BOOK CLUB EXPRESS

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After Annie

by Anna Quindlan

Look inside for

Discussion Questions

Author Interview/Biography

Reviews

Dear Reader,

Non-spoiler alert: the most vivid, memorable, alive character in *After Annie* dies in the first sentence. You all know her, Annie Brown, the kind of woman who is the linchpin of the lives of so many people, the hub of a wheel that, without her, is just so many disconnected sticks. Meet her husband, Bill, who discovers that the life they share has been entirely engineered by his wife. Her best friend, Annemarie, who doesn't know how she will keep herself together and away from very bad habits without that mouthy little girl she met in first grade. Annie's daughter, Ali, who realizes that, absent the umbrella of mother love, she will need to grow up at only age 14, care for her three younger brothers, and puzzle out many of the mysteries and malfeasance of the adult world.

And in all their minds and hearts is Annie, who is loving but not sentimental, caring but nobody's fool, who is funny and sharp and unforgettable, which is what saves them all. The people in her orbit would be lost without their memories of her, and the lessons she has taught them by example about how to be happy. Bill relives their early years together, Annemarie the unremitting ways in which her friend forced her to be strong, Ali the nights her mother made her stand in the silver light of the backyard and look up at the moon. In the year between the moment when Annie falls to the floor in her too-small kitchen, the meatloaf already on the table, and the morning when those she loved gather to leave keepsakes at the foot of her gravestone, they all learn to move forward together. *"You will prevail,"* a wise woman tells Bill. *"You have no choice."*

This is a novel about prevailing, about the power of love to make us resilient, strong, the very best version of ourselves. And from its opening sentence it is about one of the most important truths we ever unearth: **No one beloved is ever truly gone.**

Annie lives. Trust me, she does, and you will love her as they do.

Anna Quindlen

Discussion Questions

1. Annie, like all people, has many different selves: Everyone in her life knows one aspect of her extremely well, but only by looking at all of those parts together can we truly see the whole. Discuss the different, similar and occasionally opposing views the people in Annie's life have of her. Who was she *truly*?

2. "I didn't lose my mother," Ali says. "I hate it that people say that. I didn't lose her, and she's not gone, and she didn't pass away. She's dead." Discuss the language and euphemisms we use to talk about death. Do you prefer to use "softer" language like "lost" and "passed away," or more straightforward words like "died"? Why do you think this is?

3. With which character do you feel you have the most in common? The least? Discuss.

4. Why do you think that the people in our lives sometimes loom larger after death?

5. When we lose someone we love, part of ourselves, part of our history, seems to die with them. Has this ever happened to you? What was it like? How does this happen to each character in AFTER ANNIE?

6. "They were all floating in some in-between, where nothing seemed real and nothing seemed right," Quindlen writes. Have you had this experience with grief? What did it feel like for you? Do you remember when life started to feel real again?

7. Which scene in the novel moved you the most?

8. What do you think happens to the characters after the book ends? In five years? 20?

9. Have you read other novels by Anna Quindlen? What consistent themes do you notice throughout her work?

Author Interview

Zibby speaks to one of her greatest literary role models, #1 New York Times bestselling author Anna Quindlen, about AFTER ANNIE, a breathtakingly beautiful novel about family, friendship, and the power of love to transcend loss—and a Zibby's Book Club pick! They delve into the core themes of the book: grief, resilience, and the intricacies of familial and friend relationships, all of which Anna has drawn from her own experiences and observations. Finally, Anna reflects on her writing process, the challenges of publication, the unpredictability of the literary world, and the importance of perseverance.

Zibby Owens: Welcome, Anna. Thank you so much for coming back on "Moms Don't Have Time to Read Books" -- we were just joking, I feel like you've been on this a hundred times already -- to discuss After Annie, which is my Zibby's Book Club pick. I just love this book so much. I love your writing so much and, oh, my gosh, everything about it. Thank you.

Anna Quindlen: Thank you. Thanks so much for picking it, Zibby. I'm so honored and pleased. I can't wait to do the book club meeting with you.

Zibby: Yay. Also, the color, I feel like I dressed for you today. I'm wearing a light blue sweater. I can just loan it to you if you want, take it on the road.

Anna: I must say, I love the cover of this book. We fought pretty hard for it. There were a lot of different iterations. Cover art is hard.

Zibby: It's so much interior life. It's about relationships and intimacies and the effects of one thing, but it's about a person -- I would imagine this would be a tough brief because it could go in so many ways for the cover. It's gorgeous, really gorgeous. Speaking of that, can you tell listeners what After Annie is about?

Anna: I don't feel like it's a spoiler because in the first sentence on the first page, Annie Brown dies. She's a young wife and mother. She has four young kids. She's been married quite happily to a guy named Bill. Her best friend is named Annemarie. The book is about the first year in their lives without her, how Bill copes or doesn't, how Ali, who is thirteen years old, has to step up, and how Annemarie is completely lost without her closest friend. What I wanted to communicate with the book and what I feel pretty happy about succeeding at is, Annie dies on the first page, and she's the most alive person in the book. I think that that's something that we don't often appreciate about grief and loss. When we have beloved people in our lives, it's sometimes easy to overlook them on a day-to-day basis. Yes, there she is, the bedrock of everything that I do. Then if they die, when they die, they loom larger somehow in our minds, in our hearts, in our daily lives than they might have done when they were actually there. I think that's what happens for all three of these people. The way that they get through this first year is Annie is still very much there for all of them.

Zibby: Reading it as a mom of four myself, and everyone who reads it, you can put yourself in the shoes of basically every character. What would happen to everyone we love when or if we were to disappear today? How would everybody react? Would they be okay? I feel like there's so much of that worry. Are your kids going to be okay? What are they going to think about? It's almost like an exercise in handling anxiety. If this were to happen, would everyone be okay?

Anna: I think what you realize, and certainly what's true in the novel, is that people get through in different ways. Each of the four children respond in quite different ways to what has happened. Bill is almost frozen,

not only because he loved his wife so very much, but because he has overlooked the fact that basically their entire life is engineered by her. Duh. Hello. Do we all live with this? Annemarie just has never been able to imagine a life without Annie riding shotgun with her since they were both kids. Everybody has to try to recover some different piece of themselves. I think that's what happens in life when in a family, a man loses his wife, children lose their mother, and friends lose the person who held them all together.

Zibby: I know, sadly, you lost your mother at a younger age. How much of that was a piece of this?

Anna: You know, it wasn't at all a piece of this. It's been so long. I was nineteen when my mother died. I'm seventy-one years old now. You may or may not be able to figure out that this book is dedicated to my mother. It just has her initials, which is how I wanted it. I sort of felt like it was time to put that overweening influence to bed, even though it will be an overweening influence until the day I die. This grew much more out of that sense that you develop as you get older. The landscape of your personal earth starts to shift. I am seventy-one years old, which means over the last ten years, a fair number of my friends have died. That's challenging. You think about how we get on without them. The only thing that really interests me as a novelist, and actually, it was the only thing that really interested me as a reporter and a columnist, is the ordinary lives of ordinary people. Having said that, the ordinary lives of ordinary people, which are often lived with a valor and a courage and a depth that gets overlooked amid the literati, the intelligencia -- I'm not interested in writing about people who have lives of that sort. Although, there are very good books written about them. I'm really interested in the everyday pushing of the rock uphill.

Zibby: Interesting. Do you feel like that's your everyday sometimes, just getting through?

Anna: Yes, absolutely. I saw on Instagram somebody was interviewing -- was it Aretha Franklin? I think it was Aretha Franklin, and asked what her greatest challenge was. I'm going to get this wrong. Yeah, what her greatest challenge was. She said, it's trying to figure out what to make for dinner every damn night. I'm like, yes, Aretha! It's not that my upper register is narrowed or that I can't figure out where to perform. It's what to make for dinner every damn night.

Zibby: Oh, my gosh, I love that. It's so great. When you were writing it, were you trying to give a sense of hopefulness in that, yes, we all have these losses, we have people who will come in and come out of our lives, and lives will continue to shift, but ultimately, we have the ability to adapt in some way even though it's not always pretty looking? Is it that we need to take the time to acknowledge those we've lost and kind of sit with it a little bit? What do you want the reader to leave with?

Anna: All of the above. The difference between how the reader sees a piece and how you, when you're very much in it, see a piece is really interesting to me. I often say that readers tell me things about my own work that hadn’t even occurred to me. Then I, oh, yes, of course. When I went into the first meetings with the people at Random House about this book, they were all talking about how the book is about resilience and how the book is about hope and how the book is about how we can lift each other up. I went, "The book is about grief and loss." They all said, "Yes, yes, yes, but..." That "but" made me think about what I'd done here in a way that I hadn’t thought about it before, except for the fact that at the very end, there's clearly a moment where there's hope, hope with a capital H and hope with a small h. That was probably my way of saying, in different ways, for better or worse, everyone will survive and even thrive, but maybe not right now and maybe not for all of them right now. I think that reaction that the book was about successfully pushing the rock uphill made me look at it in a slightly different way.

Zibby: Do you have an Annemarie in your life?

Anna: Oh, yes.

Zibby: Who is your Annemarie?

Anna: Her name is Janet Maslin. She was, for many years, the chief film critic and then the chief book critic of The New York Times. She is definitely my Annemarie. Although, I haven't known her as long as Annemarie and Annie have known each other. Those friendships where you've known each other since elementary school -- I think you have one, don't you?

Zibby: I do, yes.

Anna: Those are powerful because they go way back to before you were you in some kind of way. Maybe when you're seven and eight, you're more you than you are at seventeen. Then you become you again. Those are really powerful relationships. Most of the women I know have, if not a best friend, then several best friends. Certainly, the ones I know who are living their best lives have a coterie of girlfriends that are critical to them.

Zibby: This is this whole, is marriage important? Could we all just go live with our girlfriends forever? I feel like there's this movement. I just read it about somewhere too. People are deciding, I'll just live with my girlfriends forever. Why not?

Anna: The piece of the whole attitude towards marriage now that I find a little perplexing is the whole, my husband is my best friend. I feel like your best friend plays one role in your life, and your spouse plays a different role. It's not more or less. It's just different. I find that whole best friend/spouse conflation a little confusing from my point of view. I think the living with your girlfriends thing also arises when you get older because the truth is women tend to live longer than men. I'm part of a women's travel group. We just got back from Rome. I love them all so much. We talk all the time about the home. The home will be one of our second homes. There's, apparently, plans for a male massage therapist and definitely a cook, maybe a nurse if we need it and all of us just sitting around being snarky.

Zibby: I feel like that could be your next book. That sounds really good.

Anna: Actually, the novel I'm working on now has a four-woman book club in it, but the rules of their book club is you cannot read the book. Everybody gets the book, but you can't read the book. Book club is just to sit around and talk about what's going on in your own life. I'm kind of charmed by that idea, even though I do love book clubs that read the book because sometimes they read my books.

Zibby: I was somewhere recently. Somebody got up to ask the author a question. She was like, "I haven't actually read your book, but blah, blah, blah." The author was like, "You know what? You bought it. That's great. I don't even care if you read it. It makes no difference to me. Don't be embarrassed. You helped me out." It was so funny. After you write a book like this where Annie and Annemarie and Bill and the kids and everybody is so real that you feel -- as a reader, I feel like I know them intimately. As the creator and however

imagination works, do you feel sort of adrift? Do you imagine what they would do in certain situations in your life? Do they kind of prance along with you as you go about the day in some way? Do you just put them to bed and close the book and set it aside?

Anna: I feel a little bit like it's like moving from one town to another, when you move away and you sort of keep in touch with people, but it's not the same kind of contact. After a while, it usually ebbs and dries up. I sort of feel like I moved to another town. Having said that, when they're real, they're real. I remember being at a stoplight in the car with the kids one day. This woman in a nurse's uniform with red hair walked across the street. I reflexively thought, that's Fran Flynn. Fran Flynn is the protagonist of Black and Blue. She is a nurse. She does have red hair, but she does not actually exist outside of the pages of that book and my imagination. Yet in some ways, during the course of writing that novel, she had become so real to me that as a matter of course, I thought I could identify her on the street. I sort of feel that way about Annie. Sometimes I drive past an assisted living place out here in Pennsylvania where I live. I'm not exactly that specific, but there is this sense that Annie's working there. That kind of thing. There's those peripheral moments that come out of nowhere and hit you.

Zibby: Interesting. You also tackle addiction, in part, in this book. Talk about that. What are we even to do with the rise of -- so many people struggle with this all the time. It impacts so many families and relationships. Just talk about that.

Anna: It's one of the things that I love the most about Annie, that Annemarie can't snooker her. If she were a lesser person, at a certain point, she would cut that cord. Of course, that's a real temptation, to just say, enough, I can't take any more. Annie is such a good person and such a good friend that she's the person who really grapples with this and pulls Annemarie out of a hole. I love that. I love that about her. Of course, then later on after Annie's gone, Annemarie really is in a head to relapse. It's only some sense of a possible future that brings her back from the brink. All addiction, all addicts are different. One of the things that you worry about creating a character like this is that people are going to say, oh, but it's not like that. She couldn't get over it by X. She couldn't work through it by Y. This is one woman who has fallen into a pit that a lot of other people have fallen into and by dint of great love manages to surmount it, one hopes -- I'm crossing my fingers here -- forever, but forever is a long time, especially when you're jonesing.

Zibby: I loved Annie's creative approach to basically making -- [laughs].

Anna: She's such a hard type sometimes. That's what I really like about her. She's being nice. She's doing things and everything. Then every once in a while, she's just like, okay, stop that right now. She's pushed to the edge of herself. I love that about her.

Zibby: Amazing. You've been writing your whole career. You're still coming up with new characters and new ideas and speaking with passion about your projects. Is this just who you are deep down? This is just part of you. A big part of you is just this continual creativity and storytelling. Does it ever end? Do you ever say, well, I don't know, I don't want to do this anymore? How do you feel about it?

Anna: As you know in my remarks at your Zibby event here in New York, I indicated quite strongly that I find it's very difficult and that I do not love it. I'm always agog at all those writers who are like, this is my happy place. No. My happy place is with a cup of coffee and the crossword puzzle. That day, I think I said something that I've come to very slowly over a period of time, which is that one of the reasons I keep going -- of course, I don't really run out of ideas. The world of human beings is an infinite place which gives you a lot of characters

to work with. The work is hard enough that what keeps me going is that I don't feel like writing is something I do. I feel like writing is who I am. Then I thought about it in a whole different way this week. In this interregnum right before publication, which is just a horrible period --

Zibby: -- Could you brand that more? Could that just become the term that everybody uses, the interregnum? Oh, my gosh, I love that. Love.

Anna: When the book is sitting there, when my box of books is sitting there and I'm thinking, will anybody care? Prepublication is just horrible for me. In this interregnum, I was reading a series of mystery novels by a woman who has been somewhat lost in the mist of time called Elizabeth Daly. She wrote a series of more than a dozen novels starring a documents guy named Henry Gamadge. The last one was published in 1950. She was always said to be Agatha Christie's favorite mystery novelist, which makes you wonder why she's been lost in the mist of time. Anyhow, I finished one the other night. I went to get the next one, and there isn't a next one. I thought, wait, I've been with Henry for a month now. What's going on? I looked up her bio thinking, oh, this is terrible, Elizabeth Daly finished this book, and then she died, but she didn't. She lived for another seventeen years. I have no idea why she gave up on this series.

What it made me think about was that every writer, whether they want it or not, whether they honor it or not, whether they accept it or not, has an intimate relationship with readers. When I sit at the computer and work -- I felt this particularly keenly when I was a columnist. It's like I'm in a conversation, but I can't see the person on the other side of the computer screen. Realizing that I wanted more of these books and that I somehow felt it wasn't fair for Elizabeth Daly to have left me in the lurch in this way, I realized that part of why I continue to do this is that I have a relationship with readers that I've built over almost fifty years. I almost have an obligation to maintain that relationship. I've never thought of it that way before. Although, I'm surprised I haven't thought about it when I'm on book tour because I meet so many readers, and it's so gratifying to talk to them about what they see in the work.

Zibby: Wow. You just feel obligated, basically. This is all just, you might as well. [laughs] No, I'm kidding. I see what you're saying, obviously. It's true. I would be very disappointed if you stopped writing.

Anna: Look, when both Philip Roth and Alice Munro announced at age eighty that they were done, I kind of envied them. Both of them had won endless prizes, are considered near the top of the canon, are both writers whose work I admire greatly. I thought, gee, what's Alice going to do? Is she just going to knit and hang out with her friends?

Zibby: More trips to Rome. Also, don't you feel, in part, that all of this lends life a greater sense of purpose, in a way? There's a reason. I don't know.

Anna: Yes, of course. I can't remember how many years ago it was, meeting with the financial advisor. He said, "At what age do you anticipate retiring?" Then he took one look at my face and said, "Okay, next question," because I can't imagine that. Having said that, I have lots of other moving parts to my life that take up a lot of time. I'm on a couple of boards. I really believe in public service. I try to always put my body where that belief is. Obviously, I have children and grandchildren and a great group of readers. I'm an inveterate reader. It's basically my favorite thing to do, except to hang out with my children and my grandchildren. I have lots of other things to fill parts of my life, but I'm very invested in work. I think probably, I will be doing it ad infinitum.

Zibby: Do you ever think about -- I know you're more active now on Instagram, which I love, getting these little sneak peeks and your funny sayings and all of it.

Anna: Did not want to do that. Ten years ago, Random House said, "You've got to join Twitter." I was like, "I'm not joining Twitter." I drew a line in the sand. Then with this book, they said -- actually, it was with Write for Your Life. "You've got to join Instagram." I sort of drew a line in the sand. Then my daughter said to me, "Mommy, you should do Instagram. It's not like Twitter. It's not mean-spirited. It's kind of fun." Then she said the magic words, "And you'll be able to promote other people's books." I thought, that's it. I'm promoting other people's books. I actually enjoy it a lot more than I expected to. Although, I spend way too much time looking at puppies.

Zibby: They are cute. My kids do that all the time on my phone, so my feed is all -- they must think I am so crazy. My kids start looking at it. I start looking at it. Anyway, aside from Instagram, when you used to write a column and have that relationship and conversation, do you ever think about doing more of that type of the immediacy of the daily life chronicling that is not just really daily life? It's really about so much more than that.

Anna: No. I feel like I wrote a column to the best of my ability first when I was doing Life in the 30s and then when I did the op-ed page column for The Times and the back page of Newsweek. I really thirst for more of that kind of material from younger people. I feel like we baby boomers have clogged every pipeline imaginable, as we now can all tell by how the presidential race is shaping up. Really, I want to hear from people in their thirties and forties and fifties from all kinds of backgrounds about what their lives are like. I feel like I did my bit. I communicated with readers in that way. I communicate with them now through fiction and the occasional nonfiction book. In terms of that kind of column and essay work, I want to hear from younger, more diverse voices.

Zibby: Great answer. Last thing. Advice to aspiring authors? Maybe the thirty, forty, fifty-year-old who is trying to get out there in the way that you're suggesting.

Anna: First of all, I feel your pain. Oh, my god. I had a real leg up here because I was working at The Times. I was doing this column. Random House never said, gee, can she write a sentence that people will read? They never said, can she bring it on home? I brought it on home twice a week and all that. I had that as my underpinnings to any kind of book deal. What I would say, first of all, is the reason they call it voice is because it's supposed to sound like the way you talk. I see way too much prose where somebody feels like, this is what writing sounds like. It sort of smacks of the MFA program or the writing workshop. In the process, the person has lost what makes them unique. What makes you unique is the only thing really worth publishing because there's so much out there. Don't lose sight of your own voice, what may be your own quirkiness, your own craziness. Oh, my god, is anybody going to publish this? David Foster Wallace got published. Quirky, crazy, whatever.

The other thing is -- we were talking before about doing the work. You can't spend too much time blue-skying this. You got to sit down every day. You got to look at the screen. If you're like me, every time you look at the screen, you are seized by insecurity, self-doubt, and fear. It won't be good. I can't do this. What am I doing? Then you just have to start to type. You just have to start to type. As I've said in the past, my experience is that sometimes bad writing leads to good writing, but not writing doesn't lead to anything. It's really important to

just pound it out. Then my senior year at Barnard in the creative writing program, [indiscernible], the novelist who was teaching us, gave us our first assignment -- we're all waiting -- buy manila envelopes. We were not expecting that. Buy manila envelopes was so we could send things out. We weren't expecting that either. I think all of us thought, we're writers. We're writing.

None of us thought, you put it in the envelope and you send it to a magazine, and they send it back to you with a form letter that says, you're a terrible writer. It never says that, but that's what you think it says. You've got to get used to the idea that you're going to try to go out there, either on the internet, through a zine, through a publishing house, and find readers. You've got to get used to the idea that person after person after person is going to turn you down. The first Harry Potter book was turned down by how many? Jane Austen's father sent out the manuscript of Pride and Prejudice, which he was going to pay to have printed, to a London publisher. Returned by post, I think it said, or returned on receipt by post. It was like they hadn't even opened the envelope, and there's a book that hasn't been out of print for two hundred years. There are people who will say to you, don't want it, don't like it. It's only one person's opinion. Again, pushing the rock uphill.

Zibby: Coming full circle. I love it. Anna, thank you so much. Congratulations.

Anna: Wait, can I add one thing, Zibby?

Zibby: Of course.

Anna: Six or seven years ago, ten years ago, the conventional wisdom was that book publishing was on the schiz. At the same time, the conventional wisdom was that independent bookstores were all going under and being a bookseller was impossible. In between that time and today, you started a publishing house and you opened a bookstore. Guess what? The conventional wisdom was wrong. I think that when you buck conventional wisdom and win, you should walk around every day thinking, ha ha ha. My last word to you today, Zibby, is you should walk around today going, ha ha ha, on behalf of all of us who write.

Zibby: [laughs] Okay, I'll do that. Thank you. Yes. I'll just keep going into the wrong trending businesses.

Anna: Do it. Do it.

Zibby: Maybe I'll take on the typewriter market next. Thank you so much.

Anna: I'll see you soon.

Zibby: I'll see you soon.

Anna: Bye.

Zibby: Bye.

Author Biography

Anna Quindlen is a novelist and journalist whose work has appeared on fiction, nonfiction, and self-help bestseller lists. She is the author of many novels: *Object Lessons, One True Thing, Black and Blue, Blessings, Rise and Shine, Every Last One*, *Still Life with Bread Crumbs,* and *Miller's Valley*. Her memoir *Lots of Candles, Plenty of Cake,* published in 2012, was a #1 *New York Times* bestseller. Her book *A Short Guide to a Happy Life* has sold more than a million copies. While a columnist at *The New York Times* she won the Pulitzer Prize and published two collections, *Living Out Loud* and *Thinking Out Loud*. Her *Newsweek* columns were collected in *Loud and Clear*.

https://www.penguinrandomhouse.com/authors/24734/anna-quindlen/

Reviews

Anna Quindlen Is Back, With Four Seasons of Loss and Survival

In her new novel, “After Annie,” the Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist shows how a family pieces itself back together after monumental loss.

by Catherine Newman

Anna Quindlen knows what she’s doing. So there’s really no need to play Sigmund Freud in a book review, stage-whispering about the protagonist of her new novel: “Annie! It’s practically the same as ANNA!” Yes. Yes, it is. And this Annie, by the end of the first chapter, has died on the kitchen floor after an aneurysm, leaving behind a brood of mourners, including her befuddled mensch of a husband, four children as lost as mittens and a precariously recovering best friend.

Quindlen, our first lady of motherhood, has written herself out of the center of this quietly revelatory and gently gleaming gem of a book. Maybe it’s a little bit like attending your own funeral — or imagining everything that comes after. What happens in the crushing vacuum of such an absence? As the husband, Bill, sees it, “he’d had a life and a family and it had been a wheel and then the hub of the wheel was gone and it was just a collection of spokes, and a collection of spokes didn’t spin, didn’t take you anywhere.”

The novel is organized into a year of sad seasons — beginning and ending with winter — and the perspective shifts among three characters: Bill, a plumber, who is plausibly baffled by everyone’s feelings even as he goes around unclogging things; Ali, the eldest, a bereft 13-year-old who suddenly needs to be making her dad meatloaf sandwiches and mothering everybody; and Annemarie, the friend who has always been, we learn, the Opium perfume to Annie’s Happy, and who is desperately trying not to add a handful of painkillers to the grief she’s swallowing.

My favorite thing about Quindlen’s writing has always been her closely observed revelations about family life. This is what has animated much of her celebrated career, not only as a best-selling novelist but as a Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist. I still recall a “Public and Private” column she wrote for The New York Times in 1990, on the second birthday of her youngest child: “My daughter is ready to leap into the world, as though life were chicken soup and she a delighted noodle.” I’ve remembered this line for 34 years.

In “After Annie,” Quindlen uses these details to help us understand the experience of loss. Husband, daughter, friend — everyone remembers Annie in bits and pieces, and these memories are like the tiles of a mosaic, laid down into a gorgeous, fractured portrait of what they’re missing. As Bill puts it, “All the general things people said, about how the person was a good friend and a good wife and a good mother, were useless, almost insulting in their lack of specificity.”

Their Annie was the person who “was always forcing the kids outside to look up: thumbnail moon, half-moon, new moon, full moon.” Sometimes, when Bill reached into the closet for a shirt, “a sleeve or two from her side would touch his arm, like it was reaching for him, and there would be a faint smell, lemon and hand cream and something else, maybe her shampoo.” Ali remembers the particular way her mother talked her through long division. Annemarie feels her friend sitting in the passenger seat, even now, saying, “Eyes on the road.”

There’s a rotting half-onion in the fridge because Annie cut it and nobody can bear to throw it out.

The very best thing about this book might be the way Quindlen, an anthropologist of domesticity, catalogs the sparklingly random moments that make up human experience. On siblings: “Ali heard someone breathing behind her, and she knew it was her brother because she’d heard him breathing behind her her whole life — in the car, in the line for the matinee at the movies, on the school bus.” On funeral food: “One of the baked zitis is really good and one is kind of eh.” On children: “The bread had those tiny sesame seeds along the crust, and he had watched, dead-eyed, as Benjy insisted on picking them all out, even once there was syrup, so that there was syrup under his fingernails and later lint from his gloves on his fingertips because of it. Then he’d sucked on his fingers and gotten the lint in his mouth, so that all during dinnertime he was picking red fuzz off his tongue.”

The book is more than the collection of minutiae I’m sketching here — secrets and drama only partly related to Annie’s absence. These give the book some shape that maybe the details alone couldn’t have. And if there’s a false note, it may be that the book takes place in the present. There’s something slightly sepia-toned about it: The kids call the adults Mr. and Mrs. and nobody seems to be glued to a screen. That said, they do all repeatedly call Annie’s phone to hear her outgoing message, and I love that detail. Even just typing “outgoing message” made me choke up — I had never thought of those words that way until now.

In the end, “After Annie” is the quietest kind of story about everyone trying to figure out what they had and who they are now. What’s left when the center drops out? What do those spokes add up to with the hub gone? Maybe it’s something that is, against all odds, still rolling forward.

Catherine Newman is the author of the novels “We All Want Impossible Things” and the forthcoming “Sandwich.”

https://www.nytimes.com/2024/02/23/books/review/after-annie-anna-quindlen.html