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- [Patricia Schultheis](#)
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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

Reviewed by:

- [Patricia Schultheis](#)

***After this* by Alice McDermott Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2006, 129 pp., \$9.95**

So much of Alice McDermott's latest novel hides in plain sight that readers must be forgiven for simply sitting back and enjoying it as an episodic narrative told in a series of vignette-like chapters. **[End Page 178]**

At first read, *After This* is a family saga about the Keanes, a nuclear family on Long Island during the postwar era. Typical of many Catholics of the '50s, '60s and '70s, the Keanes live circumscribed lives that unfold in comforting patterns of obligation and observance centered on their parish church. Whatever dreams John and Mary have are for their children. Just before the birth of the fourth and final baby, we see the family stealing a Sunday away from weekly Mass for a little picnic at the beach. And then we see John Kean laboring to get a new church built, which, when it is completed, signifies nothing so much as misbegotten modernity. We see Mary's office chum developing into a nettlesome friend and the Keane sisters becoming more sophisticated about sex than their parents ever were, but no more prepared to handle it. We observe the Keane brothers fighting: one destined for college, one for Vietnam.

But wait. This is, after all, Alice McDermott, the writer who gave us *Charming Billy*, a huge novel constructed around the consequences of a well-intentioned lie, and *Child of*

My Heart, an exploration of moral responsibility in the guise of a coming-of-age tale—both stories with palpable spirituality arising from Irish Catholicism.

In *After This*, however, McDermott takes her focus away from the power of the past and directs it toward the future. Here, characters are not caught in the undertow of memory but in a vast, unknowable cosmology. The questions McDermott raises are not about guilt and culpability but about eschatology: Where are we going? Who is saved? All of us? None of us?

With almost puckish writerly adroitness she reveals her intention by the slight pronoun in her title: *After This*. After what? After *this*. After *THIS LIFE*.

Everything the Keanes live through is vividly real, but also may evidence a divine force field. In the opening chapter, Mary, who's just said a lunchtime prayer for a contented spinsterhood, stands on the church steps and is buffeted by an April wind. A typical Northeastern meteorological phenomenon, yes, but also an expression of the Holy Spirit, the giver of grace.

Similarly, at the 1964 World's Fair, Mary and her oldest daughter, Annie, see all earthly creation from dinosaurs to the future. "They'd sat side by side in a moving chair," McDermott writes, "that took [End Page 179] them past lunar bases and underwater farms and along a glittering continental highway while a voice like God's told them, whispering softly into their ears, that the present was just an instant between an infinite past and a hurrying future." Just a day trip? Or a glimpse of all time: before, now, and ever after?

McDermott is too much a realist not to allow for the possibility that it's indifferent fate driving our "moving chair." Or that God, if there is a God, is looking elsewhere. Decades and four children after her lunchtime prayer, "Mary Keane looked for signs of grace, good fortune or simple evenhandedness, but found none." One neighbor's child gets cancer, another's becomes drug addled. And when her own oldest son is in Vietnam, a car with somber, uniformed men drives down Mary Keane's street, trolling for her house number.

While McDermott never allows *After This* to devolve into allegory—those simply reading the Keanes' saga will not be disappointed—the characters, in their roles as Everyfamily, are sometimes a little vague. Mary in particular seems almost hazy as she carries on her quotidian tasks behind a scrim of forbearance and petty resentments. We read how she has betrayed John time and again by revealing all his little shortcomings to her friend, Pauline. On the other hand, we don't actually see her doing that. What delicious reading one of those...