

## Polar Vortex: A Family Memoir

**Denise Dorrance**

The Experiment (Mar 5, 2024)

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Denise Dorrance's graphic memoir *Polar Vortex* is about returning home to tend to her ailing, forgetful mother.

When her ninety-one-year-old mother Hilda falls at home, Dorrance races from England to Iowa to help. Her mother exhibits confusion and memory loss but also moments of complete lucidity. And though she's a loving and responsible daughter, Dorrance also admits to longing for release from obligation and her troubled relationship with her California-based sister. Against the backdrop of a snowstorm, Dorrance grapples with childhood memories, medical insurance, and the question of what's best for Hilda.

The hand-drawn art style allows for moments of whimsy: imagined meetings with celebrities including Dr. Ruth and Monty Hall; an actual meeting with a doctor whose resemblance to Ben Stiller is emphasized via cut-and-paste graphics of the actor. The most critical imaginary character is Death, who holds extended conversations with Dorrance while offering an end to her mother's suffering. Inserts of actual letters and photographs magnify the book's emotional effect, and the conclusion heightens the drama as Hilda's fate is revealed.

*Polar Vortex* is an honest, affecting graphic memoir about a messy series of compromises and reconciliations accompanying end-of-life caregiving.

PETER DABBENE (March / April 2024)

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