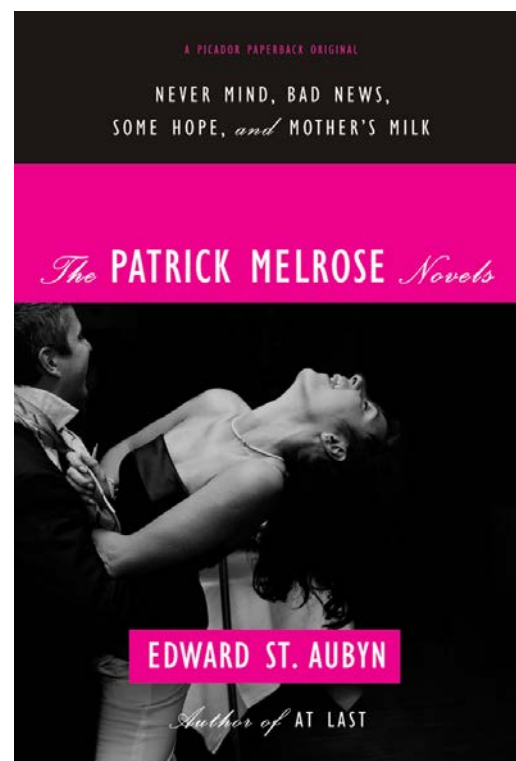


Reading Group Gold

The Patrick Melrose Novels

by Edward St. Aubyn



ISBN: 978-0-312-42996-6 / 688 pages

For more than twenty years, acclaimed author Edward St. Aubyn has chronicled the life of Patrick Melrose, painting an extraordinary portrait of the beleaguered and self-loathing world of privilege. This single volume collects the first four novels---*Never Mind, Bad News, Some Hope*, and *Mother's Milk*, a Man Booker finalist---to coincide with the publication of *At Last*, the final installment of this unique novel cycle.

By turns harrowing and hilarious, these beautifully written novels dissect the English upper class as we follow Patrick Melrose's story from child abuse to heroin addiction and recovery. *Never Mind*, the first novel, unfolds over a day and an evening at the family's chateaux in the south of France, where the sadistic and terrifying figure of David Melrose dominates the lives of his five-year-old son, Patrick, and his rich and unhappy American mother, Eleanor. From abuse to addiction, the second novel, *Bad News* opens as the twenty-two-year-old Patrick sets off to collect his father's ashes from New York, where he will spend a drug-crazed twenty-four hours. And back in England, the third novel, *Some Hope*, offers a sober and clean Patrick the possibility of recovery. The fourth novel, the Booker-shortlisted *Mother's Milk*, returns to the family chateau, where Patrick, now married and a father himself, struggles with child rearing, adultery, his mother's desire for assisted suicide, and the loss of the family home to a New Age foundation.

Edward St. Aubyn offers a window into a world of utter decadence, amorality, greed, snobbery, and cruelty---welcome to the declining British aristocracy.

PICADOR

Reading Group Gold

QUESTIONS AND TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Why does Eleanor submit to David in *Never Mind*? Does he submit to anything (other than the memory of his father)?
2. As five-year-old Patrick is being brutalized by his father in chapter seven, how does his imagination rescue him? What effect does this have on his perception of reality in the subsequent books?
3. In the closing passages of *Never Mind*, Eleanor watches Bridget clumsily try to escape for a tryst with Barry, “just going down the drive as if she were free” (page 129). If it weren’t for the lure of money and status, would all the primary characters be free?
4. What makes Edward St. Aubyn’s depiction of addiction in *Bad News* unique? How did you react as you watched Patrick juggle Quaaludes, speed, and heroin, culminating in the other world of the Key Club?
5. What various comforts do Anne, George, and Pierre offer Patrick after he comes face-to-face with his father’s “misplaced” corpse?
6. In *Some Hope*, Princess Margaret natters on about child abuse, atheism, the failure of socialism, the charms of Noël Coward, and the ways in which the ambassador’s sauce splatter is a sign of egregious disrespect for the crown. In this infamous party scene, is she the only one being spoofed?
7. Patrick tells Anne that his grandmother’s Great War diary (page 429) led him to believe that his father was sexually abused as a child. Did you agree with Patrick or with Anne as they debated the role of forgiveness?
8. What was it like to experience birth from wise Robert’s point of view in *Mother’s Milk*? How do Robert and Thomas complete St. Aubyn’s meditation on sons and mothers?
9. The quartet ends with Patrick in the role of parent as his mother confronts euthanasia (after signing over Saint-Nazaire to the Foundation). What did Eleanor teach him about women? How do these lessons play out with Julia and Mary?
10. St. Aubyn gives us recurring images of an Alsatian dog chasing Patrick (page 132 and 511) and describes David as “no more endearing than a chained Alsatian” (page 156). Who and what continue to hound Patrick long after his father’s death?

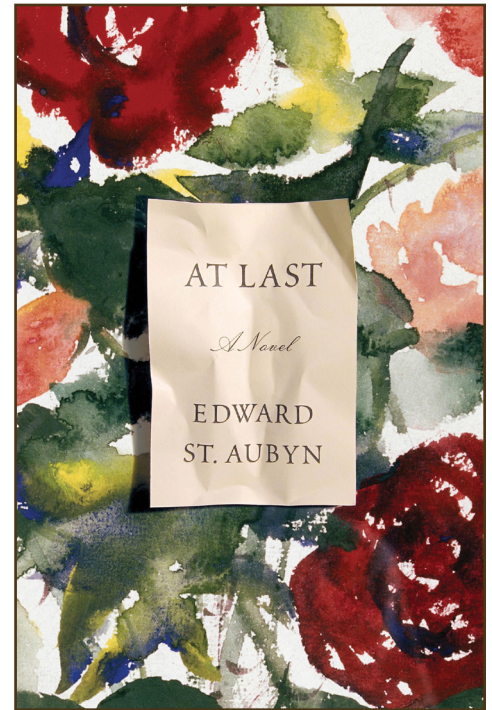
Read on for the *At Last* Reading Group Guide, and for more information about the author...

Reading group guide written by Amy Clements / The Wordshop, Inc.

Reading Group Gold

At Last

by Edward St. Aubyn



ISBN: 978-0-374-29889-0 / 272 pages

There never was a mother quite like Eleanor Melrose, and there never was a funeral quite like hers, captured in the wickedly dark comedy *At Last*, Edward St. Aubyn's novel of legacies lost and gained. As Eleanor's son, Patrick, joins other family members and friends to pay final respects, a conflicting image of her emerges. For some, she was the noble heiress who gave up the grandeur of her upbringing to perform good works. For others, especially Patrick, she was an enigmatic, sometimes even heartless woman who restricted those good works to total strangers, leaving her supposed loved ones deprived. Her death is the culmination of Patrick's contentious relationship with both his parents, and with his own destructive self-loathing. From the eulogies that ponder Eleanor's correspondence with shamans to a rendition of "I Got Plenty o' Nuttin'" on the organ (followed by a party filled with intrigue, of course), St. Aubyn delivers a hilarious portrait of one of humanity's most mysterious transitions.

The fifth and final installment in the acclaimed Patrick Melrose novels, *At Last* offers an entertaining yet thought-provoking experience, even for those who have never read the previous books. We hope that the following topics will enhance your group's discussion of this wise and witty novel.

QUESTIONS AND TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Edward St. Aubyn describes Patrick as being torn between the lure of consolation and the lure of disappointment. Why does he find those options alluring? What aspects of a powerful, albeit

Reading Group Gold

masochistic, bond are captured in the fact that he mourns not the loss of his mother but the loss of longing for closeness to her?

2. Why does Nicholas derive pleasure from being snarky? In the book's opening scenes, was it fun or annoying to see him creating tension, on what should have been a somber occasion? At the end of the novel, do people react to his closing chapter with phoniness or candor?
3. Discuss Eleanor's marriage to David and what we learn about it in this novel. Why was she unable to choose between being his collaborator and his antagonist when it came to raising Patrick?
4. Patrick contemplates Eleanor's emotional legacy throughout her funeral. What legacies will he leave for Robert and Thomas? How is he able to break the cycle of his family's cruelty?
5. Discuss Annette's observations about Eleanor's spiritual side, delivered in a fairly lengthy eulogy. How does Annette's depiction compare to other impressions of Eleanor? What would Eleanor have thought of these spiritual philosophies, and those that Erasmus continues to ponder throughout the service?
6. What does Nancy's spending say about her memories of Jean, her stepfather? Why can't Nancy simply accept the reality of her situation? Why is the myth of endless wealth important for her to uphold?
7. St. Aubyn has spoken candidly with interviewers about the horrific incidents from his own life that inspired aspects of Patrick's story, including being brutalized by his father and recovering from drug addiction. How does it affect your reading to know that the plot is partially autobiographical?
8. What makes St. Aubyn a master of the art of gallows humor? Why are morbid subjects and despicable people often the best material for comedy?
9. On page 262, the author describes Patrick as getting comfortable with Keatsian mysteries, finally open to questions that can't necessarily be answered. What questions in your life and legacy can't really be answered? How could you make peace with this uncertainty?
10. Discuss the author's notion that those who appear to deserve the most blame actually deserve the most help. When is this true in the novel, and in your own life?
11. Why was it easy for Eleanor to give charitably to strangers but not to her own family and staff? What does her generosity say about her personality? What were some of the most striking differences between her public and private personae?
12. How does the transatlantic connection enhance *At Last*? What is Patrick's perspective on America, and how is his identity shaped by knowing about Eleanor's grandfather Jonson? Why was

Reading Group Gold

Southern culture meaningful to Eleanor? Did her image of it extend very far beyond the stereotypes of *Porgy and Bess*?

13. In *At Last*, how do Patrick's interactions with Mary, his wife, compare to his interactions with Julia, his former girlfriend? Is his attitude toward women different now that his mother is gone?
14. Discuss the transformations that Patrick has experienced in the Melrose novels you have read previously. He has evolved from anger and addiction to middle-age crises; what has he become in this final portrait?

PRAISE

"Tantalizing . . . A memorable tour de force." —Leo Carey, *The New York Times Book Review*

"Extraordinary . . . Acidic humor . . . Stiletto-sharp." —Francine Prose, *New York Observer*

"Perhaps the most brilliant English novelist of his generation." —Alan Hollinghurst

"A spectacularly toxic confection." —Joy Press, *The Village Voice*

"Perversely funny." —*People*

"Dialogue as amusing as Waugh's and narrative even more deft than Graham Greene's." —Edmund White

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

EDWARD ST. AUBYN has chronicled the life of Patrick Melrose for twenty years. Born in London in 1960, he was educated at Oxford University. His six novels include *Mother's Milk*, the fourth Patrick Melrose novel, which was short-listed for the 2006 Man Booker Prize. *Mother's Milk* also won the 2007 Prix Femina Étranger as well as the 2007 South Bank Show literature award. The other novels in the series are *Never Mind*, which won the Betty Trask award; *Bad News*; and *Some Hope*. St. Aubyn is also the author of *A Clue to the Exit* and *On the Edge*. Visit his website at edwardstaubyn.com.

ALSO AVAILABLE

The first four Patrick Melrose novels (*Never Mind*, *Bad News*, *Some Hope*, and *Mother's Milk*), collected in a single Picador paperback edition (ISBN 978-0-312-42996-6)

Reading group guide written by Amy Clements / The Wordshop, Inc.