

After Helen

Paul Cavanagh

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Romance gives way to reality, and vivacity to human fragility in this novel about rebuilding a family after a loss.

The novel that won Paul Cavanagh the spot as the first-ever Lit Idol hits the international stage. *After Helen* is a nuanced exploration of what it means to mourn those we love most, all their flaws considered.

It's been around a year since Irving lost his beautiful and intriguing wife, Helen, to cancer. In the interim, he and his daughter, Severn, have struggled to revive their relationship. Severn acts out in ways that pique his worry, spending copious amounts of time with a puppy-dog teenage boy and getting caught shoplifting at a bookstore with embarrassing family ties. When she fails to return home one night, Irving is forced to set out to retrieve her, with Marla, a more centered fellow parent, guiding his endeavors.

As their trek progresses, Irving reminisces on his time with Helen, whose tempestuous past may hold the key to unlocking Severn's distress. The woman he recalls is held apart as beloved, but she's also shown to be, at times, selfish, uncommunicative, and even cruel. Theirs, Irving reveals, was a love built on shaky foundations: he enamored and persistent, she always struggling to balance lofty dreams with the prosaic reality of small-town life and the duties of marriage and an inherited bookshop.

Much of the beauty of Cavanagh's prose lies in his refusal to become saccharine, even when discussing topics—love, sex, betrayal, cancer, loss, teenage angst—that may invite a heavy touch. Instead, his characters maintain their complexity throughout.

After Helen teems with sympathetic expressions of human connection: from reconciliation to the imperfect people we're forced to mourn, to commitment that weathers betrayal and disappointment. Irving indicts himself for being unable to say goodbye to his wife; by the end of this beautiful and challenging novel, readers may share a measure of his guilt. *After Helen* is an emotionally intelligent, surprising novel that more than earns its stripes.

MICHELLE ANNE SCHINGLER (Spring 2015)

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