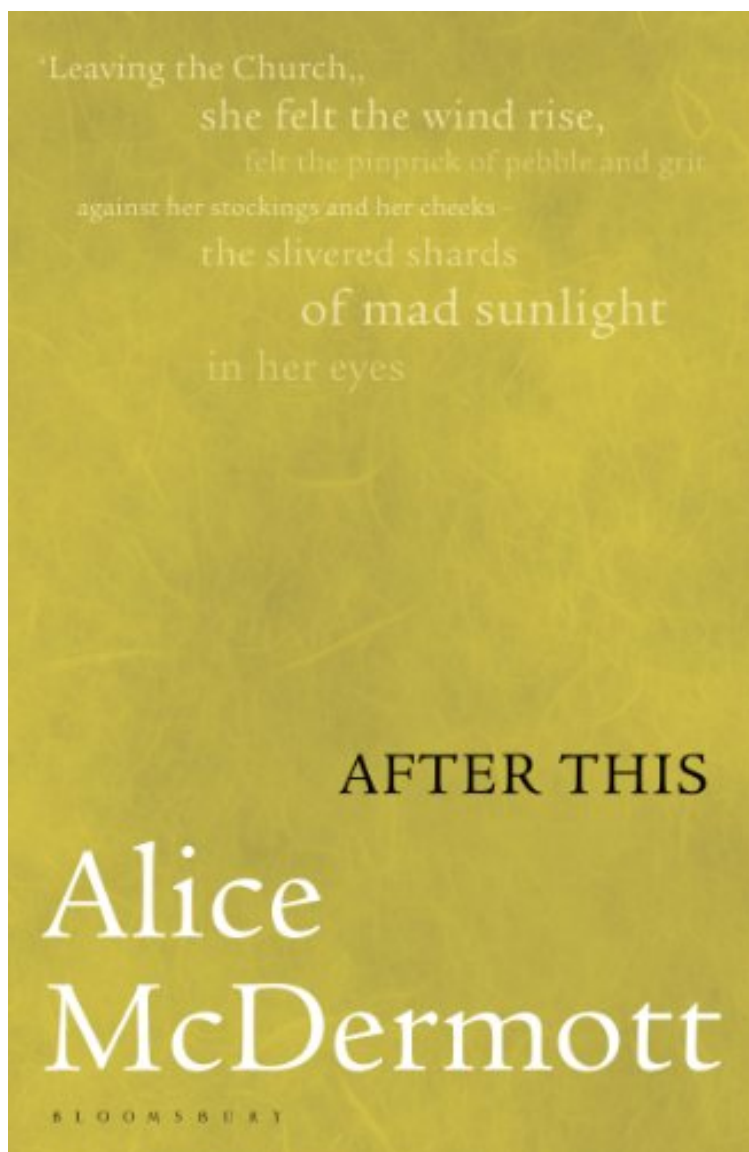


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After This



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Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurAlice McDermott's masterful novel is a portrait of a working-class American family living through the tumultuous middle decades of the twentieth century. While Michael and Annie Keane taste the alternately intoxicating and bitter fruits of the sexual revolution, their older brother, Jacob, finds himself on the way to Vietnam. Clare, the youngest child, seeks to maintain an almost saintly innocence. As their parents, John and Mary, struggle to uphold the family's framework, the four siblings are destined to experience the challenges and liberties of the 1960s. With McDermott's inimitable understanding and grace,

After This captures the joy, sorrow, anger and love that underpin, and undermine, what it is to be a family.ExtraitChapter OneLEAVING THE CHURCH, she felt the wind rise, felt the pinprick of pebble and

grit against her stockings and her cheeks the slivered shards of mad sunlight in her eyes. She paused, still on the granite steps, touched the brim of her hat and the flying hem of her skirt felt the wind rush up her cuffs and rattle her sleeves. And all before her, the lunch-hour crowd bent under the April sun and into the bitter April wind, jackets flapping and eyes squinting, or else skirts pressed to the backs of legs and jacket hems pressed to bottoms. And trailing them, outrunning them, skittering along the gutter and the sidewalk and the low gray steps of the church, banging into ankles and knees and one another, scraps of paper, newspapers, candy wrappers, what else? office memos? shopping lists? The paper detritus that she had somewhere read, or had heard it said, trails armies, or was it (she had seen a photograph) the scraps of letters and wrappers and snapshots that blow across battlefields after all but the dead have fled? She squinted against the sunlight on taxi hoods and bus windows, heard the rushing now of air and of taxis, wheezing buses, and underneath it all something banging a loosened street sign, a trapped can, a distant hammer rhythmic and methodical. The march of time. And then George approaching, his hand stuck to his hat and the hat bent into the onslaught. She went down the steps just in front of him, drawn more by forward momentum than by any desire to meet up with, or to avoid, her brother's latest best pal. The cold wind made it difficult to breathe, as if it could snatch your next breath before you had time to swallow it, and she bent her head, too, hand to her hat, submerged in wind and beginning to imagine herself slowly losing ground with each step forward, slowly beginning to stall, and then to sail backward a quick scramble to regain ground and then another sailing backward. In church she had prayed for contentment. She was thirty, with no husband in sight. A good job, an aging father, a bachelor brother, a few nice friends. At least, she had asked so humbly, so earnestly, so seriously let me be content. And now a slapstick windstorm fit for Harold Lloyd or Buster Keaton. It was either God's reply or just April again, in the wind tunnel that was midtown Manhattan. The scent of it, the Easter scent of April in the city, all around her, in the cold air itself as well as on the shoulders of the crowd; the smell of sunlight and dirt, something warming at the heart of it all. And then she felt his hand on her shoulder and he shouted, "Mary Rose," which bound him forever to her brother and her father and her life at home since nowhere else did she tolerate the double name. His head was still lowered, his hand still on his hat he might have been waiting for the right opportunity to doff it and he peered around at her from under its brim as if from under the rock of another life. And she, her hand on the back of her own hat, did the same. "Hello, George," she said. She could feel the crunch of city grit between her back teeth. "Some wind," he said. He had one eye closed against it, the other was watery. "You're telling me," she said. They walked together to the corner and as they stepped off the curb, he suddenly reached up and took her raised elbow the one that led to the hand she held against her hat and kept it between his fingers as they crossed. She thought he must look like a man attached to a subway strap. At the next corner, he did the same; a gesture that was either brotherly or proprietary, but awkward either way, as if one of them were blind or doddering, or as if both were involved in some odd, raised-elbow folk dance. At Forty-sixth, the light was against them and the wind paused enough for her to take her hand off her hat while they waited with the crowd. She turned to him was he going to speak? His eyes were teary from the wind, red-rimmed and bloodshot. His nose was running and there were tears on his windblown cheeks. She clicked open the purse that hung on her arm and found her handkerchief, but he refused it, reaching into his overcoat for his own. He mopped his face and blew his nose before the crowd got them moving again and as they got to the curb, she placed her left hand on her hat so he could reach her elbow at a more convenient angle which he did, guiding her across the street as if she were a novice pedestrian, and this time, perhaps, putting a little more pressure behind the fingertips that held her. "Where are you headed, George?" she asked him. He shouted something unintelligible into the wind. "Have you eaten yet?" she asked, because it was only polite. And then the wind paused completely, as it will in April, a sudden silence and maybe even the hint of warmth from the sun, so that he replied with odd gentleness, "Yeah, I had my lunch." They were at the door of the restaurant. The wind was picking up again. "Would you like some coffee?" she asked. He shook his head and she could not deny her own relief. "I'm out of time," he said. And then added, "What about dinner?" "Lamb chops," she told him. "You coming over?" Anticipating already a stop at the butcher's to pick up two or three more. He shook his head. There was another tear streaming down his windblown cheek and as he replied she lifted the handkerchief in her hand and wiped it away, feeling the not unpleasant pull of his beard against the thin cotton. He said, "I mean, what about us having dinner?" The wind puffed up again and they both put their hands to their hats. "Where?" she said, rudely, she realized later. But it was like having a passing stranger suddenly turn to sing you an aria. Anyone would have a second or two of not quite knowing what was really going on. "Out," he told her. He was a broad-faced man who looked good in hats. Who looked better now than he did at home, where he had

been thus far only the unremarkable source of her brother Jimmy's unpredictable enthusiasms. "At a restaurant," he said. And then to make himself clearer, "The two of us." "Tonight?" she said, and then they both turned away for a moment from the peppered wind. When they turned back, he said, "Why not?" but without conviction, confirming for them both that this was a sudden impulse that most likely would not last out the afternoon. "What if I come by at seven?" he said. She paused, squinting, not for the chance to see him better but for him to see her. "I'll have to cook those lamb chops anyway," she said. "Or else Jimmy and my father will be gnawing the table legs by the time I get home." He smiled a little, unable to disguise what she was sure was a bit of confusion about his own impulse. He said again, "I'll come by at seven," and then turned back into the wind. She pushed open the door to the restaurant. More lunchtime bustle, mostly women in hats with their coats thrown over the backs of chairs, the satiny linings and the fur collars and cuffs, the perfume and the elegant curves of the women's backs as they leaned forward across the small tables, all giving the hint of a boudoir to the busy place. She found a seat at the counter, wiggled her way into it. Saw the man beside her who was finishing a cigarette give her a quick up and down from over his shoulder and then turn back to flick an ash onto the remains of his sandwich. She imagined returning his dismissive stare, and then maybe even letting her eyes linger distastefully on the crust of bread and the bitten dill pickle and the cigarette debris on his plate. She could slide the ashtray that was right there between them a little closer to his elbow, hint, hint. Emboldened, perhaps, was she? by the fact that she'd just been asked out on a date. She ordered a sandwich from the waitress, whose pretty youth was still evident in the doughy folds of her weary and aging face, and a cup of tea. And then she held her hands over the steaming water for a few seconds. Thin hands, long fingers, with a kind of transparency to the chapped skin. Her mother's gold ring, inset with a silver Miraculous Medal, on her right hand. The man beside her rubbed his cigarette into the plate, then stood, swinging away from her on the stool and causing a slight ripple through the customers all along the other side of him. He took his overcoat from the hat rack and put it on standing just behind her, and then leaned across his empty stool, brushing her arm, to leave a few coins under his plate. "Overcoats in April," he said. "Some crazy weather." She turned to him, out of politeness, the habit of it. "I've never seen such wind," she said. He was handsome enough, dark eyes and a nice chin, though his hair was thinning. He wore a dark overcoat and a dark suit, a white shirt and a tie, and there was the worn shine of a brass belt buckle as he reached for his wallet. "Reminds me of some days we had overseas," he said, taking a bill from his billfold. She frowned, reflexively. "Where were you?" He shook his head, smiled at her. Something in his manner seemed to indicate that they knew each other, that they'd had such conversations before. "In another life," he said and snapped the bill and slapped the wallet and returned it to his pocket with a wink that said, "But all that's behind us now, isn't it?" He was thin and his stomach was taut and his starched white shirt was smooth against his chest and belly. The brass belt buckle, marked with decorative lines, a circled initial at its center, was worn to a warm gold. "Once more into the breach," he said, turning up his collar. "Wish me luck." For an odd second, she thought he might lean down and kiss her cheek. "Good luck," she said. Over her shoulder, she watched him walk away. A slight limp, a favoring, perhaps, of his left leg. A flaw that would, she knew, diminish him in some women's eyes. Even if he'd been wounded in the war, there would be, she knew, for some women, the diminished appeal of a man who had suffered something over which he'd had no control. Who had suffered disappointment. She turned back to her sandwich. And here, of all things, was desire again. (She could have put the palm of her hand to the front of his white shirt.) Here was her chicken sandwich and her tea and the waitress with a hard life in her eyes and a pretty face disappearing into pale flesh asking if there's anything else for now, dear. Here was the boudoir air of respectable Schrafft's with its marble counters and pretty lamps and lunchtime bustle (ten minutes until she should be back at her desk), perfume and smoke, with the war over and another life begun and mad April whipping through the streets again. And here she was at thirty, just out of church (a candle lit every lunch hour, still, although the war was over), and yearning now with every inch of herself to put her hand to the worn buckle at a stranger's waist, a palm to his smooth belly. A man she'd never see again. Good luck. She sipped her tea. Once, ten years ago, at a Sunday-afternoon party in some apartment that she remembered now as being laby-rinthine, although it probably had only four bedrooms, as opposed to the place she shared with her brother and her father that had two, Mike Shea had seized her by the wrist and pulled her into a dim room and plastered his mouth against hers before she could catch her breath. She had known him since high school, he was part of the crowd she went with then, and he had kissed her once or twice before she remembered specifically the train station at Fishkill, on a snowy night when they were all coming back from a sledding party but this was passionate and desperate, he was very drunk, and rough enough to make her push him off if he had not, in the first moment

she had come up for air, gently taken off his glasses and placed them on a doiled dresser beside them, and then, in what seemed the same movement, reached behind her to lock the door. It was the odd, drunken gentleness of it, not to mention the snapping hint of danger from the lock, that changed her mind. And after two or three rebukes when he tried to get at the buttons that ran up the back of her dress, she thought, Why not, and although her acquiescence seemed to slow him down a bit, as if he was uncertain of the next step, she was enjoying herself enough by then to undo the last button without prompting and then to pull her bare shoulder and arm up out of the dress first one then the other and to pull dress and slip (she didn't wear a bra, no need) down to her waist in a single gesture. And then was it just the pleasure of the material against her bare flesh, his shirt front, her wool? she slowly pushed dress and slip and garter belt and stockings down over her narrow hips until they fell to her feet. And then she stepped out of her shoes. ("Even the shoes?" the priest had whispered in the confessional the following Saturday, as if it was more than he could bear, or imagine as if, she thought later, he was ready to send her to perdition or ask her for a date.) The banging at the door was his excuse to turn away some people had their coats in there and while he stood with his back to her she dressed again and unlocked the door and walked out. She smiled at the taunts and jeers of her friends and when someone asked, "Where's Mike?" she said, "I think I killed him," which got a great laugh. Mike Shea became a medic during the war and was now married, working for Pfizer. To this day he can't look at her straight. To this day she can't quite convince herself that the sin was as grave as it seemed. (She thought, in fact, of telling the priest as he whispered his furious admonitions that she weighed barely a hundred pounds and was as thin as a boy and if he would adjust his imagination accordingly and see the buds of her breasts and her flat stomach and the bony points of her hips, he would understand that even buck naked, her body was not made for mortal sin.) She can't quite convince herself, these ten years later, that anything at all like it will happen to her again. She finished her sandwich, gave an extra quarter to the waitress, who also wore no wedding band, and headed back into the breach. From Publishers Weekly Starred . A master at capturing Irish-Catholic American suburban life, particularly in *That Night* (1987) and the National Book Award-winning *Charming Billy* (1998), McDermott returns for this sixth novel with the Keane family of Long Island, who get swept up in the wake of the Vietnam War. When John and Mary Keane marry shortly after WWII, she's on the verge of spinsterhood, and he's a vet haunted by the death of a young private in his platoon. Jacob, their first-born, is given the dead soldier's name, an omen that will haunt the family when Jacob is killed in Vietnam (hauntingly underplayed by McDermott). In vignette-like chapters, some of which are stunning set pieces, McDermott probes the remaining family's inner lives. Catholic faith and Irish heritage anchor John and Mary's feelings, but their children experience their generation's doubt, rebellion and loss of innocence: next eldest Michael, who had always dominated Jacob, drowns his guilt and regret in sex and drugs; Anne quits college and moves to London with a lover; Clare, a high school senior, gets pregnant. The story of '60s and '70s suburbia has been told before, and McDermott has little to say about the Vietnam War itself. But she flawlessly encapsulates an era in the private moments of one family's life. (Sept.) Copyright Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.