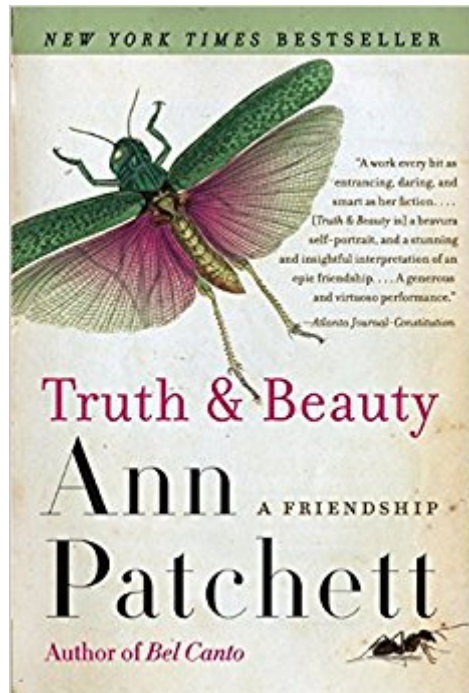




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# Truth & Beauty: A Friendship



## Synopsis

Ann Patchett and the late Lucy Grealy met in college in 1981, and, after enrolling in the Iowa Writers' Workshop, began a friendship that would be as defining to both of their lives as their work. In Grealy's critically acclaimed memoir, *Autobiography of a Face*, she wrote about losing part of her jaw to childhood cancer, years of chemotherapy and radiation, and endless reconstructive surgeries. In *Truth & Beauty*, the story isn't Lucy's life or Ann's life, but the parts of their lives they shared. This is a portrait of unwavering commitment that spans twenty years, from the long winters of the Midwest, to surgical wards, to book parties in New York. Through love, fame, drugs, and despair, this is what it means to be part of two lives that are intertwined . . . and what happens when one is left behind. This is a tender, brutal book about loving the person we cannot save. It is about loyalty, and being lifted up by the sheer effervescence of someone who knew how to live life to the fullest.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

This memoir of Patchett's friendship with *Autobiography of a Face* author Lucy Grealy shares many insights into the nature of devotion. One of the best instances of this concerns a fable of ants and grasshoppers. When winter came, the hard-working ant took the fun-loving grasshopper in, each understanding their roles were immutable. It was a symbiotic relationship. Like the grasshopper, Grealy, who died of cancer at age 39 in 2002, was an untethered creature, who liked nothing more than to dance, drink and fling herself into Patchett's arms like a kitten. Patchett (*The Patron Saint of Liars*; *Bel Canto*) tells this story chronologically, in bursts of dialogue, memory and snippets of

Grealy's letters, moving from the unfolding of their deep connection in graduate school and into the more turbulent waters beyond. Patchett describes her attempts to be a writer, while Grealy endured a continuous round of operations as a result of her cancer. Later, when adulthood brought success, but also heartbreak and drug addiction, the duo continued to be intertwined, even though their link sometimes seemed to fray. This gorgeously written chronicle unfolds as an example of how friendships can contain more passion and affection than any in the romantic realm. And although Patchett unflinchingly describes the difficulties she and Grealy faced in the years after grad school, she never loses the feeling she had the first time Grealy sprang into her arms: "[She] came through the door and it was there, huge and permanent and first." Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved. --This text refers to the Hardcover edition.

Adult/High School — Lucy Grealy, whose *Autobiography of a Face* (HarperCollins, 1995) found critical acclaim as well as a popular readership, died two years ago. Patchett first met the poet in college, became her roommate in graduate school, and remained devoted to her through years of artistic, medical, economic, and emotional upheavals. The ties binding these two women included resolve to meet physical adversity with energy and to place friendship beyond the reaches of either habit or convenience. Patchett moves the story from their acclimation to one another through her friend's lifelong desire to gain a reconstructed face and the lengths to which she went in search of what she'd lost to childhood cancer, to Grealy's ultimate slide into drugs and suicidal ideations. Patchett's own self-perception as the straight arrow to her friend's daredevilry is disclosed across time, as is Grealy's increasingly frenetic chase for a reconstructed face and, as important, for fame earned through writing. In spite of the story unfolding through the years between college and near middle age, teenage girls will find it accessible and engaging. The author's clear-eyed depiction of the writer's life as requiring gigs waiting tables and suburban tract housing is refreshingly honest. She includes details of more glamorous moments as well; this is no cautionary tale, but a celebration of friendship and of craft. — Francisca Goldsmith, Berkeley Public Library, CA Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved. --This text refers to the Hardcover edition.

This book is a must read for those who like to read about life through others eyes and get all of the real, gritty, raw and unfiltered experiences. I couldn't put it down and had to read until the end. Afterwards I felt that it was one of the most honest accounts of life, friendships, love and facing

the rough with the smooth that I had ever read. It takes so much courage to write like this, and I appreciated this book for what the author didn't do - for not prettying up the gory details, and for giving us the opposite of a Hollywood movie ending. The inability to feel love, to feel that there is never enough love - that is a real personality type, isn't it? Personified quite well here. And the selfless friend, Ann, who finally does set her personal boundaries provides a coming of age story as well. And finally, given that Lucy was prescribed painkillers due to her many surgeries, it seems quite likely that their use lead to heroin use. We're all the richer for facing the real issues in life head on, aren't we? I recommend that you read this book if you like books that raise more questions than answers about life. Or if you want to read a behind the scenes memoir of the "glamorous" lives of writers and poets. However - if you have preconceived notions of what life is all about and how people should behave, then this book is not for you.

To say that this novel was about truth and beauty undermines the underlying meaning of the story, where in fact, it was about the pursuit of these elusive obsessions by writer Lucy Grealy, and her friend, the author, Ann Patchett, and their failure to realize, "the (only) thing you can count on in life is that Tennessee will always be scorching hot in August" and that something will go wrong like the air conditioner that is broken in the rental truck that the author is driving to Iowa, everything else is mutable. (Patchett, 1). The obsession by Lucy to fix her face so that she can be "beautiful" is the concrete purpose that propels the action, but that yearning to be normal so that she can be loved is the theme that is weaved throughout this novel. Patchett realizes that the love that they both have sought so desperately to find was right there all of the time, and failed to see it until it was too late; She admits: "that was my mistake." (Patchett, 257). Truth & Beauty is the story of the intricate, and sometimes complicated female friendship between the two main characters, the author (Ann Patchett), and fellow writer Lucy Grealy, from their first encounter at Sarah Lawrence to the prestigious Iowa Writers Conference, and through their illustrious careers as teachers, and successful writers. The plot moves around the devotion, and shared moments two friends spent with each other, during many of Lucy's thirty eight operations to restore the lower jaw and the beauty she had lost to the numerous treatments, and deforming surgeries; her multiple sex partners, love interests, a suicide attempt, and substance abuse. Although there is a raw callousness to the manner Patchett reveals the intimate secrets shared with readers about her friend that may seem disingenuous at times, there is truth and beauty in the relationship she that

reveals in her pages. Patchett put personal letters in her novel that the two friends sent to each other during the years of friendship; Lucy writes: Dearest anvil [ ] [ ] dearest deposed president of some now defunct but lovingly remembered country, dearest to me, I can find no suitable words of affection for you, words that will contain the whole of your wonderfulness to me. You will have to make due with being my favorite bagel, my favorite blue awning above some great little café where the coffee is strong but milky and had real texture to it. (Patchett: Grealy, 7). The letter reveals a depth of affection Grealy had for Patchett, combined with a description that revealed Patchett's character, and love as having real texture to it. There is some central idea that is recurring throughout the novel, a thread to hold the fabric of the plot together, 'one action' as Aristotle had phrased it hundreds of years ago. There appears to be more than one theme in this memoir, one of a complicated friendship between two women, where love is not revealed until it's too late, and the other Lucy's drive for beauty, or yearning to become normal so that she can be loved. Although the story is about the friendship, and moments shared between two authors, during their formative years, the novel centers on a young woman, an aspiring poet, who is disfigured by Ewing Sarcoma, and the radical, and multiple treatments and surgeries to put her back together. Lucy Grealy's obsession with recapturing the beauty she lost is really her struggle to be able to live a normal life, drives the external plot of the novel; while the need to be normal, to be loved, as any other woman, drives the internal story. Lucy gives up her virginity to a man she met in a consignment shop when she first gets to Iowa, a man who doesn't love her, and introduces her to dominance and bondage; (Patchett, 12) another man she meets abroad "Daddy" and [ ] drunk and trying to have sex on the bench in a rainstorm (unsuccessfully); (Patchett, 14) and a slew of lovers thereafter to the point where the character Ann notes, Lucy had more sex than most people who did not suffer her affliction. It was apparent to Ann that Lucy was assimilating sex as a replacement for love: "she was slowly figuring out that wanting sex was knotted together with wanting love" the only avenue she had with Daddy was sex, and she tried frantically to use it to make him love her. It was a bad habit she established, and it stayed with her for the rest of her life. (Patchett, 13). To achieve her desire, and attract more men, Lucy struggled to keep her body in shape, and she longed to retrieve that beauty she lost from the treatments of her illness. She put in breast implants using her student loans, and pursued every new treatment possible to restore her face. Lucy believed that when the surgeons "would get the business of her face finished up once and for all, and then, life, real

life, would begin. Lucy felt that she *“would have friends and fall in love and go dancing every night.”* (Patchett, 85). Patchett reveals that on one trip to Europe to have an experimental operation, Lucy has to stretch her lower face with saline injections so it swells up like a balloon, and her drive to be beautiful (that she associates with normal) is so great that she endures gawking, and harassment from strangers. As further exposition, she publishes Lucy’s letter to her describing one of her operations: *“I look like I had a good right cross to the chin and lip. I had some fat from my hip grafted into my lower lip, so now I’ve got what will hopefully be a bridget Bardot lip, though it’s doubtful it will last more than a few months, meaning I’ll have to decide then if I want to do it again.”* (Patchett, 89). And of course it doesn’t last and she attempts suicide by slitting her wrists, but survives, and Ann learns that she has a severe heroine addiction. There is a period when the two friends are mad at each other, but later reconcile. Ann learns other things that she once thought were certain, turned out to be wrong. Ann thinks that her friend is invincible, having been through all kinds of surgeries, an attempted suicide, and believes Lucy will always be there, but learns after her untimely death that Lucy was as fragile as the bird that she uses in her metaphors to describe her, and realizes too late that she has made a mistake. Thus, the central theme of some deep female friendship that lay unknown to each of them to its bitter end is revealed. In writing the book, Patchett appears to reveal her naïve beliefs that Lucy’s nature, and spirit were indestructible, and that she was tough enough to endure the scrutiny of her uniqueness. In an excerpt of Lucy’s radio comments about her novel *Autobiography of a face*, she writes: *“a lot of my suffering was emotional suffering—my story is really not so much [ ] about being disfigured, it’s about having a face that changed, so continuously that I never really identified myself as connected to it.”* (Patchett, 136). Lucy reveals also that her own face repulsed her; when she looked into a mirror, *“the visage I saw staring back at me was undeniably repulsive.”* (Patchett, 136). Ann recognizes that this is why her favorite questions were *“Do you love me?”* and *“will I ever have sex again?”* The foil in her character, where her face was constantly deteriorating, being restored, changing, drove the tragedy of the inner story to become beautiful (normal) completing the theme at her death with the revelation that she already was beautiful—where she is loved for whom she is. (Patchett, 257).

#\_\_\_\_\_ Truth & Beauty: a friendship. Ann Patchett. Harper Collins. New York. 2004. From *Where You Dream*. Robert Olen Butler. Grove Press. New York. 2005.

Wow! What an intense raw depiction of a flawed friendship/love between two talented women writers! It is beautifully written (as always) by Ann Patchett about her enduring relationship with a brilliant, exciting, selfish, deeply flawed addict basket-case world-class manipulator. In my opinion, it was both a blessing and a curse that Ann met Lucy while they were both young students in college. The book is written with Ann as the giver & Lucy the taker. For the life of me, I cannot understand why Ann did not extract herself from this friendship after she discovered that the support she gave to Lucy was a one-way street. Perhaps they were so immeshed by that time, that it was impossible. This story will pull you in and fascinate you till the very last page. Note: be sure to view the Charlie Rose interview with Lucy which is available on-line. Fascinating!

A sweet, sad tale of two friends, drawn together by chance, but held together by love. This is the story of two authors that ended up as room mates during grad school, forming an unbreakable bond. The two characters are total opposites, one fairly plain, self proclaimed neat freak committed to deadlines and follow through. The other is a free spirited woman, with years of cancer treatment behind her, dealing with the the physical scars of all of the surgeries which left her disfigured. She ends up a drug addict coping with many more surgeries to repair her physical state. The friends stick it out even until death.

This is a beautifully written book about a complex, intellectual, and deep friendship between two extraordinary women. Ann Patchett draws you in, as if you too were a dear friend going through the many delightful and painful experiences that she shared with writer Lucy Grealy. It is also a sad tale of Lucy's struggle with depression, a disease as cruel cancer and sometimes as fatal.

An excellent literary memoir by author Ann Patchett about her long-term close friendship with brilliant writer Lucy Grealy, with whom she shared similar experiences in gaining acceptance by the literary and publishing worlds, and in "life of the mind" experiences as well (for me, the most absorbing & rewarding aspect of the book). The throw of the dice for these similar, complementary souls played out differently, however. Grealy was more vulnerable, from a life of constant surgeries (38), reliance on pain killers, and obsessive need for reassurance of love and value, complicating her ability to write consistently and eventually leading to addictions to Oxycontin and at the end, heroin.

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