

Henri's Last Gift

Gilles Jaitour

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Henri's Last Gift is a playful psychological novel that reframes life's hardest moments as opportunities for healing.

In Gilles Jaitour's supernatural novel *Henri's Last Gift*, a repressed man's departed friends help him to face his past.

Josh's childhood was directed by his alcoholic parents and the death of his younger brother, both of which led him to repress his emotions. Josh's interactions with his parents are conveyed in intimate, subtle terms that help to clarify his inner pain. By adulthood, he learned to shut others out; he became cynical and inclined to focus on the negative.

While still grieving for his longtime family friend and father figure, Henri, Josh spirals, has a bizarre mental break, and winds up in an incident that leaves him in a comatose state, on the precipice of death himself. His soul wanders the AfterL, where he interacts with communities of spirits—people who were once alive on Earth. These spirits include the souls of those whom Josh has lost. They have a lot to show him. They help him to process his past traumas, all with the hope that his near-death experience will enable him to better his future.

The dynamics of the AfterL are explained during Josh's whimsical, long-winded conversations with his spirit guides. These include Dieter, who also considered Henri a mentor, and whose behavior is dramatic; Henri, who is still new to the afterlife; and Josh's brother, Ronnie, whose loss had a profound effect on him. Ronnie transforms into superheroes when he's transitioning between locations, while Dieter and Henri's stories are played out for Josh like performances; all are empathetic characters whose experiences lead to discussions of trauma, regret, and death.

Though the descriptions of AfterL are entertaining and imaginative, its esoteric rules, and religious challenges within it, are addressed through drawn out metaphors and references to modern scientific theories. And while Josh's perspective directs the narrative, Henri's story ends up being its more substantial feature. Details about his experiences of abuse are revealed, showing why he chose to help other boys who survived abuse themselves. His understanding, compassionate perspective is used to address cultural and social understandings of parent-child dynamics across generations.

Revelations await a man in the space between life and death in *Henri's Last Gift*, a playful psychological novel that reframes life's hardest moments as opportunities for healing.

DELIA STANLEY (February 19, 2021)

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