

An Absent Mind

Eric Rill

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Rill's brilliant novel about Alzheimer's is so well-crafted, the fully-human characters seem real.

In his brilliant third novel, *An Absent Mind*, Eric Rill chronicles the devastating decline of a man with Alzheimer's and how each family member reacts to the crippling disease that affects over thirty-five million people worldwide.

The story of crusty curmudgeon Saul Reimer unfolds in clear, unvarnished prose reminiscent of Hemingway's straightforward style. "The usual suspects were once again gathered at our house," says Saul. "This was to be a family council meeting, they told me, but I knew what it really was—a lynch party for one Saul Reimer." Later, he confides, "My brain is like a shortwave radio, mostly static that occasionally finds the station, but even then the sound isn't always clear."

Action centers on Saul and his überdutiful wife, Monique. They are a couple whose relationship is simultaneously loving and unsatisfactory, unwavering and tenuous. *An Absent Mind* also includes the perspectives of Saul's grown children, Joey and Florence, as well as the opinions of an Alzheimer's expert, Dr. Tremblay.

In postmodernist style, short chapters resembling journal entries contain each character's responses to daily events over a span of six years. Monique, for example, looks at a vase of flowers past their prime and expresses her heartfelt compassion: "Today, for the first time, I realized the obvious. That as each petal falls, a flower loses a part of its life. And that's what's happening to Saul. Bit by bit, he is losing parts of himself, and eventually, when all the petals fall, he will be nothing—gone—extinct. My poor Saul."

At another point, Monique responds to the crushing responsibility of caring for a spouse with dementia: "Saul may be the one with Alzheimer's, but I'm the one suffering a long and miserable life."

As the family copes with Saul's illness, they unearth old hurts and secrets that could either tear the family apart or bind them more closely together. The only thing that's certain about this race is that Saul will not reach the finish line.

An Absent Mind is a work of fiction, but, informed by the author's experiences caring for his father who had Alzheimer's, the book is so well crafted that readers may forget that Rill's fully-human characters are not real people.

NANCY WALKER (April 16, 2014)

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