



## After This

*Alice McDermott*

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A vivid portrait of an American family in the middle decades of the twentieth century.

Alice McDermott's powerful novel is a vivid portrait of an American family in the middle decades of the twentieth century. Witty, compassionate, and wry, it captures the social, political, and spiritual upheavals of those decades through the experiences of a middle-class couple, their four children, and the changing worlds in which they live.

While Michael and Annie Keane taste the alternately intoxicating and bitter first fruits of the sexual revolution, their older, more tentative brother, Jacob, lags behind, until he finds himself on the way to Vietnam. Meanwhile, Clare, the youngest child of their aging parents, seeks to maintain an almost saintly innocence. *After This*, alive with the passions and tragedies of a determining era in our history, portrays the clash of traditional, faith-bound life and modern freedom, while also capturing, with McDermott's inimitable understanding and grace, the joy, sorrow, anger, and love that underpin, and undermine, what it is to be a family.

## After This Details

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Author : Alice McDermott

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## From Reader Review After This for online ebook

### Lexie Keller says

I loved it. Love LOVE In fact I will probably read it again soon, immediately after finishing it. This book was just beautiful. Spare but fully observed and it's clear McDermott's heart swells along with her characters-- I felt like I had several genuine moments of revelation throughout this little ordinary novel about a NY Catholic family over several decades. I've read (and enjoyed) most of McDermott's books and this newest is the best. Maybe my favorite contemporary novel. ?

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### Jeanette says

Absolutely enthralled me! Wonderful window into the period and the people in a certain place.

It doesn't hurt that it was so very similar to my own, and in the same time period as Annie's.

Ordinary people. Normal. Family structure that holds. Faith in an immortality.

And also some fun and insights along the way. Brothers that don't "fit" but they deal with it. And each other.

Alice McDermott is priceless. And she does the men as well as she does the women. Girls, boys of her time and of her beliefs. But she also tells it with the nuance of "kind" and structure. In the manner of language, and of the tone.

For me, the chapters about the methods of raising money and rebuilding the Church building itself after the other one was bulldozed!! EXACT to what and where and how. Ours was a quonset hut structure that was ultimately given to house a family with 15 children and the new Church built by the parish school (both took the entire block) which held 200 kids in EACH GRADE of 8 grades. (Each grade had 4 classes and some years I had 60 or 62 people in my classroom- no switching. Now most public schools are between 22-26 kids at the most.) No kindergarten in our parish. You had to go to the public's for that year but none of the people on my block ever took them up on it.

It's still there and as "modern" in style as St. Gabriel's in this story. The priest faced the people and God the Father (Italian small pieces of glass and stonework formed the great face of God the Father) spanned a circular 50 or 60 foot wall behind him. With St. Thomas More in his judicial robes and lawyer's wig standing 8 foot tall with the white dove of the Holy Spirit landing on his pulpit. Jesus on the crucifix free standing behind the altar and in front of the wall. "The King's good servant, but God's first" in cursive all along the top. Everything was in circles and the cry room was IN THE FRONT behind glass. People freaked out. Called it a spaceship. WAY TOO MODERN! Green plush rugs and NO hat clips. And even movable kneeler pads in the pews. The kind the boys love to let fall with a bang.

It's still there and used and Catholic. But not as much. 2 Masses on the day when there used to be 7 or 8. And no Masses in the lower floor altar at all. And the school itself is 90% Baptist but they still wear the same uniforms and have ministry as a class. And it's still private. I'll visit again at the end of Oct. Our group is tight and we meet twice a year. This year I get to tell them congratulations on turning 70 and remind them that I'm a year younger! (I never let them forget my age or my skipping second grade either.)

Alice McDermott is a treasure. Her writing is precise and her characterizations so intricate. And so much more than real for me.

I wanted to give it 5 stars but that dredging into Michael's college was like a paperclip thrown into a fastly revolving electric room fan. Jarring. And absolutely not universal in the mid-1960's. It just bounced back at me. LOVED her turn with Jacob picking up Clare at school to say his goodbye in his own way.

For some of the posters who question the title. This is what it means:

After this (post WWII period, "non-relative" mores, culture of specific manners and stranger conversation)- everything is far more unkind and extremely more complicated. Mary and John would agree.

Quotes below, but I could have put many others here, as well.

"Who, "he asked with his finger in the air, "who do you think you'll have on your side when your mother and I are gone? Who do you think you'll be able to turn to when you're as old as I am and there's something you need- a buck or two, or a piece of advice, maybe just someone you can ask, Remember when? Your friends? Your Little League team? He waved his broad hand. "They'll be scattered to the four winds. They'll have forgotten your name." He paused, as if waiting for them to speak. And then he said, "Your family. Your flesh and blood, that's who you'll have. If you're lucky. Your two sisters. Each other. That's who you'll have."

"It was not the future they'd been objecting to, but the loss of the past. As if it was his fault that you could not have one without the other."

That last quote says perfectly what most of us from our neighborhoods, the way our neighborhoods worked/meshed/supported- what we feel. It was a great, great loss when those neighborhoods were decimated by social engineering.

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### **Arwen56 says**

Girellando qua e là, ho trovato giudizi "tiepidi" su questo romanzo di Alice McDermott, finalista per il Pulitzer 2007, vinto poi da "La strada", di Cormac McCarthy. Qualcuno lo ha addirittura definito noioso. A me, invece, è piaciuto molto, sia per la sua scrittura nitida, sia per l'essenzialità espressiva. L'autrice ci accompagna alla scoperta di una famiglia americana, di origine irlandese, a partire dai primi anni del dopoguerra sino quasi ai giorni nostri, passando attraverso la rivoluzione sessuale e il Vietnam, ma soprattutto facendo i conti con l'educazione fortemente cattolica dei Keane.

Alice McDermott indugia raramente in descrizioni dettagliate dei suoi personaggi da un punto di vista esterno rispetto al narrato e con altrettanta parsimonia lascia che essi si abbandonino al cosiddetto *stream of consciousness*. Preferisce piuttosto che sia ciò che fanno e ciò che dicono a raccontarceli e a definirli poco a poco. Ne risulta così, per il lettore, un progressivo avvicinarsi a queste persone, quasi effettivamente abitassero accanto a lui e si svelassero quel tanto che è possibile che sia. Perché chi mai può sostenere di conoscere a fondo qualcuno?

Il ritratto di un'epoca, di un ambiente e di un gruppo di essere umani che ha il sapore della vita quotidiana, senza pretese di eccezionalità o di esemplarità, ma che ci riporta in ogni caso pensieri, stati d'animo e modeste aspirazioni che potremmo provare tutti. Più adatto, forse, a quelli della mia generazione che non a

chi è cresciuto ai tempi di Internet, dei telefonini e dei *social network*. Comunque, un modo per ritrovare o conoscere, a seconda dei casi, quella forma di “pudore” che è stata anche ipocrisia, ma più spesso, credo, naturale inclinazione dell’animo e ormai diventata merce rara in tempi di esibizione a tutti i costi.

P.S. Il primo capitolo del romanzo è superbo, praticamente perfetto a mio modesto avviso.

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### **Ann-Marie says**

After searching for "Charming Billy" I settled on this slim little book. I had heard next to nothing about it but now that I've completed it, for me this was the kind of writing and story where afterwards you want to read reviews, book club discussion questions and more to retain the mood, the atmosphere, the raw memories it's stirred. One review from USA Today (consider the source) in particular distressed me. The reviewer remarked that "After This" "failed as a cohesive novel." Clearly, the cohesive novel the reviewer imagined was not what McDermott was striving toward.

This is an elegant, sparely written unfolding of an era and a place and a sub-culture (Irish-American Catholics) recounted so vividly, you feel you know them. Yet I found it compassionate and sensitive without being sentimental. If you don't favor poignant, reflective novels with compelling characters where representative everyday moments in time are captured brilliantly, then Alice McDermott's work may not be for you. But for many readers tired of spelled-out plots with predictable cliff hangers and shifting of the dramatic arc, I encourage you to try this. It is the kind of book I will be buying for presents this year.

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### **Elizabeth says**

This book is unlike any other I have ever read. Her writing style astounded me... throughout the book I had a hard time defining the plot in my mind, yet I knew the book was incredibly well written and the message clear. Moving through the lives of several character, McDermott smoothly uses foreshadowing, repetition, idioms, and symbolism to emphasize various significant points.

This was my first experience reading McDermott, and I must admit I was a little caught off guard. While she moved quickly through the lives of various characters I felt I obtained brief insights into their lives and was able to skip over the monotonous details that fill most novels. There was not a single word wasted and each chapter was crucial to the overall picture of the novel. However, I did feel that there was a lack of the beautiful descriptive language that I was spoiled with in the *Mists of Avalon*. I also struggled to establish a connection/sense of attachment with some of the characters because each scene was so brief. My biggest challenge with this book however, was the ending... I felt like closure was there but I just missed it. I couldn't quite understand the ending and the last line, which left me perplexed for quite awhile.

Overall, the book was an enjoyable read. It didn't take that long, it was interesting, and it held my attention. On the otherhand, I don't plan on rushing into reading another of her books. Mixed feelings on this book. I respect her writing style, I'm just unsure of my feelings regarding the plot and the message she intended for readers to take away.

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## Will Byrnes says

I have enjoyed books by McDermott before, thus my interest in this one. This is a portrait of an Irish American family in the post war period up to today. There is much that feels familiar to me about the characters, the worldview, the Catholicism, the resignation. But I found that I did not feel any real attachment to any of the characters, male or female. They all felt to me like literary mechanisms, useful as a means of getting points across about the changing culture of the 20th century, but not all that compelling as characters. Although the book is not without merit, I would refer potential McDermott readers to Charming Billy and At Weddings and Wakes. They are far better than this one.

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## K.D. Absolutely says

This is one of those novels that I thought to be a so-so and yet it turned out to be exceptionally good. For me, its strongest suit is the opening scenes. There is no earth-shattering event like atomic bomb or an unforgettable quote but just a description of a woman coming out from a late morning visit to a church to pray. That scene is so vividly described complete with the wind blowing and the and a very detailed account of the church's steps, the feet of that woman, the sea breeze and the office people walking at the marina on their way to the lunch. Alice McDermott's (born 1953) prose particularly in this opening reminded me of Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*. Very apt because both novels' main theme is "life goes on" no matter what happens in our lives and both deal and are focused on a certain family particularly the relationship between parents and their children.

*After This* is about an Irish-American family living in New York and its suburbs on Long Island in the 1960s. It starts with **Mary Keane** coming out from the church praying for herself and the Vietnam War. At 29, she is still single and living with her father and a younger brother. Upon coming out from the church, she is greeted by strong wind. Amidst the office workers who have just finished their lunch, Mary goes to a café for her lunch. There she meets **John Keane** who becomes her husband and then later a father of her children: **Jacob** who has to join the army by picking the wrong number in a lottery; **Michael** who typifies a normal son by going to college; **Annie** who is a book-lover influenced by her mother's friend **Pauline** and who plans to study in England until she meets a young man in a bus so she drops her plan and marries him; and **Claire** who is a devout Catholic and a loving daughter who goes wayward towards the end and breaks her parents' hearts. It is Claire who towards the end goes back to school after her life with her boyfriend as if saying "after this" (in reference to her failed love life) and uttered "life goes on." The plot sounds quite common but it is McDermott's Woolf-like prose and the many snippets of the characters' lives that follow the opening that appear like short stories collated beautifully like photographs in one big album make this an exceptionally good and definitely a memorable reading experience.

This novel almost won over Cormac McCarthy's post-apocalyptic novel *The Road* for the Pulitzer award in 2007. I read that book by McCarthy last week. I neither liked nor hated it so I got curious why it won over the other finalists. So I immediately picked up this book and will later read the other finalist Richard Powers' *The Echo Maker*. But Powers can wait since I have read his *Generosity* several months back and, like that

one of McCarthy, it was just an okay book.

I will definitely look for my copy of *Charming Billy*, the winner of 1998 National Book Award, *That Night* a finalist for the 1987 National Book Award, the Pen/Faulkner Award, and the Pulitzer Prize, and *At Weddings and Wakes* a finalist for the 1992 Pulitzer Prize.

I have no doubt that her three finalist novels for Pulitzer and one book that won National Book Award are proofs that Alice McDermott is a force to reckon with among the contemporary American novelists.

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### **Linda says**

Times change. People change.

And no matter how we rearrange the furniture around that notion, we can never step aside of the truth. That curl of our hair, the snorting laugh, the gait of our walk, the tall and the small, and the testy temperament. Shaken and stirred, we are who we are.

Alice McDermott sets her story down among the familiar bungalows of twentieth century Long Island. John and Mary Keane met and married before the leaves even had time to turn color. And four children seemed to follow quickly before roots burrowed into that earth. You left the confines of your childhood abode and lit the match under another of your own. Was it to replicate the familiar or was it to escape the mundane?

McDermott introduces us to the Keane children: Jacob, Michael, Annie, and Clare. As their stories unfolded, I almost had the feeling of a pinball effect. Social, political, and spiritual experiences bounced off of them as the ball hit repeatedly reminding us of the signposts of the times. They each seemed to bend in the direction of the social upheavals of the era: birth control, abortions, women's rights, Vietnam, and so on. Was this truly the flow of this storyline or were the characters simply molded to fit the premise?

I was drawn into the superb writing of Alice McDermott through her latest book, *The Ninth Hour*. I grabbed, Someone, almost immediately with great satisfaction as well. But this one seems to lack the flow and the depth of these aforementioned books. McDermott is known for her detail, but detail seemed to swallow this storyline up. Don't get me wrong. It is still an excellent read. I don't think that I'll be ranking it as high on McDermott reads. Many have rated it much higher. Perhaps it touched a special somewhere within.

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### **Joshua says**

Alice McDermott has a gentle yet incisive voice and really excels at evoking the feel of a time and place with her narration. One fascinating point of this book is that the most important event is never shown, thus contradicting the "show don't tell" maxim of creative writing. But by the event's very absence, the novel achieves an appropriate mood of absence and recovery.

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## **Carole says**

I felt this was an absolute waste of time. I abandoned it a little more than halfway through, completely fed up of McDermott's random comments about individual characters... and attempts at creating mystery by only vaguely alluding to certain things (the early birth of Clare, how Mr Keane will eventually die and many more).

Having just read "All The King's Men" which was so beautifully written and all the character development felt relevant and important... "After This" just felt like the uncoordinated ramblings of an uninspired author.

I'm really annoyed at myself for persevering with it for so long and and absolutely do not care how it ends - it can't be worth it.

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## **Denise Kruse says**

A sad yet hopeful, subtle yet powerful look at a changing time. Alice McDermott's exquisite words take us to a time, those few significant years when children soak it all in—observing and being formed. The novel begins when the roles of men and women are defined, WWII-era parents of big, Catholic families do the best they can, the Church can do no wrong (or at least few admit it with any fervor), and what is considered "PC" then is not the same as today.

Then the 60s happen.

*...their father agreed to splurge on a six-piece set of Danish modern from Sears, which gave the new room a sleek, science-fiction look that Mary Keane found cold, although it inspired in her sons a sense that their own modern futures, part Buck Rogers, part James Bond, were finally upon them.*

1964 is the year some consider the start of the Viet Nam War. It is the year the Beatles arrive in the US. The new Mass begins in the Catholic Church. At mid-point this story has us in that year at a sweltering NY World's Fair with its futuristic exhibits and a long wait in line to see The Pieta, indeed a portent. One does not have to be raised Catholic to savor this book but it adds dimension. I loved it.

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## **Peggy says**

This is the story of Mary and John Keane and their four children. They are an Irish-Catholic family living in Long Island, NY. We meet Mary Rose a thirty-ish single woman who lives with her father and brother, her mother is dead. She wonders if she will ever get married. John Keane is home from the war with a bum leg as a result. They meet one day at a diner over lunch and our story of their life together begins.

I am not a Catholic, but I love reading novels with characters, like Mary and John, with strong ties like the Irish Catholic have to their faith and to family. I enjoyed meeting all the different families of different ethnicity in the neighborhood. The Persichetti's, the Italian family on their street and the old man who owned the local grocery, Hungarian or Russian, I can't remember now. That's the draw back to an audio book, its

hard to go back and double check things:( And there's Pauline, Mary's friend who never marries and has no family. She adopts Mary and her family as her own.

Mary and John were young during WWII and their kids are growing up in the Vietnam War era. So many changes from one generation to the next.

This book was wonderful. I really hated for it to end. Ms. McDermott describes the mundane, day-to-day events of middle-class people—births and deaths, the fixing of meals, the ebb and flow of love, and the development of relationships inside the family and out. I love how she doesn't deal with all the details of the characters lives, but focuses on their inner lives. By the time the book is finished you feel like you know them intimately. She seamlessly moves from one character to the next, exposing them to us not only thru their own thoughts and actions but thru people they encounter like the Catholic school secretary, Mr. Persichetti, Pauline, the grocer, the lady in line in front of Mary at the fair, their priest. And of course each other.

I don't want to tell you too much about the story because it's so much better to let it all unfold new as you read it. But we have a hurricane, a home birth, devastated families from the Vietnam war, abortion being legitimized...

You can read a nice size excerpt @ <http://www.npr.org/books/titles/13801...>

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### **Katie says**

This book was pretty boring and definitely lacked character development. Very hard to get into.

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### **Amy says**

I had a hard time connecting to this book, and it took me quite a while to finish it; I never really wanted to pick it back up and resume. It was well-written and I appreciated the quiet subtlety of McDermott's writing, but...I don't know. I just never felt that engaged with it.

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### **Jenny Shank says**

<http://www.rockymountainnews.com/news...>

After This, by Alice McDermott

Author conjures up another tour de force with post-WWII tale

Jenny Shank, Special to the News

Published September 7, 2006 at midnight

When Alice McDermott's novel Charming Billy beat out two sprawling tomes by literary heavyweights for the National Book Award in 1998 (Tom Wolfe's A Man in Full and Robert Stone's Damascus Gate), The New York Times described the victory as a "surprise." But those who had been following McDermott's

career closely might not have been as shocked - two of her previous novels had been finalists for the Pulitzer Prize and one made the short list for the NBA.

McDermott's new *After This* is another stellar novel - gripping, moving and beautifully observed and written. The book is all the more impressive because it deals with the simplest possible subject matter, the story of a typical American family in the post-World War II years.

McDermott is a magician, able to conjure a story that feels epic out of the materials of ordinary lives. Through the precise use of detail and exacting arrangement of revelation, she creates drama from events that in other writers' hands might seem mundane. McDermott's gift for underplaying the dramatic (such as a death of one of the characters) and spinning the quiet moments into grand meditations (such as a description of a long wait in an exhibit's line on a hot summer day) is what makes *After This* such a profound pleasure.

The novel opens with a section about an unusual day in the life of a woman named Mary, "thirty, with no husband in sight," who lives with her father and brother and works as a secretary in Manhattan. On this April day she meets John Keane, a World War II vet with a slight limp, the man who will become her husband, but McDermott teases the reader by beginning with a different man asking Mary out on a date.

She shows the still-virgin Mary feeling a flare of desire for a stranger. "And here she was past thirty, just out of church (a candle lit every lunch hour, still, although the war was over), and yearning now with every inch of herself to put her hand to the worn buckle at a stranger's waist."

McDermott skips forward in time with each chapter, joining the consciousness of various members of the Keane family, usually at moments when they are just on the cusp of change rather than amid the actual event. The second chapter begins with John and Mary married already for years, with three kids and another on the way, and McDermott weaves this back story into a meditative, melancholy account of a family trip to the beach at the end of summer.

She beautifully conveys John Keane's feelings on that day as he watches his kids play: "His love for his children bore down on his heart with the weight of three heavy stones. There were all his unnamed fears for them, and hopes for them. There was all he was powerless to change, including who they were - one too mild, one too easily tempted to be cruel, and the little girl (it was the weight of a heavy stone against his heart) a mystery to him, impossible to say what she, through her life, would need."

Throughout this chapter, McDermott intersperses details that may or may not indicate that John Keane is having a heart attack as his brother did before him, capturing the hypochondriac terror that everyone feels at the advent of a sudden, inexplicable pain.

As the kids grow up, the specter of the Vietnam War begins to loom. The Keane's oldest son's birthday comes up unlucky in the draft lottery. A neighbor, whose son has returned from the war mentally ruined, tells John to do everything in his power to keep his son from going. "Shoot him in the foot. Break his legs before you let him go."

Each chapter takes a different member of the Keane family as its primary subject, and is so finely crafted that most could stand on their own as short stories, but each also adds a layer to the larger narrative, plumbing the inner lives of the characters as gradually the perspectives and experiences of all the family members are revealed. The structure of *After This* is the perfect one to demonstrate how a family is at once a cohesive unit and a group composed of disparate individuals.

Throughout her story, McDermott consistently uses a sort of sleight of hand, building the reader's expectation that events will develop in a certain way, and then revealing the unforeseen outcome. McDermott's coquettishness with plot development is the perfect way to infuse an ordinary family's life with suspense for the reader: How will the kids turn out? Will the baby be all right? When and how will the characters die?

McDermott is toying with the reader's emotions a little, but no more so than life itself does. In *After This*, McDermott has condensed a significant swath of the 20th-century American experience into a slim, beautiful book, dispatching with efficient elegance a subject that might have moved other writers to verbosity.

#### After This

- By Alice McDermott. Farrar, Strauss, Giroux, 279 pages, \$24.
- Grade: A

Jenny Shank's fiction has appeared in Michigan Quarterly Review, Image, CutBank, Calyx, Eureka Literary Magazine, Weber Studies and other journals. One of her pieces was listed among the "Notable Essays of the Year" in the Best American Essays. She lives in Boulder.

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