Read-alikes: Family Resiliency and Humor

Family novels abound. Some are sagas—panoramic, multigenerational novels that march through the decades, linking one family’s story to historic events. Others are intimate, domestic dramas that focus tightly on one family’s personal struggles. And then there are novels that closely trace the aftershocks of family secrets as children stumble their way into adulthood—nuanced, character-driven tales of keen wit, crisp social observations, and high psychological intelligence, such as Ann Patchett’s Commonwealth and the novels listed below.

AFTER THIS by Alice McDermott
F MCD, LARGE PRINT, CD AUDIOBOOK
McDermott portrays, as does Patchett, an American Catholic family in an extraordinarily refined, through-the-decades saga that begins when Mary steps out of church on a wildly windy day at the close of WWII, hurries into a diner, and sits beside a stranger. They marry and raise four children, and McDermott follows their lives through a hurricane, hilarious classroom scenes, a premature birth, an abortion, military service, a life-changing college year abroad, and much more.

CARRY THE ONE by Carol Anshaw
F ANS, CD AUDIOBOOK, HOOPLA AUDIOBOOK
Patchett’s novel begins with a christening party; Anshaw’s tough, tender, and wise comedy of siblings, addiction, conviction, and genius begins with a chaotic wedding, accelerates to a disaster, and then follows several generations forward into lives steeped in guilt and in search of redemption.

A FAMILY DAUGHTER by Maile Meloy
F MEL
Meloy’s second novel about the Santerre family (after Liars and Saints, 2003), also Catholic, tracks the aftermath of divorce, as young Abbey is sent to live with her grandparents, an arrangement that catalyzes what becomes a dark sexual family secret that the adult Abbey unnervingly alludes to in her published novel.

HOW THE GARCIA GIRLS LOST THEIR ACCENTS by Julia Alvarez
F ALV
Alvarez’s now classic first novel, a tale about a family of four sisters who fled the Dominican Republic and relocated in New York in 1960, has the sort of wit and valence that syncs with Patchett as Carla, Sandra, Yolanda, and Sofia tell their stories of cultural collision and change, covering three decades rife with complex familial, personal, and social experiences.
ON BEAUTY by Zadie Smith  
F SMI, CD AUDIOBOOK  
In this boisterously funny, smart, and poignant family tale, Smith portrays the multicultural and multinational Belseys, who land in Massachusetts, where Howard teaches art history and relies on his practical wife, while their three children pursue divergent paths. A novel laced with canny inquiries into the evolution of family life shaped by social conflicts and conundrums.

A SPOOL OF BLUE THREAD by Anne Tyler  
F TYL, LARGE PRINT, CD AUDIOBOOK, HOOPLA EBOOK  
With charm, wit, and grace, Tyler creates a whirl of hectic family gatherings, disorienting crises, and abrupt domestic reconfigurations, which are punctuated by cutting insights into class, gender, age, and race as she follows several generations of the Whitshanks, who are passionately attached to the obsessively well-constructed house built by their patriarch.

WHO ASKED YOU? by Terry McMillan  
F MCM, LARGE PRINT, CD AUDIOBOOK, HOOPLA AUDIOBOOK  
In McMillan’s tale of a working-class family in Los Angeles, Betty Jean has a hotel job and cares for her Alzheimer’s-afflicted husband and her drug-addicted daughter’s children. Betty Jean’s older son is a doctor who maintains his distance from “the hood,” while her other son is in prison. Their lives are pointedly contrasted, over the course of many years and many changes, with those of Betty Jean’s financially better-off but no happier sisters and their families.

THE YEAR WE LEFT HOME by Jean Thompson  
CD AUDIOBOOK  
Thompson takes a slide-show approach to the multigenerational family saga in this pithy, funny, compassionate, and resonant novel about the farming Eriksons of Iowa, who navigate weddings, a funeral, holidays, traumas intimate and societal, and successes and failures during the years bracketed by the wars in Vietnam and Iraq.

Compiled by Donna Seaman, Booklist, 7/16