Anne Tyler deftly handles the evolving role of women in the later half of the twentieth century in her best-selling novel *Saint Maybe*. As we enter into the lives of the Bedloe family in 1960’s Baltimore, we find Bee Bedloe’s apparently pre-shaped existence for her family rocked when her eldest son Danny brings home the “woman who has changed [his] life.” Lucy, who according to Danny’s younger brother Ian “resembles some brightly colored bird held captive by his brown plaid family,” does indeed change not only his life but also all of their lives indirectly and irrevocably (6). This beautiful divorcée with two young children and no family epitomizes women in this era: dependent. Ian unwittingly unleashes the caged bird, setting off a chain of events which captivate our imaginations and the lives of all around him as Tyler unfolds a story of longing, passions too closely bridled, and the consequences of seemingly mundane actions. Moreover, Tyler shows the potential for a bolder future in the next generation of women as the dust begins to settle from the chaos that ensues.

In the midst of adult disorder Tyler presents one little gem of a girl, a diamond in the rough. She sits demurely on the sidelines, at best ignored and at times rebuked in ways she soon becomes accustomed to for a thing beyond her control. This child is unattractive. Early descriptions of Agatha reveal a child “as cloddish as her name-plain and thick, and pasty-faced” (14). The pink frilly frock she wears to the first family Christmas only “seemed to accentuate her monolithic jaw,” and she would breathe through her mouth in a most conspicuous way (22). However, she will not simper, nor try to make-up even when she knows she has answers that are wanted by the adults who will ultimately be responsible for her care following the untimely death of her mother. She allows Bee to walk herself ragged with baby Daphne, then informs Ian that sitting in the rocking chair will do the trick and keep the baby from fussing, establishing a quid pro quo basis to their relationship (95). She has watched her mother fail regardless of beauty and charm, buffeted by bullies in a world where adults rule and life is tough. This reinforces her resolve to use her brain (mind) as the means to her ends, refining the hardness of the diamond within.

Tyler grounds Agatha with responsibility from her earliest memories. She is the comforter of her younger brother Thomas, allowing him into bed with her to tell him a story rather than turn on a light to read. Although her preference is for stories with fairy godmothers, she relents and tells the tale of *Hansel and Gretel*, leading to inevitable visions of two lost children in the woods as she lay trying to sleep. She is also a source of strength for her mother, watching as Lucy struggles against insurmountable odds, reinforcing further the fact that attractiveness and charisma cannot overcome dependence on others for basic need fulfillment. Noticing her tone of voice is hardening like her mother’s as she speaks to Thomas, she recalls Grandma Bedloe’s wounding comment at a family gathering: “What a pity Agatha didn’t inherit Lucy’s bone structure” (77). This increases Agatha’s devaluation of her physical self-esteem and underlines her determination to succeed regardless: traits that carry her into adult life. Seven-year-old Agatha firms her resolve not to be a victim, a mere pawn, but to be a strong person and take the initiative, empowering her for subsequent dealings with the Bedloes.

When we find Bee shuffling into Lucy’s abode with a basket of food, she
queries Agatha about the possibility of alcohol to explain Lucy’s catatonic state, provoking the child to protect or cover-up for her mother. It is apparent from the state of things inside the house that the bereaved young woman is not coping. She has no money, family, nor help of any kind: the infant is in a squalid cot and the two older children are dirty and have no food to eat. When Ian fills their glasses with milk from the refrigerator “he stops and sniffs, then pours them both down the sink” (70). The children’s pathetic plea to Bee goes unheeded when they beg to go to her house: “ ‘If you wrap [Lucy] in a blanket she can walk pretty good. Stir some coffee in her Co-Cola, and make her drink it.’ Ian’s fingers stop in mid-air and he and Grandma Bedloe look at each other” (73). This is a pivotal point in Ian’s assessment of Bee’s ability to ‘sugar coat’ a situation. He pauses and although he is only seventeen, he senses there is more wrong beneath the surface than his mother is willing to face up to. Their lack of Christian morality foreshadows upcoming events and his instincts prove right: Lucy dies. The calamity of this event overtakes their lives and Agatha watches it unfold.

Whether it is the responsibility of Bee and Ian to act according to the situation as they visibly find it, Agatha watches Bee metaphorically wash her hands of the matter. Lucy shakily enters the room and offers a patently fictitious excuse for “napping in the shank of the afternoon” due to her walking with the children during the heat of the day. Perhaps Bee did believe that Lucy had walked so far with the blanket draped around her as the children had described? No, Bee knows that Lucy and the children have not been out of the unkempt house, yet she accepts the excuse. To add further to Agatha’s plight, Bee picks up the thread and runs with it, cajoling Lucy with “Why, my heavens—of course you are worn out.” Watching this deceit, this seeming betrayal, Agatha is left in a vacuum. As Ian picks up his Parcheesi piece, a semblance of normality resumes, but for Agatha it has a surreal quality. She knows the adults are accepting a patent cover-up. She and Thomas tried their best to receive help and found the safety and love that Danny’s family denied them. Agatha must be brave; she instinctively knows and is “anxious” about the further responsibility she is undertaking (73).

While Bee’s recently widowed daughter-in-law draws closer to the verge of sanity (and imminent death) she pushes the child for answers that are apparently meant to appease her own sense of duty. How does the child respond? She shows loyalty, devotion, and resilience developed more forthrightly and steadfastly in this character than in any other throughout the book. Indeed, one wonders whether Agatha might be a reflection of the author herself? Tyler pursues the question of Christianity in the child’s eyes even further when the Bedloe’s minister comes in to comfort them before Lucy’s funeral. Dr. Prescott calls her “Abigail” and tells them “life must go on” (97). Agatha remains expressionless. In fact at this point she has already determined to take the fate of herself and her siblings into her own hands. The mysteriously missing documentation on their previous existence has been carefully hidden away since before her mother’s death providing Agatha the element of time required for the Bedloe’s reluctant sense of duty to develop.

The avenue of The Church of the Second Chance presents her with a lifeline due to Ian’s newfound religious persuasion, and she holds the key to their remaining in his care. She is too astute not to have heard the undertones of adult conversation: “What will you do with the children? You’re stuck with them, aren’t you?” (114). She remembers the happiness of the afternoons spent with Ian baby-sitting and playing games, when Lucy would come rushing in bringing the freshness of the outside air and the joy of her adventures with her. This is tempered with the memory of Ian leaving them alone on the night Danny died. Agatha is left without firm footing in her reflections, unable to discern the conflicting elements of Ian’s character. As Ian acknowledges to himself that “being a child at all is scary, the powerlessness, outsiders—murmurs over your head about something everyone knows but you” (115). She is in tune with his shift of feeling but reserves her inner thoughts, tolerating him for long enough to secure a place to keep the children together. This raises the question of whether Agatha ever finds the ability to show a true and lasting trust in any other individual or whether she must always be in charge in order to manipulate the outcome of events.

By the age of ten she feels confident enough with their position in the family/clan to take their mother’s mustard seed locket to Bible camp. Thomas is shocked by this display of faith, as he has been forbidden to mention anything pertaining to their past by Agatha since the indiscretion about his father’s Christian name with Mrs. Jordan. This is the beginning of the end of her duplicity: she no longer feels the threat of by the Bedloes. On the other hand, the time is also coming for her to ‘absolve’ Ian from the responsibility of continuing
to require her presence in the church to show he is doing the 'right thing'. Her early childhood memories of Christian behavior, exemplified by Dr. Prescott prior to her Mother's funeral, had not imbued Agatha with a burning desire to pursue this path. In later years she refers to the Bible camp as "pathetic", and tells Daphne, "[Religion] narrows you and confines you." She goes on to compare living with a family "like taking a long trip with people you are not very well acquainted with. After awhile their [idosyncrasies] make you want to scream and you have to get away from them" (284). Tyler pulls deeply into the depths of Agatha's character to show the adolescent becoming autonomous as she pursues her education and matures. Her ontological persuasion and sovereignty attitude have emerged.

Ultimately, we find the adult Agatha little changed from the child. She returns from her medical practice in L.A. following Bee's death with an impossibly handsome husband at her side. While he dresses in "the sort of casual, elegant clothes you see in ads for ski resorts," Agatha shows her usual disregard for time-wasting appearances (270). Her uniformly white face is a carry over from her pasty-faced youth, as she dresses in drab garb remarkable only for its austerity. And her hair is styled in a way that still accentuates her jaw line although she could, by all accounts, present herself in a becoming fashion. Daphne speculates that maybe Stuart is Agatha's one self-indulgence or perhaps (more likely) she hadn't really noticed how attractive he is! This may indeed be the case, for as Agatha relates a dream of a high-school boy proposing to her she laughingly recalls turning him down because of their age difference while omitting to tell him she is already married.

Stuart, on the other hand, shows his admiration for her directness with terminally ill patients: "She's amazing. She'll say straight out to them, 'What you've got can't be cured.'" She banters back with "I say, what you've got can't be cured at this particular time" (282). She goes on to point out that she could not deal with the shallowness of dermatology: Tyler's way of showing Agatha's further rejection of exterior/cosmetic values?

This is the young woman who was shaped by death and loss in early childhood and learned to take the hard truth straight on. She does not dabble in appearances. In contrast with her mother in the 1960's, who could not await the outcome of circumstances, she has had the benefit of education and also the ability and single-mindedness to pursue independence; but at what intrapersonal cost? The traumatized child remains within, aloof from deeper interpersonal commitments. This may well be a reflection of women's roles in society today, as they strive to represent themselves as the epitome of all that is finest in so many diverse arenas. Ms. Tyler used Dr. Prescott as the vehicle of her final analysis when he issued the line, "Life goes on," and through Agatha's character we see that, indeed, it does.

Work Cited