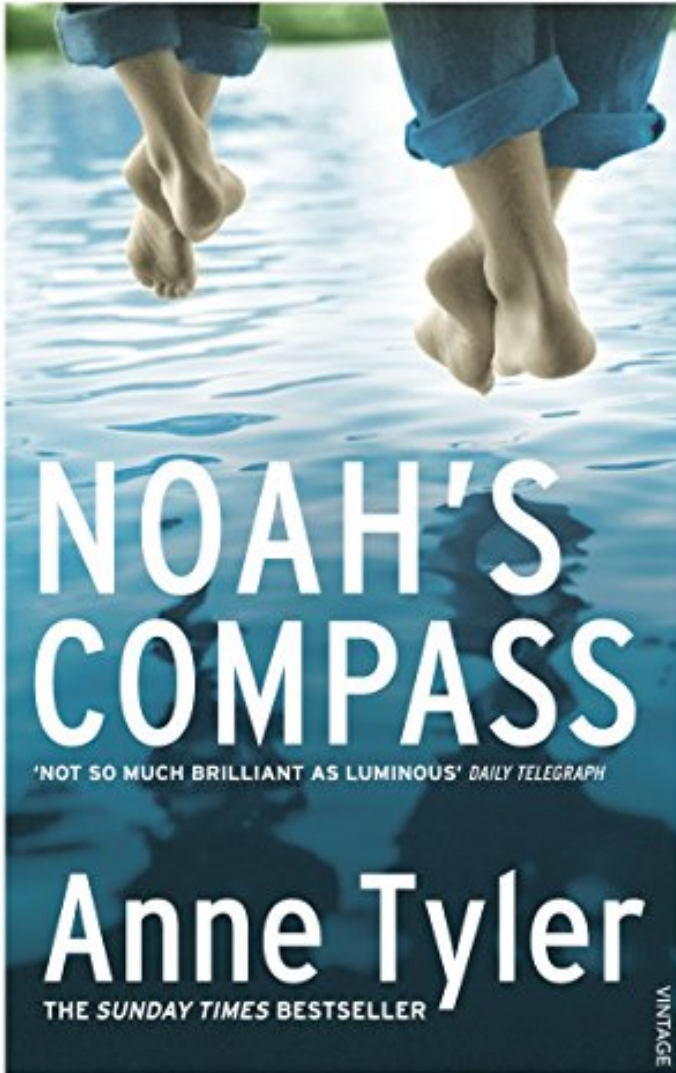


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Noah's Compass



Par Anne Tyler
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Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurLiam Pennywell has spent most of his life dodging issues and skirting adventure when suddenly, in his sixty-first year, something happens that jolts him out of his certainty and leaves him with a frightening gap in his memory. In trying to piece together what took place on his first night in a new apartment, Liam finds instead an unusual woman with secrets of her own, and a late-flowering love that brings its own set of thorny problems...OVER A MILLION ANNE TYLER BOOKS SOLDShes changed my perception on life Anna Chancellor One of my favourite authors Liane MoriartyShe spins gold' Elizabeth Buchan Anne Tyler has no peer Anita ShreveMy favourite writer, and the best line-and-length novelist in the world Nick Hornby A masterly author Sebastian Faulks Tyler is not merely good, she is wickedly good John

Updike I love Anne Tyler Anita Brookner Her fiction has strength of vision, originality, freshness, unconquerable humour Eudora Welty Extrait In the sixty-first year of his life, Liam Pennywell lost his job. It wasn't such a good job, anyhow. He'd been teaching fifth grade in a second-rate private boys school. Fifth grade wasn't even what he'd been trained for. Teaching wasn't what he'd been trained for. His degree was in philosophy. Oh, don't ask. Things seemed to have taken a downward turn a long, long time ago, and perhaps it was just as well that he had seen the last of St. Dyfrigs dusty, scuffed corridors and those interminable after-school meetings and the reams of niggling paperwork. In fact, this might be a sign. It could be just the nudge he needed to push him on to the next stage the final stage, the summing-up stage. The stage where he sat in his rocking chair and reflected on what it all meant, in the end. He had a respectable savings account and the promise of a pension, so his money situation wasn't out-and-out desperate. Still, he would have to economize. The prospect of economizing interested him. He plunged into it with more enthusiasm than he'd felt in years gave up his big old-fashioned apartment within the week and signed a lease on a smaller place, a one-bedroom-plus-den in a modern complex out toward the Baltimore Beltway. Of course this meant paring down his possessions, but so much the better. Simplify, simplify! Somehow he had accumulated far too many encumbrances. He tossed out bales of old magazines and manila envelopes stuffed with letters and three shoe boxes of index cards for the dissertation that he had never gotten around to writing. He tried to palm off his extra furniture on his daughters, two of whom were grown-ups with places of their own, but they said it was too shabby. He had to donate it to Goodwill. Even Goodwill refused his couch, and he ended up paying 1-800-GOT-JUNK to truck it away. What was left, finally, was compact enough that he could reserve the next-smallest-size U-Haul, a fourteen-footer, for moving day. On a breezy, bright Saturday morning in June, he and his friend Bundy and his youngest daughters boyfriend lugged everything out of his old apartment and set it along the curb. (Bundy had decreed that they should develop a strategy before they started loading.) Liam was reminded of a photographic series that he'd seen in one of those magazines he had just thrown away. National Geographic? Life? Different people from different parts of the world had posed among their belongings in various outdoor settings. There was a progression from the contents of the most primitive tribesmans hut (a cooking pot and a blanket, in Africa or some such) to a suburban American familys football-field-sized assemblage of furniture and automobiles, multiple TVs and sound systems, wheeled racks of clothing, everyday china and company china, on and on and on. His own collection, which had seemed so scanty in the gradually emptying rooms of his apartment, occupied an embarrassingly large space alongside the curb. He felt eager to whisk it away from public view. He snatched up the nearest box even before Bundy had given them the go-ahead. Bundy taught phys ed at St. Dyfrig. He was a skeletal, blue-black giraffe of a man, frail by the looks of him, but he could lift astonishing weights. And Damiana limp, wilted seventeen-year-old was getting paid for this. So Liam let the two of them tackle the heavy stuff while he himself, short and stocky and out of shape, saw to the lamps and the pots and pans and other light objects. He had packed his books in small cartons and so those he carried too, stacking them lovingly and precisely against the left inner wall of the van while Bundy singlehandedly wrestled with a desk and Damian tottered beneath an upside-down Windsor chair balanced on top of his head. Damian had the posture of a consumptivenarrow, curved back and buckling knees. He resembled a walking comma. The new apartment was some five miles from the old one, a short jaunt up North Charles Street. Once the van was loaded, Liam led the way in his car. He had assumed that Damian, who was below the legal age for driving a rental, would ride shotgun in the van with Bundy, but instead he slid in next to Liam and sat in a jittery silence, chewing on a thumbnail and lurking behind a mane of lank black hair. Liam couldn't think of a single thing to say to him. When they stopped for the light at Wyndhurst he contemplated asking how Kitty was, but he decided it might sound odd to inquire about his own daughter. Not until they were turning off Charles did either of them speak, and then it was Damian. Swingin bumper sticker, he said. Since there were no cars ahead of them, Liam knew it had to be his own bumper sticker Damian meant. (BUMPER STICKER, it read a witticism that no one before had ever seemed to appreciate.) Why, thanks, he said. And then, feeling encouraged: I also have a T-shirt that says T-SHIRT. Damian stopped chewing his thumbnail and gaped at him. Liam said, Heh, heh, in a helpful tone of voice, but still it seemed that Damian didn't get it. The complex Liam was moving to sat opposite a small shopping mall. It consisted of several two-story buildings, flat-faced and beige and bland, placed at angles to each other under tall, spindly pines. Liam had worried about privacy, seeing the network of paths between buildings and the flanks of wide, staring windows, but during the whole unloading process they didn't run into a single neighbor. The carpeting of brown pine needles muffled their voices, and the wind in the trees above them made an eerily steady whispering sound. Cool,

Damian said, presumably meaning the sound, since he had his face tipped upward as he spoke. He was under the Windsor chair again. It loomed like an oversized bonnet above his forehead. Liam's unit was on the ground floor. Unfortunately, it had a shared entrance—a heavy brown steel door, opening into a dank-smelling cinderblock foyer with his own door to the left and a flight of steep concrete steps directly ahead. Second-floor units cost less to rent, but Liam would have found it depressing to climb those stairs every day. He hadn't given much thought beforehand to the placement of his furniture. Bundy set things down any old way, but Damian proved unexpectedly finicky, shoving Liam's bed first one way and then another in search of the best view. Like, you've got to see out the window first thing when you open your eyes, he said, or how will you know what kind of weather it is? The bed was digging tracks across the carpet, and Liam just wanted to leave it where it stood. What did he care what kind of weather it was? When Damian started in on the desk, it had to be positioned where sunlight wouldn't reflect off the computer screen, he said. Liam told him, Well, since I don't own a computer, where the desk is now will be fine. That about wraps things up, I guess. Don't own a computer! Damian echoed. So let me just get you your money, and you can be on your way. But how do you, like, communicate with the outside world? Liam was about to say that he communicated by fountain pen, but Bundy said, chuckling, He doesn't. Then he clapped a hand on Liam's shoulder. Okay, Liam, good luck, man. Liam hadn't meant to dismiss Bundy along with Damian. He had envisioned the two of them sharing the traditional moving-day beer and pizza. But of course, Bundy was providing Damian's ride back. (It was Bundy who'd picked up the U-Haul, bless him, and now he'd be returning it.) So Liam said, Well, thank you, Bundy. I'll have to have you over once I'm settled in. Then he handed Damian a hundred and twenty dollars in cash. The extra twenty was a tip, but since Damian pocketed the bills without counting them, the gesture felt like a waste. See you around, was all he said. Then he and Bundy left. The inner door latched gently behind them but the outer door, the brown steel one, shook the whole building when it slammed shut, setting up a shocked silence for several moments afterward and emphasizing, somehow, Liam's sudden solitude. Well. So. Here he was. He took a little tour. There wasn't a lot to look at. A medium-sized living room, with his two armchairs and the rocking chair facing in random directions and filling not quite enough space. A dining area at the far end (Formica-topped table from his first marriage and three folding chairs), with a kitchen alcove just beyond. The den and the bathroom opened off the hall that led back to the bedroom. All the floors were carpeted with the same beige synthetic substance, all the walls were refrigerator white, and there were no moldings whatsoever, no baseboards or window frames or door frames, none of those gradations that had softened the angles of his old place. He found this a satisfaction. Oh, his life was growing purer, all right! He poked his head into the tiny den (daybed, desk, Windsor chair) and admired the built-in shelves. They had been a big selling point when he was apartment hunting: two tall white bookshelves on either side of the patio door. Finally, finally he'd been able to get rid of those glass-fronted walnut monstrosities he had inherited from his mother. It was true that these shelves were less spacious. He'd had to consolidate a bit, discarding the fiction and biographies and some of his older dictionaries. But he had kept his beloved philosophers, and now he looked forward to arranging them. He bent over a carton and opened the flaps. Epictetus. Arrian. The larger volumes would go on the lower shelves, he decided, even though they didn't need to, since all the shelves were exactly, mathematically the same height. It was a matter of aesthetics, really—the visual effect. He hummed tunelessly to himself, padding back and forth between the shelves and the cartons. The sunlight streaming through the glass door brought a fine sweat to his upper lip, but he postponed rolling up his shirtsleeves because he was too absorbed in his task. After the study came the kitchen, less interesting but still necessary, and so he moved on to the boxes of foods and utensils. This was the most basic of kitchens, with a single bank of cabinets, but that was all right; he'd never been much of a cook. In fact here it was, late afternoon, and he was only now realizing that he'd better fix himself some lunch. He made a jelly sandwich and ate it as he worked, swigging milk straight from the carton to wash it down. The sight of the six-pack of beer in the refrigerator, brought over the day before along with his perishables, gave him a pang of regret that took a moment to explain. Ah, yes: Bundy. He must remember to phone Bundy tomorrow and thank him at greater length. Invite him to supper, even. He wondered what carry-out establishments delivered within his new radius. In the living room he arranged the chairs in what he hoped was a friendly conversational grouping. He placed a lamp table between the two armchairs and the coffee table in front of them, and the other lamp table he set next to the rocker, which was where he imagined sitting to read at the end of every day. Or all day, for that matter. How else would he fill the hours? Even in the summers, he had been accustomed to working. St. Dyfrig students could be counted on to require an abundance of remedial courses. He had taken almost no

vacation just one week in early June and two in August. Well, think of this as one of those weeks. Just proceed a day at a time, is all. On the kitchen wall, the telephone rang. He had a new number but he had kept his existing plan, which included caller ID (one of the few modern inventions he approved of), and he checked the screen before he lifted the receiver. ROYALL J S. His sister. Hello? he said. How's it going, Liam? Oh, fine. I think I'm just about settled. Have you made up your bed yet? Well, no. Do it. Now. You should have done it first thing. Pretty soon you're going to notice you're exhausted, and you don't want to be hunting for sheets then. Okay, he said. Julia was four years his senior. He was used to receiving orders from her. Later in the week I may stop by and visit. I'll bring you a pot of beef stew, she said. Well, that's very nice of you, Julia, he said. He hadn't eaten red meat in thirty-some years, but it would have been useless to remind her. After he hung up he obediently made his bed, which was easily navigated since Damian had positioned it so there was walking space on either side. Then he tackled the closet, where clothes had been dumped every which way. He nailed his shoe bag to the closet door and fitted in his shoes; he draped his ties on the tie rack that he found already installed. He'd never owned a tie rack before. Then, since he had the hammer out, he decided to go ahead and hang his pictures. Oh, he was way ahead of the game! Picture hanging was a finishing touch, something that took most people days. But he might as well see this through. His pictures were unexceptional van Gogh prints, French bistro posters, whatever he'd chosen haphazardly years and years ago just to save his walls from total blankness. Even so, it took him a while to find the appropriate spot for each one and get it properly centered. By the time he'd finished it was after eight and he'd had to turn all the lights on. The ceiling globe in the living room had a burnt-out bulb, he discovered. Well, never mind; he'd see to that tomorrow. All at once, enough was enough. He wasn't the slightest bit hungry, but he heated a bowl of vegetable soup in his miniature microwave and sat down at the table to eat it. First he sat facing the kitchen alcove, with his back to the living room. The view was uninspiring, though, so he switched to the end chair that faced the window. Not that he had much to see even there—just a sheet of glossy blackness and a vague, transparent reflection of his own round gray head—but it would be nice in the daytime. He would automatically settle in that chair from now on, he supposed. He had a fondness for routine. When he stood up to take his empty bowl to the kitchen, he was ambushed by sudden aches in several parts of his body. His shoulders hurt, and his lower back, and his calves and the soles of his feet. Early though it was, he locked his door and turned off the lights and went into the bedroom. His made-up bed was a welcome sight. As usual, Julia had known what she was talking about. He skipped his shower. Getting into his pajamas and brushing his teeth took his last ounce of energy. When he sank onto the bed, it was almost beyond his willpower to reach over and turn off the lamp, but he forced himself to do it. Then he slid down flat, with a long, deep, groaning sigh. His mattress was comfortably firm, and the top sheet was tucked in tightly on either side of him as he liked. His pillow had just enough bounce to it. The window, a couple of feet away, was cranked open to let the breeze blow in, and it offered a view of a pale night sky with a few stars visible behind the sparse black pine boughs—just a scattering of pinpricks. He was glad now that Damian had taken such trouble to situate the bed right. Most probably, he reflected, this would be the final dwelling place of his life. What reason would he have to move again? No new prospects were likely for him. He had accomplished all the conventional tasks—grown up, found work, gotten married, had children—and now he was winding down. This is it, he thought. The very end of the line. And he felt a mild stirring of curiosity. Then he woke up in a hospital room with a helmet of gauze on his head.

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