

## Afterlife

**Julia Alvarez**

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A story about sisters and undocumented immigrants, Julia Alvarez's *Afterlife* evokes the loneliness of grief.

A recent retiree and a writer, Antonia is coping with the loss of her husband. She's also helping a young Mexican immigrant bring his girlfriend, Estela, to the US. Then Antonia's oldest sister, Izzy, goes missing.

Antonia's younger sisters believe that Izzy is bipolar; she'd put a down payment on a motel, hoping to start an artists' commune, before she disappeared. Antonia is pulled back and forth across the country, searching for Izzy. Then Estela shows up at her doorstep, pregnant with a different man's child.

In this whirlwind of events, Antonia has little time to process the loss of her husband. Her grieving process becomes lonely as her friends and family are distracted by their own worries. Her dramatic sisters try and fail to empathize with her; they guilt her into joining their frantic search for Izzy. Their interactions are a comedic reprieve from Antonia's stress and sorrow; they bicker through increasingly bizarre events.

Realistic, well-incorporated instances of unconscious racism are interjected by those who mean well. A police officer assumes that Antonia, whose background is Dominican, is Mexican because of her appearance; he warns her about an upcoming ICE raid, though, hoping to protect Estela.

Within this inquisitive novel, which balances its humor with emotional exposition and dramatic tension, Antonia spends much time in her head: contemplating her approaches to her sisters' and Estela's problems; quoting literature. Her husband's afterlife is in her mind; she speaks to him often, wondering what he would do or say in the heart-wrenching circumstances that she faces.

In the hopeful novel *Afterlife*, a widow is pulled in many directions, including into a fight over immigration issues.

AIMÉE JODOIN (March / April 2020)

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