

Wilderness House Literary Review 17/3

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Four Paperback Tearjerkers Introduce a Guide to the Appreciation of Literature and other Arts

- *The Dutch House*, by Ann Patchett, Harper, New York, ISBN: 9780062963680
- *Bel Canto* by Ann Patchett, Harper Collins, New York, 2001, ISBN: 9780060188733
- *A River Runs Through It* by Norman MacLean, University of Chicago Press, 1976, ISBN: 9780226500669
- *Stoner* by John Edward Williams, New York Review of Books Classics, ISBN: 9788893250627
- "It Happens," in *Maximum Security Ward and other Poems* by Ramon Guthrie ed. by Sally M. Gall, Persea Books, New York, ISBN: 9780892550807

Ever so often a book reminds me how a good cry can make the world as it is easier to deal with. This ability of tears to wash my windshield and cleanse my vision was triggered recently by Ann Patchett's *The Dutch House*, although it was published in 2019 and has been out in a trade paperback for over a year, I think when you have been gob smacked you need to share the cause no matter how tardy you are in your acknowledgement.

As I considered what *The Dutch House* had done to me and why, three other novels, which had triggered similar responses, rose to the surface of my memory: Norman Maclean's *A River Runs Through It*, Patchett's *Bel Canto* and John Edward Williams's *Stoner*. Then, while pondering my lacrimation, it came to me that what they all share are villains with egos who need to win and whose needs frustrate affection. Oh! if the people who run our worlds would only leave things alone and let us love each other. Of course, that abstraction, love frustrated by egoism, which unites these novels, was not the reason for my weeping. If an abstraction could provoke a cathartic abreaction you'd be reaching for a Kleenex about now; I reached for one toward the end of each of these books because their writers had made "it happen." By that I mean that they belong in a list of Ramon Guthrie's that begins on page 56 of *Maximum Security Ward and other poems*:

*It happens
has no name
No name stands in its path delimits it
It happens when Goya paints
those gloves that pock marked wondrous face
of the Marquessa de la Solana
and continues for another 512 lines to end
It happens
Oh! too
could sometimes shout or sing or sob
wild hosannas to Its name*

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What distinguished *The Dutch House* from the prior three novels was a comic note that made "it happen" so that laughter seasoned my tears through the final chapter. At a gathering in the Dutch House some time after the heroine, Maeve, has died her brother the narrator, Daniel, listens to his grown daughter:

The boxes of Maeve's books were still there ... the letters I had written to her when she was in college. May did an impromptu reading of one of them over dinner.

...Somehow May knew exactly what I had sounded like at eleven. "Last Saturday we made thirty-seven stops for rent and collected \$28.50 in quarters from the washing machines in the basements."

"Are you making this up?" [Daniel] asked.

She waved the letter. "Swear to God you were really were that boring. It goes on for another page."

Following that sequence I put the book down to wipe my eyes then grew lighter as I continued to pick it up, put it down and pick it up.