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Family Lives in the Pandemic Year: A Study of Anne Tyler's *French Braid* and Elizabeth Strout's *Lucy by the Sea*

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Abstract

In 2022, Anne Tyler and Elizabeth Strout, known for their perceptive studies of mundane, everyday lives in America, published works set in the pandemic year 2020. Both works are about families, but Strout extended her insights into the social, economic, and geographical divide hurting contemporary America. In the chronicle of life in evacuation told by a writer, Lucy Barton, Strout tangles Lucy's wounds with those of her partner, daughters, and siblings. Lucy lives in evacuation with issues such as her partner's self-remorse for inheriting assets made from the World War, her daughter's marriage in crisis, and accusation from her sister of being selfish to leave her impoverished family. When the second spring after the pandemic onset comes around, she is ready to accept a new beginning in the house by the coast in Maine. Tyler's vignette in her latest novel limits her scope to the personal experience of David Garrett and focuses on family life's resilient and unchanging facets. Despite the seriousness of the unprecedented crisis their works deal with, both writers show how life goes on and close their works with a sense of hope.

Keywords: pandemic, evacuation, marriage, parenthood, social class

1. Anne Tyler and Elizabeth Strout: Chroniclers of American families

Anne Tyler (1941–) and Elizabeth Strout (1956–) are among the foremost American women novelists. Book reviewers often see similarities between the two. Reviewing Strout's *Anything Is Possible* (2017) for *The Guardian*, Elizabeth Day mentions how Strout reminds her of John Steinbeck and Anne Tyler, whom she regards as writers who are "great observers of the interaction between internal and external landscapes, who also appreciate the value of simplicity over self-conscious floridity." (Day 2017) Nina Kenwood, in her review for the Australian website "The Readings," writes: "Like Anne Tyler and Marilynne Robinson, Strout is concerned with the small, intimate details of a person's life" and that she is good at capturing "the moments that weigh heavy on her character's hearts, and she is especially good when writing about mothers

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and daughters." (Kenwood 2017) Helen Elliott is another reviewer who puts Tyler and Strout in the same school: she points out that Tyler excels in "reading … the other drama happening beneath the quiet surface – the backstages of all our ordinary, endlessly fascinating dull lives" and that "Tyler and Elizabeth Strout do this in a uniquely American way." (Elliott 2022) Both writers are regarded as chronicler of family lives in the United States. Tyler named Strout an author she wished she could write like, showing that she recognizes the resemblance of topic and style between herself and Strout.

Asked in a 1976 interview with the *Washington Post* what motivated her to write, Tyler answered, "Because I want more than one life." (Petry 45) In a recent interview published in *People* magazine in April 2022, she said, "I write in order to feel what it would be like to be somebody else." (Hubbard 66) The first-person narrator of *Lucy by the Sea* (2022) makes similar comments. Lucy Barton, who is a novelist, observes some people while she has the car parked in the parking lot of a gas station and muses: "What is it like to be *you*? I need to say: This is the question that has made me a writer; always that deep desire to know what it feels like to be a different person." (*LS* 203) In a previous novel, *Oh William!* (2021), Lucy also asks herself, "But who ever really knows the experience of another." (*OW* 98). These questions may be fundamental ones the two writers repeatedly ask themselves.

Tyler and Strout are keen observers of the American middle class, with slightly different scopes. Tyler has created men and women with different ordinary and extraordinary occupations. The characters she created chiefly live in and around Baltimore and stand at the same few steps on the social ladder. Strout's characters are more widely dispersed regarding area and social class. In 2022, Tyler published her twenty-fourth novel, *French Braid*. Strout published her ninth novel, *Lucy by the Sea*, in the same year. In both works, a couple in their sixties lives through the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. Tyler allots only the final vignette of her work to the pandemic period. In contrast, Strout's book spans from March 2020 to April 2021, chronicling the events in the life of the protagonist-narrator. Nevertheless, both novels deal with family life when how people distanced from each other changed unexpectedly and unprecedentedly, forcing most of us to view our lives from a new perspective. This paper discusses Tyler's vignette from *French Braid* and Strout's *Lucy by the Sea*, aiming to see what these two women writers saw through family life during the pandemic year.

2. *French Braid*: A lesson in family ways

French Braid spans from 1959 to 2020, giving an account of the Garrett family in Baltimore: Robin and Mercy Garrett and their children Alice, Lily, and David. By the end of the novel, the

three siblings have become grandparents. Each of the eight vignettes is self-contained, focusing on some member(s) of the family at a certain point in their sixty-year history. When the Garretts decided they could afford a family vacation, renting a cottage near a lake in the summer of 1959, they seemed unaffected by the impact of the Civil Rights Movement. As the three Garrett children, then seventeen, fifteen, and seven, grow up, leave home, have their own families, and reach middle age and finally retirement age, no reference is made to the different social turmoil that the US has gone through. It is as if they are not interested in or affected by any of them, which is typical of Tyler's fictional world. Her characters are not directly influenced by what is happening in society.

It is somewhat surprising that the final chapter of *French Braid* is explicitly set in 2020, the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic. David Garrett, who was seven in 1959, is now sixty-eight. Although he had planned on working longer as a high school English teacher, he decided not to return to the job he had held for over forty years. David's passion has been in drama classes; without them, he can no longer sustain his interest in teaching. David's choice is directly affected by what is happening in the outer world, not by the personal circle of his family or friends.

Closing the three-generational history of the Garrett clan with a chapter on and from the viewpoint of David is an interesting choice, considering how little he has shown up or spoken as an adult throughout the book. He first appears as the youngest child of Robin and Mercy, who shies away from water when the family stays at the lakeside. Robin expects his son to wade into the water and learn to swim, but David prefers to play in the cabin, dispiriting his father. This turns out to be the first of a series of disappointments he causes: his choice of major in college (English) seems "useless" (*FB* 72) to his father, his total lack of interest in the business his father took over from Mercy's father, and his failure to invite his family to his wedding to Greta. As the siblings grow older, he communicates little and shows not much interest in what other family members are up to.

However, once he marries Greta, he becomes a family man. Because Greta has a daughter from her previous marriage, fatherhood has come at the same time as the wedding. The family increased when he and Greta had a boy, Nicholas. In 2020, Nicholas is a father of a five-year-old son. He and his wife live in New York, which seemed to be the epicenter. A CDC (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention) report, "COVID-19 Outbreak — New York City, February 29–June 1, 2020," issued in November 2020, describes how hard the pandemic hit the metropolis:

> New York City (NYC) was an epicenter of the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) outbreak in the United States during spring 2020. From March to May 2020, approximately 203,000 laboratory-confirmed COVID-19 cases were reported to the NYC Department of

> Health and Mental Hygiene (DOHMH). … The highest rates of cases, hospitalizations, and deaths were concentrated in communities of color, high-poverty areas, and among persons aged ≥75 years or with underlying conditions. The crude fatality rate was 9.2% overall and 32.1% among hospitalized patients. (CDC 2020)

Because Nicholas's wife, Juana, is a doctor and has recently been transferred to the Infectious Diseases section, it is not safe for her to be with her little son Benny and her husband, and that is why Nicholas asks to stay with his parents, who can support him in caring for the child. Another article by the City of New York reports a horrible death toll: "The pandemic resulted in a mortality rate of 241.3 deaths per 100,000 population in 2020, its impact exceeding the 1918 influenza pandemic in New York City, which had a mortality rate of 228.9 deaths per 100,000 population." (The City of New York 2023)

For the young family, however, it is less an evacuation than a practical need for childcare. Nicholas does not bring the shadow of death or an unspeakable horror with him. David and Greta do not fear, either, since they have not reached the age when the fatality rate goes steep. Instead, they are revived when Nicholas calls and tells them of his plan to come to stay with his parents. This is especially true of David, who finds adjusting to the sudden lack of social life "shockingly easy." (*FB* 218) He does not mind the "just two of them" life with Greta that the pandemic has brought, with one exception: "If only they'd had their children nearby, he would have felt perfectly contented." (*FB* 218) Just as Mercy Garrett was covetous of letters from her son shortly after he left for college, now David longs to be with his children and their family. Without knowing, he duplicates the empty-nest syndrome that his parents went through, and it becomes more explicit as COVID-19 deprives him of his beloved work and forces retirement when he is not quite ready. Anticipating his son's arrival, it is as if he had a new project he was assigned to, which he willingly accepted.

So, the last chapter of *French Braid* is not overshadowed by fear but instead filled with small joys and new beginnings. As they await Nicholas's arrival, Greta teases David, saying, "So, you're anxious because you're expecting again. In a manner of speaking." (*FB* 223) By the end of their arrival day, the grandparents realize the large amount of energy needed to deal with a five-year-old, and David finds "a pleasant kind of tiredness" (*FB* 228) as he goes to bed, sleeping better than he has for a while. Soon, a dog is adopted, adding a new walking routine in the neighborhood. David realizes that his Philadelphia suburbs neighborhood has accepted new, younger families. People are staying home and keeping "social distance" from each other, but even though their lifestyles have been forced to change, the area is not overshadowed by death. After Benny goes to bed and the grown-ups have the living room to themselves, David and

Nicholas "would exchange jokey suggestions for a Covid cure they might stumble on by accident" (*FB* 233), something people who are more apprehensive of the ongoing pandemic may frown upon. David feels relaxed and enjoys the temporary three-generational life at home. The Garrets have never been a close-knit clan. Just as David's niece Serena in the first chapter of *French Braid* recalls, if they ever got together, it was only for weddings and funerals, and "even when the Garretts did get together, it never seemed to take, so to speak." (*FB* 21) Serena remembers David as the uncle who "left early from his own father's funeral" (*FB* 13) and Greta as "standoffish" (*FB* 9). Just as Serena, after she visits her boyfriend's parents for the first time, realizes that hers is a "not-*open*" (*FB* 16) family, the sudden shift in life caused by COVID-19 urges David to re-think what family is.

Nicholas finds old family albums and asks David who is who. David does not enjoy this; in particular, he remembers the family trip to the lake when he was seven years old and cannot help thinking how he has not been up to what his father, Robin, expected and that he was not liked. Having Nicholas and Benny with him turns out, unexpectedly, to be an opportunity to recollect his tie to his family, which disturbs him. Even though he has distanced himself from his parents and sisters after he left home for college, and even more so after he married Greta, Benny makes David see the imprint family can make on an individual. When he watches how Benny raises his shoulders when he is intent on doing something, he sees his father, Robin. When Benny runs with his chin tucked, he remembers how his sisters used to do that, too. Hearing Benny's monologue as he is playacting, David cannot help but admit that it is not much different from what he did in his childhood. He is surprised when his grandson sings a song he knew in childhood: the ever-looping "Song That Never Ends":

> This is a song that never ends.
> Yes, it goes on and on, my friends … (*FB* 231)

Although he has kept himself aloof from his family, David is amazed to see how certain things are handed down to the next generation, going on and on, just like the never-ending song.

The evacuation of Nicholas and Benny allows David to reevaluate how family shapes one's personality. In a conversation with Greta, he compares it to a French braid:

> "What is the name of that braid that starts high up on little girl's heads?"
> …
> "Oh, a *French* braid," Greta said.
> "That's it. And then when she undid them, her hair would still be in ripples, little leftover

squiggles, for hours and hours afterward."

"Yes,,,"

"Well," David said, "that's how families work, too. You think you're free of them, but you're never *really* free; the ripples are crimped in forever."

Greta started laughing. "You are finding this out just now?" she asked. (*FB* 234)

David belongs to the group of Tyler's characters who escape from the family they are born into, along with Elizabeth Abbott in *The Clock Winder* (1972), Mary Tell in *Celestial Navigation* (1974), Caleb Peck in *Searching for Caleb* (1975), Barnaby Gaitlin in *Patchwork Planet* (1998), Lindy Anton in *The Amateur Marriage* (2004), and Denny Whitshank in *A Spool of Blue Thread* (2015). Others take a temporary leave, such as Charlotte Emory in *Earthly Possessions* (1977), Delia Grinstead in *Ladder of Years* (1995), and Rebecca Davitch in *Back When We Were Grownups* (2001). In David's case, he accepts "how families work" while admitting there is no way to escape it. The pandemic worried him, but the period spanning from June to August 2020 re-connected him to where he came from and made him articulate what the novelist Tyler has been showing in her many portraits of different families in her almost 60-year career. Typical of Tyler's world, family ways surpass topicality.

3. *Lucy by the Sea*: The strain of life in evacuation

The changes in Lucy Barton's life in *Lucy by the Sea* in 2020 far exceed David Garrett's experience. For David, it was classes going online, retirement moving up, and the bliss of spending a few months with his son and grandson. Lucy Barton's narration starts with a quiet alarm. As early as the first week of March 2020, her former husband, William Gerhardt, a parasitologist, asserts that Lucy is at higher risk because of her age (sixty-three), scrawniness, and lack of exercise. Before she is convinced of imminent danger, William forces her to evacuate from New York, and the two of them drive to Maine to settle in a house by the sea. Lucy recalls how little she knew when she left the city:

> Here is what I did not know that morning in March: I did not know that I would never see my apartment again. I did not know that one of my friends and a family member would die of this virus. I did not know that my relationship with my daughters would change in ways I could never have anticipated. I did not know that my entire life would become something new. (*LS* 12)

Before Lucy starts chronicling her days in the house by the sea, she lets the readers know that significant changes will occur for her, and her life will be tumultuous, creating tension as her story unfolds. This tension is absent from David Garrett's days in Tyler's *French Braid*.

Numerous New Yorkers probably shared Lucy's lack of awareness at the beginning of March 2020. According to the *The New York Times* article "Two Years of the Pandemic in New York, Step by Awful Step," the first case of COVID-19 in New York was confirmed on March 1. On March 7, the governor of New York State declared a state of emergency, followed by the mayor of New York City two days later. In the next ten days, visits to nursing homes were stopped, and public schools were ordered to close. New York went into lockdown on March 20. More than one hundred deaths were counted by March 22, and it reached one thousand by the end of the month. When William takes Lucy to Maine in the second week of March, measures to prevent the pandemic have just started to be taken. It is no wonder Lucy does not understand why William is insistent on leaving New York. By the end of the month, as Lucy watches TV, she sees "horrifying scenes, picture after picture of people being taken to emergency rooms, on ventilators, hospital workers without the right masks or gloves, and people kept dying and dying." (*LS* 27) Lucy feels severed from New York, her home for the last forty years. What is more important is that there is no way for her to see that her life will be affected by the spread of the virus.

While in Crosby, Maine, Lucy changes relationships with William Gerhardt, her daughters Chrissie and Becka, her brother Pete and sister Vicky, and the people she meets in Crosby. Naturally, it is with William that she interacts most during this period. However, their relationship started to change before they left New York, which is the subject of Strout's previous work, *O William!* (2021). William's third wife, Estelle, walked out on him; besides, he felt he was getting older and no longer academically productive as a parasitologist. As a Christmas present from Estelle, he had received a subscription to the ancestry website. The search resulted in his finding out that his mother, Catherine, had had a child before he was born and that she had left her husband and the baby to be with William's father, a former German prisoner of war. The fact that she had discarded her infant daughter, of which he was unaware, came as a blow to him. After Estelle left him, William asked Lucy to accompany him to Maine to investigate his mother's truth further. At the same time, he wished to meet his half-sister, Lois Bubar, the daughter Catherine left. Lucy met and spoke with Lois, who had read Lucy's books, but Lois refused to see William. That and his discovery that his mother came from dire poverty left William distressed. Therefore, the evacuation of William and Lucy to Maine means going back to William's roots and, at the same time, re-exploring the relationship between them.

The relationship between Lucy and William goes back to her days in college when they met as

a student and a teaching assistant in science classes. Their marriage ended after twenty years because of William's affairs, but they have been on friendly terms for the following twenty years. The unpretentious Lucy does not reveal a lot about her writing career. However, she mentions doing book tours, making TV appearances, and publishing a memoir, indirectly telling readers that she has become a prominent writer. She does not say what kind of work she has produced except saying, "I am a novelist." (*OW* 4, *LS* 5) Although she secretly thinks William is overreacting to COVID-19 in March, she lets him take her away because he is a scientist. She has seen both authority and vulnerability in him. As Lucy accompanied William on his first trip to Maine in search of his half-sister, she suggested they go to the town library to find articles on his German father, who spent some time as a POW there. They found a picture of Wilhelm Gerhardt, and Lucy saw authority in him:

> And—slowly—I realized this: This authority was why I had fallen in love with William. We crave authority. We do. No matter what anyone says, we crave that sense of authority. Of believing that in the presence of this person, we are safe. (*OW* 132)

She recalled how they had been like "Hansel and Gretel lost in the woods": she "always felt safe in his presence" (*OW* 133) even when they felt lost and their hearts gnarled with both definite and unnamable fear. Several weeks after their trip to Maine, though, she realized William had lost authority; he was no longer the person who had made her feel safe: "I was no longer that kid looking to Hansel as a guide." (*OW* 235–236) William, whom his much younger wife deserted, disturbed by the facts about his mother's past, aware that he was not making academic achievements, appeared vulnerable to her. Alternatively, Lucy was the only person from whom he did not hide his uncertainty. As she repeatedly asked herself, "Who is this man, William?" (*OW* 227), she understood that he had lost authority. At the onset of the COVID pandemic in 2020, Lucy grieved the death of her second husband David, and William mourned the prime of his life and was disturbed by the recent findings about his mother's past. Lucy, at sixty-three, understands the seventy-year-old William's "sort of midlife crisis, or older man crisis, with the loss of his much younger wife moving out and taking their ten-year-old daughter, and then his half-sister's not wanting to see him and his finding out that his mother had not been who he'd thought she had been." (*LS* 4–5)

Asking who William is reconnects Lucy to her past and, thereby, a way to find the truth about herself. William is the only person who has been to Lucy's home in Amgash, Illinois and has seen the extreme poverty the family has lived in. He was the one who brought her to New York when they married, and they settled down as he took a position in a New York university. They

had two daughters and did not live in any crisis that would endanger their marriage until Lucy learned about William's affairs and decided to leave, returning to her maiden name, Barton. Retrieving her name, Lucy Barton, she found a stronger voice for herself and established her writing career in the next twenty years. She calls writing her "vocation" (*OW* 219), a word that connotes "a strong conviction that it is one's duty or destiny to follow a particular profession" or "a way of life," according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, but she finds herself unable to read or write for as long as six months after the onset of the pandemic. William also re-discovers his "calling" (*LS* 171) as a parasitologist. He works with the University of Maine and his potato farmer nephew to fight potato parasites, finding a new meaning in his life. In an unprecedented crisis, Lucy and William experience a small resurrection.

If this was merely a story of an older couple enduring the pandemic days together and each finding a renewed sense of their calling, *Lucy by the Sea* might have ended up as a domestic chronicle, but this is not the case. Shortly after settling in their house in Maine, William finds a tower within walking distance, and it soon becomes a place he frequents on his daily walks. The tower was "built during World War II to look for submarines, and there had been German submarines that came up" (*LS* 68) to the coastline of Maine. This is a historical fact that can be verified by different sources, including the official website of the Federal Bureau of Investigation: in 1944, two German saboteurs landed from submarines on the coast of Maine, although the FBI quickly caught them. William sees the tower as a reminder of the Nazi's threat being real. The tower also connects him to the legacy that he accepted from his grandfather:

> "Look at that tower, Lucy. My father's father—that horrible old man we met when we went to Germany so many years ago—my *grandfather* was making money on World War II." He looked over at me. "He was making money on these submarines coming right into this harbor. He was a huge industrialist, and all he cared about was making money, and he did—during the war. And he stuck it all in Switzerland." (*LS* 192)

William abhors himself for receiving a significant sum as the only heir directly from the trust that managed his grandfather's fortune; his father refused to take it because it was money made in war. This is a fact new to Lucy. She did not know that his father had not accepted the money and that his mother had advised William to make the same decision. For the first time in their decades-long relationship, William discloses what had been gnawing him over the years. The place, Maine, has led him to face it, along with his connection to the family his mother left to marry his father—the ex-soldier from Germany. Although Lucy does not mention it, the lease of a posh apartment in New York, the eventual purchase of the house by the sea, and the rent of

Lucy's studio in the nearby town of Crosby may all be made possible because of the surplus money. William contradicts himself by denying the legitimacy of the funds and, at the same time, spending it freely for himself and those close to him.

William is not alone in being affected by his past. Lucy frequently refers to her childhood in Amgash, Illinois, where she grew up in poverty and was abused in her own home. The memories of childhood abuse from her parents and poverty and the disdainful treatment she received from others make one wonder how she could survive the experience and grow up to be a prominent writer. Her father had been sent to the European front in World War II, witnessing horrible scenes. Not only that, panicking in fear, he shot two young German soldiers, and the memory left him with a case of what would later have been known as PTSD. It was not recognized or treated as such, and as a result, he suffered from paraphilia. William suffers from the wealth the war has left him unexpectedly, whereas the war indirectly wounds Lucy's mother and siblings. They are both affected by the great wave of history that affects individuals. However, William and Lucy are well-educated professionals and can sustain an upper-class lifestyle in the US's most cosmopolitan and expensive city. One of their daughters finished law school and has a good job; the other left her job to start at Yale Law School. William has a network of connections, which Lucy sometimes (for example, when her second husband David became seriously ill) benefits from. In other words, they belong to the privileged class and know it. This awareness can be painful or disturbing when they recognize the vast difference between themselves and those severely underprivileged.

Lucy's siblings live beyond a rift that separates them regarding geography and class. Her brother, Pete, is alienated from the changing world, and her sister, Vicky, chooses to be led by unscientific advice during the pandemic. She joins a Christian fundamental church, where the congregation does not wear masks. At Thanksgiving 2020, Vicky first gets COVID, then Pete catches it, and Lucy strongly suspects he contracted it from Vicky. For people in the service sector—like Vicky, a care worker at a nursing home—it was impossible to stay home and work online. Vicky's daughter, Lila, works at the same place. This starkly contrasts Lucy, who has evacuated from the epicenter and cautiously keeps social distance even when she is with her daughters, who work from home. The question is, what made this vast difference? Lucy does not mention hard work. She did so well in high school that she won a full scholarship to a college outside Chicago, which completely changed her life. In *My Name Is Lucy Barton*, Lucy recalls her habit of staying in the classroom after school to keep herself warm; she did much reading and never missed homework, which earned her a perfect academic record. The result was: "My senior year, the guidance counselor called me to her office and said that a college just outside of Chicago was inviting me to attend with all expenses paid." (*MNLB* 25) Lucy was unexpectedly

"called" and "invited," and when Lucy accepted the offer, the counselor drove her to campus to support her in starting her new life, stopping on the way to buy her some clothes. It should be noted that Lucy portrays her eighteen-year-old self as passive rather than someone who worked vigorously to seize the opportunity. Years later, Vick's daughter Lila won the same kind of scholarship to the same college but quit after a year and returned home. Although it makes her sad to think of Lila, Lucy does not mention the reason or give insights into Lila's failure to continue. She only muses: "Who knows why people are different? We are born with a certain nature, I think. And then the world takes its swings at us." (*LS* 39) She does not attribute her achievements to her efforts and tries to understand others in terms of "difference" instead of dichotomizing them into "success" or "failure."

Nevertheless, it does not mean that the relationship between Lucy and Vicky is amiable. When Vicky gets COVID, she is taken into a hospital and put on a ventilator; she is too sick to speak but texts a message to Lucy, saying she thinks she "will not make it." (*LS* 225) Lucy immediately replies, "I love you," to which Vicky replies: "I know you think you do." The next day, Vicky gives another message: "Lucy, you've always thought you were better than me. And I think you have been very selfish in your life. I'm sorry but I do. I should pray for you but I am too tired." Lucy feels the message has shot her in the chest. (*LS* 226) Lucy then calls Pete to ask him if he feels the same way about her, which he denies. Pete, unlike William, is not a source of authority for Lucy. What readers know about him from the three novels that Lucy narrates and the story "The Sign" in *Anything Is Possible* (2017) is that he is an isolated person and, in a sense, childlike. For instance, Lucy's mother tells Lucy that he "spends the night with any animal that will be killed the next day." (*MNLB* 9). Lucy recalls how her daughters loved the same book that Pete repeatedly read. He may never have fully matured and remained naïve and gentle until the end, without complaining or blaming others for his misfortune. He grew up as a victim of physical, sexual, and psychological abuse, which resulted in life-long social distancing (not a temporary measure against the pandemic). His life contradicts the social belief that has long been held in the US that everyone has the opportunity to go up the social ladder and be better off than their parents. Still, and more importantly, through Lucy, Strout portrays a meek and gentle soul whose life may have been sad but remained humane. There is hope in humanity, even in the direst poverty.

As Vicky gets over the worst stage of COVID, Pete calls Lucy, telling her he is ill and short of breath. After Lucy implores him to go to the hospital, they have a conversation that will long remain in Lucy's heart:

> He said, "I don't want you to think you were selfish. That's just Vicky talking."

"Oh, Petie, thank you," I said.

And then he said quietly, "I love you, Lucy. Bye now."

My brother had never said he loved me. No one in our family ever said that. (*LS* 227)

Even when death is imminent, Pete remembers the conversation with Lucy and leaves a message that saves her soul. His death leaves Lucy in grief, which is made even more terrible because of Vicky's accusation. However, the exchange of gratitude and love in their final conversation saves Lucy and Pete. Lucy thinks of the time when her siblings helped her: when she visited them in rural Illinois for the first time in many years, she suffered from a panic attack and could not return to Chicago, where she was staying. She asked Vicky to drive her in Vicky's car and Pete to drive the rented car she had driven from Chicago. They agreed to do so until Lucy felt safe enough to drive. As Katherine Montwieler points out in *A Companion to the Works of Elizabeth Strout*, "Strout shows compassion coming from the unlikeliest of people." (Montwieler 217) Lucy remembers their kindness at that time, which is told in the story "Sister" in *Anything Is Possible*, and states, "I understood exactly why Vicky had called me selfish." (LS 229) Lucy does not explain why she has come to this understanding but shows that she values the consoling power of kind-hearted words and gentle, compassionate minds.

If Vicky in *Lucy by the Sea* is less compassionate than in "Sister," the pandemic may have affected her. As early as mid-March 2020, the Brookings Institution released an article titled "Class and COVID: How the less affluent face double risks" and pointed out that the less affluent are likelier to have higher health risks such as diabetes. Taking precautionary measures by keeping social distance from others is more difficult because they lack resources such as job opportunities, funds, or connections for evacuation. Another factor is the rift between the urban and the rural. In *My Name Is Lucy Barton*, Lucy recalls how a look of distaste went across her neighbor's face when she mentioned the sense of disbelief she feels finding herself living in New York: "I had not yet learned the depth of disgust city people feel for the truly provincial." (*MNLB* 39) In Maine, she is exposed to animosity from the locals. For one thing, William and Lucy are evacuees from the epicenter early in the pandemic. A few weeks after they settled in the house by the sea, they find a piece of cardboard stuck to the back of William's car, "and in big letters, someone had written on it: GET OUT OF HERE NEW YORKERS! GO HOME!!" (*LS* 45) To protect themselves from further hostility, William procures a Maine license plate using his connections—another example of being privileged. The resentment is not only because of fear of the virus. Amy Kaplan pointed out that New York had become a place that was not part of the American homeland in the eyes of people outside it: "It is hard to imagine New Yorkers referring to their city as 'the homeland.' Home, yes, but homeland? Not likely. Even in the upswelling

support for New York in the wake of 9/11, most Americans are unlikely to claim the city as part of the homeland, which has a decidedly anti-urban and anticosmopolitan ring to it." (Kaplan 1338/4660 Kindle) Anti-urbanism, anti-cosmopolitanism, anti-intellectualism, and anti-elitism are critical notions in discussing the cultural and political rift in the contemporary US. They culminated in the Capitol Hill riot in Washington D.C. on January 6, 2021, which Lucy and William watched on TV. William's keen interest in this incident affects Lucy. She recalls visiting her alma mater and being invited to talk to a group of students about her memoir on growing up poor. The students showed no interest, asked no questions, and made few comments, making Lucy leave the classroom distressed and humiliated. Remembering this unpleasant memory leads to an understanding of the rioters:

> For one hour that day outside of Chicago, I had felt my childhood humiliation so profoundly again. And … what if I felt locked down upon *all the time* by wealthier people in this country, who made fun of my religion and my guns. I did not have religion, and I did not have guns, but I suddenly felt that I saw what these people were feeling; they were like my sister, Vicky, and I understood them. They had been made to feel poorly about themselves, they were looked at with disdain, and they could no longer stand it. (*LS* 239)

Lucy does not accept what happened in Washington D.C. and labels the rioters "Nazis and racists" (LS 239), but does not avert her eyes from the nature of the great divide among Americans.

Neither has Strout. She extensively explored the subject in *The Burgess Boys* (2013), another novel in Maine. The Burgess siblings—the New York corporate attorney Jim, younger brother Bob, a Legal Aid lawyer also in New York, and Susan, the youngest and a single mother living in their hometown with her son—get together for the first time in many years when Susan's son throws a pig's head into the building used by the Somali community for religious purposes. It is prosecuted as a hate crime, and Susan turns first to Bob and then to Jim for legal help. Michael Tager sees geographic and class conflict between the New York-based brothers and the rooted-in-Maine sister. Tager points out Susan's "animus toward New York City," which "reflects a sense of abandonment by her brothers." (Tager 435) This sense of abandonment is the same as what Lucy sees in the people rioting on Capitol Hill or her sister Vicky. As the course of the Burgess siblings' lives intertwined, Jim fell into disgrace, whereas Susan saved him in the end. The novel ends hopeful as Susan's son Zach has the charges against him dropped and shows signs of picking himself up. The tremendous social divide is there but is mended as the family tie is renewed after much resentment and agony.

Strout also shows a sign of hope in *Lucy by the Sea* through the friendship Lucy has found in Maine. Lucy volunteers at a food pantry, where she meets Charlene Bibber, a nursing home cleaner with a Donald Trump bumper sticker on her car. Socially and culturally, Charlene is farther on the side of Vicky than Lucy, but Lucy enjoys taking walks with her every few weeks and learning about the people she tends to at work. Lucy may have fewer chances to see her because Charlene plans not to get the vaccine and, therefore, will not be able to continue at the food pantry. So the divide is there, but Strout leaves the impression that their friendship is mature and may last. The power of female friendship to overcome differences was present in Strout's first novel, *Amy and Isabelle* (2013). Isabelle Goodrow, a secretary at a paper mill in Shirley Falls, Maine, is disjoined from other officewomen. For one thing, she is a secretary to the manager, and her workplace is partitioned from the others. She comes from a middle-class family, but she was talked into a sexual relationship with her late father's friend and settled down in Shirley Falls with her infant daughter as the man severed her. Her manners and lifestyle differ from the other women in the workplace. However, she is gradually involved in their miseries and awkwardly builds friendships with them, thereby gaining a new power to herself. Through Charlene in *Lucy by the Sea*, readers learn that in her late years, Isabelle formed a friendship with her cohabitant in the nursing home, Olive Kittridge, the fictional character that won Strout a Pulitzer Prize. The indirect connection of women does not affect personal favor or advantage and, in that sense, contrasts with the kind of connection William has in New York. Lucy, like Isabelle, finds comfort in being a part of it.

4. Conclusion

Coincidentally, both couples in Tyler's *French Braid* and Strout's *Lucy by the Sea* are in their sixties or older, and their children are in their mid to late thirties. Although it has been many years since they left home for college, their parents still miss them. David Garrett in *French Braid* cannot recognize his grown-up children as the lovable ones he used to have with him: "… they weren't the same people. It was just as if those children had died. He'd been in mourning ever since." (*FB* 220) Tyler sees the irony that David, who has kept himself away from his parents and sisters as much as possible, misses his children. On the other hand, Lucy Barton admits her relationships with her daughters have always been close. However, the pandemic affects their relationships because they no longer live in the same city (New York), and the daughters' problems in their marriage surface. Lucy has compassion for Chrissie, who repeatedly suffers a miscarriage, and for Becka for her divorce. Chrissie mourns her lost motherhood, Becka mourns her marriage, and Lucy mourns the loss they endure. Although

Becka is ready to start her new life as a law school student, Chrissie is about to have an affair. In the scene toward the end in which Lucy talks to Chrissie, making her see that she is doing this to her marriage because of the losses she has suffered, Lucy is candid about her breaking up with William, having an affair, marrying David, and getting back together with William. Montwieler points out that Lucy in *My Name Is Lucy Barton* "stresses that she is not a reliable narrator" (Montwieler 129), and Lucy remains self-effacing in *Lucy by the Sea*, all the more so because she does not know what is going on or what awaits as the pandemic lingers. However, she comes out strong as she faces her daughter, and her candidness about herself turns into authority that captures Chrissie. Marriage, parenthood, and aging are fundamental to family life and, therefore, recurringly appear in the fictional families of Tyler and Strout. In Tyler's works, as in the Garrets in *French Braid*, families "hide a few uncomfortable truths, allow a few self-deceptions" together with "little kindnesses" and "little cruelties" (*FB* 242) rather than confront each other. In Strout's family, issues are more verbally articulated.

The prominent difference between Tyler and Strout is the degree of direct reference to the social reality of the US. Strout, whom Montwieler calls "an explicitly social writer" because of the power of her works to make the readers consider "the evil in the world" and show the "collective responsibility for others" (Montwieler 11), has been describing the tremendous American divide in her novels. By 2020, the divide had been significant because of political and economic factors, and the pandemic made the conflict even more severe. Her descriptions of poverty and abuse and the antagonism and disdain between different social sectors are poignant. Tyler's characters are less diverse regarding geography and class and more focused on domestic matters. Tyler's interest is in domestic affairs, and she may lack the eye of a social critic. She focuses on what remains resilient and little affected by the times in ordinary, middle-class family lives in the U.S. The David Garrett vignette in *French Braid* and *Lucy by the Sea* together cover the lives of the privileged, the middle-class, and the underprivileged in what will be remembered as the year of COVID-19. The pandemic has had an impact that left no one untouched, compelling writers, both social and domestic types, to chronicle the experience.

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（たんじ　めぐみ）

パンデミックにおける家族の姿
―Anne Tyler *French Braid* と Elizabeth Strout *Lucy by the Sea* 研究―

Megumi TANJI

要　約

アン・タイラーとエリザベス・ストラウトは現代アメリカを代表する作家で，平凡な日常生活の奥にあるものを洞察する作風で知られる。いずれも2020年のパンデミックを背景にした小説を2022年に発表した。双方ともにパンデミック下の家族を描いているが，その視点は異なる。Tylerは一人の人物の視点と経験により，パンデミックでさまざまな対応を余儀なくされながらも，歴史的・社会的変化が起こる渦中で継続性を発揮する家族の本質を示している。ストラウトはタイラーよりも社会性が強く，現代アメリカに見られる社会的・経済的・地理的な分断への関心が作品のプロットに直接的に反映されている。パンデミックから逃れてニューヨーク市からメイン州に移住した語り手の視点は，個人が歴史や社会から受ける大きな影響を直視しながら，家族の在り方を模索する。感染拡大期の不安を背景に，いずれの作家も家族が家族として生き続ける希望を提示している。

キーワード：パンデミック，避難生活，結婚，親子関係，社会階層