makes Grealy if not sympathetic then certainly compelling. I have to re-read the book to see exactly how Patchett does it. I do know that she acknowledges the hard truths of Grealy's rather deficient character with wisdom and charity. Who among us could walk that tightrope of love and honesty? I couldn't, and I don't think many others could, either.

I read this book for the first time because I loved Ann Patchett's *Bel Canto*. Not knowing what the book was about, the first reading was rather shocking. I have never read another biography like it. This second reading was for my book group and we also decided to read *The Autobiography of a Face*. They work like companion books, and Patchett was obviously picking up where Lucy left off. Her title is even lifted from the title of one of Grealy's chapters. She often echoes Lucy's sentiments about her many emotional and physical problems. The two women were not friends during their simultaneous matriculation at Sarah Lawrence, but Ann knew who Lucy was. Theirs is a co-dependent relationship, with Ann as the strong one, the sensible one, the substitute parent, the

big sister. All of her relationships, at least as presented in this book, play second fiddle to the all-consuming one with Lucy. Lucy is a friend because she needs lots of friends. Her family is mostly absent through most of her serious operations and various depressions. Reading this novel made me wonder where they were. You get to know them a little better from Lucy's book. In both memoirs they are conspicuously absent a great deal of the time. Lucy is a selfish, stubborn, artistic, free-spirited, waif-like presence in the lives of those she knows. Ann is constantly amazed at how many people know and adore Lucy, and how all these relationships are maintained with the primary players rarely meeting, until they rally together to support Lucy in her more dire times of need. The reader may find Lucy's manipulative nature annoying; Ann finds it endearing. Lucy calls, Ann answers. Lucy beckons, Ann comes running. Lucy needs money, Ann supplies it.

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