

The Mourning After

Edward Fahey

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Full, realistic characters advance the themes of death and love in this meaningful story.

In the novel *The Mourning After*, Edward Fahey thoroughly and artfully explores his Irish family's approach to death, as expressed in the book's dedication: "You can be among the living without technically being alive." The result is a compelling narrative that weaves the past, present, and future into a seamless garment.

This is the story, first of all, of Denis, who is sheltered from the world because he has a weak heart. As a child, he has only one friend, a young girl whom he calls "M." The two share secrets and experiences that indicate insight and character far beyond their chronological years. M, however, is wrenched from Denis's life by her parents' divorce. Denis grows into adulthood and experiences the death of both his parents, never having fully established a meaningful relationship with his father.

Denis's father, known in the novel only as "Sergeant Carl," is a veteran of World War II, haunted by dreams of his wartime experiences. Describing Carl coming home to his family, Denis observes: "After a long moment of readjustment, of just standing there, putting World War II buddies back onto his own inner shelves, he stepped the rest of the way into our home and, as much as he could, into our lives." Denis feels distant from his father, but the two are connected through their dreams of past wars, though Denis has never experienced combat firsthand. Or has he encountered such events in a past life? Fahey leaves this question unanswered.

His mother's death is monumental to Denis, as is the assassination of President John F. Kennedy, a special person in the Irish Catholic community. About this moment in history, Denis says: "But now God had turned away from all of us and left us in the hands of utter savagery." By contrasting the safe and stable home provided by his mother with Denis's short narrative about the Kennedy assassination, Fahey makes his point: just a generation earlier, the Irish fought to be accepted in the United States. Irish Catholics viewed JFK's election as group acceptance, so his assassination seemed personal. It was proof that the world was dangerous. But there is comfort in having a connection to those who have gone before. Fahey makes it clear that Denis is not alone.

It is inaccurate to say that *The Mourning After* is populated by only three main characters: Denis, M, and Denis's later-discovered soul mate, Waters. These three fill their roles more to advance the discussion of the principal themes of death, love, and relationships. They live and interact in a world unto themselves, separated from mundane everyday life. Although these three are fully developed characters that play primary roles in the narrative, the tale also contains the spirits of persons who have died.

This is no ghost story, but Fahey masterfully defends his thesis that the world is populated by more than just the living.

JOHN SENGER (December 20, 2013)

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