

After Dad: A Novel

Ralph Cohen

Tattersall Press (Jan 11, 2014)

Softcover \$16.95 (310pp)

978-0-615-94238-4

A story told through the eyes of five family members compellingly conveys the splintering effect of tragedy.

Ralph Cohen has challenged himself in his first published novel, *After Dad*, to address the dark side of a family devastated by tragedy in Los Angeles during the 1960s. Readers will benefit from Cohen's adroit and sensitive handling of complicated family dynamics.

This postmodern novel follows the lives of five members of the Kovacek family: two daughters, Margot and Jenny; a younger son, Toby; Ruth, the mother; and Dad. Dad was a marginally successful architect who worked hard, allowing Ruth to be a stay-at-home mom, and was a fun-loving and involved parent. He died suddenly of a heart attack when Margot was about sixteen years old, Jenny about fourteen, and Toby younger still. Each chapter in the book presents one family member's perspective on processing the emptiness in their lives resulting from Dad's untimely death. As could be expected in any family, the members of the Kovacek family achieve varying results in this endeavor.

Each chapter of *After Dad* is a self-contained vignette that is effective both as a part of the whole but also can stand apart from the remainder of the novel. It is a creative storytelling technique and a symbol of the way this family fragments and flies apart after the death of the father. One chapter deals with Margot's failures in school and another relates how Jenny gets a job performing in bars as a woman wrestler. Cohen creates separate, distinct characters and watches as they respond to a shared experience in very different ways.

Cohen demonstrates a finely developed sense of scene. His prose draws the reader quickly into the story. While the family (after Dad's death) is walking down the street, Jenny first notices the look of sadness and concern on her mother. She thinks this comes from the space left on the sidewalk between her mother and the curb, and she notes that Margot "got her unhappiness from being the next closest to it. And I was only partially affected...And Toby...was too far away to be touched by it at all." Ultimately, while the imagery is clear, her analysis may be flawed, as it is Toby who is most deeply affected by Dad's passing.

Cohen also uses language to give the story a sense of time and place. Margot is struggling with her debate partner, who condescendingly sees her as intellectually less competent. Trying to understand his meaning, she says: "Or do you mean like the sidekicks in an Errol Flynn movie, the ones who take all the arrows."

After Dad is a sad tale skillfully told. There are glimmers of sunshine in places, but the overall weather is cloudy. No family member gets out of the novel unscathed. Mostly, the characters struggle but endure. Yet, it is not a depressing book. Rather, it invites readers to seriously contemplate the most difficult aspects of life.

JOHN SENGGER (May 20, 2014)

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