

A Review of Religion, Politics & Culture

# Commonweal

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## fall books

E. J. Dionne Jr. **on** Conservative Christians

Peter Quinn **on** Alice McDermott

Melinda Henneberger **on** 'The Theocons'

Jean Bethke Elshtain **on** Andrew Sullivan

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### The Fragmentation of Higher Education

Alasdair MacIntyre p. 10

### Kansas & the Catholic Vote

Philip Schweiger p. 8

### The Dangers of the Baby Business

Barbara Dafoe Whitehead p. 6

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Peter Quinn

## Clement & Loving

### After This

Alice McDermott

Farrar, Straus and Giroux, \$24, 279 pp.

There is a scene early in *After This*, Alice McDermott's latest novel, set in the parking lot of a public beach on Long Island. The time is Sunday morning, in mid-September, in the late 1950s or early 1960s. John and Mary Keane, the Irish-American parents of three young children, have decided to take a short car trip to the nearby shore. A hurricane is moving up the coast, and though still far to the south, its approach has stirred in John a wartime "memory or dream of the Ardennes" and an urge to see what the roiling Cape Verde tempest is agitating in "the waters off Jones Beach."

Pregnant with their fourth child, Mary uncharacteristically if gladly accepts his suggestion to "skip Mass just this once and head to the beach." She looks forward to being together as a family, a day

without obligations, holy or otherwise, as well as a final moment before the arrival of another child upends whatever equilibrium the family has achieved (or fallen into) and propels them to seek a new balance.

The reality of a day at the beach proves less agreeable than the idea. Though they have the beach to themselves, the reason isn't merely because it's post-Labor Day. The surf is thunderous and dangerous. The wind forces them to huddle in the dunes. Mary frets to her husband that the children are playing too near the water—"some vestigial habit of her race or of her sex, this frowning vigil at the edge of the sea—until he had returned them to her sight."

The family's best efforts to enjoy a day at the beach are finally defeated when the wind shifts and even the dunes can't protect their picnic lunch from the ubiquitous storm-blown grit. They retreat to the parking lot, where they eat lunch in the squeezed but sheltered quiet of their car. Yet, free from the turmoil of sand



Alice McDermott

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and sea, they are still exposed to the sharp and inescapable crosscurrents of their own quotidian existence: John's simultaneous love for his children and his mix of apprehension and resentment at his elder son's timidity; Mary's pain at perceiving that "He did not love his oldest child as he should"; the children's own tangle of emotions toward their parents and each other.

To recount the bare outline of a sin-

gle scene between a couple named John and Mary, lower middle-class parents residing in the bland-lands of suburban Long Island, is to be reminded of what an extraordinary artist Alice McDermott is. Everything is ordinary about the Keanes, the protagonist family at the center of *After This*—white-bread parents, unexceptional places, lives that demographers and actuaries would have little trouble analyzing, graphing, and placing in the

appropriate pigeonholes of race, religion, and income.

But in the way McDermott tells their story—in her surgeon's eye for detail, in her poet's virtuosity with language, in her unrelenting ability to penetrate surfaces and explore the rich and tragic nuances of the human predicament—the everyday is transubstantiated into art and the wash-and-wear facts of a Catholic family of six (yes, four children, two boys and two girls) riding out the boom and gloom of America's post-World War II suburban saga is made into the stuff of literature.

Novelist Wallace Stegner maintained that in the writing of fiction authors should "have no agenda except to be truthful." The truthfulness Stegner was concerned about wasn't a matter of historical chronologies or geographical details. Truthfulness for Stegner resided in a novel's characters, in the way their smallest gestures and ultimate fate, however prosaic or heroic, seemed integral to their being, not only believable but indispensable ingredients in the unfolding of their stories.

I know of no more truthful writer than Alice McDermott, both in the sense Stegner meant—a writer whose characters are vibrantly real and achingly authentic—and in the accuracy with which the settings of her stories are explored and described. Because we are near contemporaries, raised in the same New York-area pre-Vatican II parish world, I can't but assess and admire her transcendent capacity to capture the shared presumptions and sharp-angled perspective ("cynical humanism" in the words of William Kennedy) of the urban Irish-Catholic community brought into existence in the wake of the Great Famine and, as chronicled in *After This*, shaken and scattered by the relentless, ceaseless gale-force blasts of American capitalism and secularism.

Lately, as a believer, I've struggled with the depressing condition of American Catholicism—the ugly, squalid facts of the sexual-abuse crisis, the clueless, feckless hierarchy, the demoralized clergy and increasing predominance of shrill reactionaries intent on returning the church

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to an imaginary golden age. More and more I've turned to Catholic writers and novelists for consolation and inspiration. To Garry Wills's book on the rosary. To Graham Greene and Georges Bernanos. To Alice McDermott's *Charming Billy* and *Child of My Heart*, complex and exquisite examinations of life, death, love, disappointment, and Christian hope.

Truth be told, when I first saw *After This*, I wondered to myself whether the title was taken from the *Salve Regina*, the favorite prayer of my childhood from which I lifted the moniker of my first novel, *Banished Children of Eve*. Sure enough, in the recounting of Michael's drenchingly secular experience at a state university (he's the Keanes' second son), the prayer appears, a relic of memory and/or, perhaps, a prescient anticipation of things to come:

He thought how even after you'd disentangled yourself from everything else, the words stayed with you:

To thee do we cry, poor banished children of Eve, to thee do we send up our sighs, mourning and weeping in this valley of tears. Turn then, most gracious advocate, thine eyes of mercy toward us, and after this our exile, show unto us the blessed fruit of thy womb...

Words you could dismiss as a joke as readily as you could claim them as precise definition of everything you wanted.

Alice McDermott is a powerful and graceful novelist. Her abilities as a stylist and storyteller put her in the first rank of American writers, and *After This* will only add to that reputation. For me, her greatest gift is to make her Catholic sensibility indistinguishable from the catholicity of her literary imagination, a clement, loving, and sweet (but never saccharine) embrace of all that is human. ■

Peter Quinn is the author of *Banished Children of Eve* and *Hour of the Cat*. His next book, *Looking for Jimmy: In Search of Irish America*, will be published in the spring.



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