

Moral uncertainties and a recent widow

"Afterlife" by Julia Alvarez

**Algonquin Books of
Chapel Hill, 2020**

The book's prologue describes the evening Antonia Vega and her husband, Dr. Sam Sawyer, are about to celebrate her retirement from the Vermont college where she has taught literature for 30 years. They have planned to meet at a favorite restaurant, but Sam dies of an aneurysm on his way. The prologue's title, "Broken English," masterfully catches the disjointed panic that still plays over and over in Antonia's head nine months later. It also sets up one of the threads that runs throughout the book. Antonia and her three sisters immigrated to the US with their parents from the Dominican Republic when the girls were quite young, and though Antonia writes novels and stories in fluent English, she still feels that "there is some deep core of English that she [can't] access"—along with the peculiarities of a culture "where you put on your oxygen mask first."

Sam—generous, leftist, secure in his certainties—has protected Antonia from her doubts, and generally from expressing the political opinions that they shared: "He was the bold one. She the reluctant activist." But now, suddenly neither a wife nor a teacher, she is facing a new world, and it comes in with a rush. Her eldest sister Izzy is behaving erratically, and the other two sisters, Tilly and Mona, want Antonia to help them intervene. Meanwhile, Mario, the illegal Mexican immigrant who helps Antonia's neighbor Roger milk his 150 cows, needs help getting his girlfriend to Vermont from Colorado, where she has been abandoned by the coyotes that have brought her illegally across the border. Determined to give Sam an afterlife by doing what he would indubitably do, she tentatively becomes involved in both situations. It's not easy for her. She's what her therapist has called a "highly sensitive organism"—one that is easily overwhelmed and requires a different ecosystem to thrive. She soldiers on, however, even as Izzy disappears, and Mario's 17-year-old girlfriend turns out to be pregnant. Turning again to Sam's ghost, Antonia hears not one of the many literary quotations that pass through her



Julia Alvarez

Photo by Brandon Cruz González

head, but the dictum he always quoted from his mother: Let's see what love can do.

The dictum turns out to be more complicated and much less sentimental than it sounds.

Sisterhood, in this novel, is powerful, but the sisterhood into which Antonia is thrown by Izzy's troubles has less to do with feminism than with patriarchy. Alvarez, the author of "How The Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents," has a deep interest in sisterly relationships, and part of the fun (and the sorrow) of this novel is witnessing the bickering, criticism, overwhelming emotions, and deep love of the four sisters. Here, Alvarez's comic writing is at its best. Among other things, she creates variations on the theme of English words in malapropisms with which Tilly refers

to a disliked neighbor as "a wolf in cheap clothing," or remarks "it's a good thing we're doing this interjection now," referring to the need for their intervention in Izzy's life. Intervention is also necessary in Vermont, as the sheriff, out of appreciation for Sam's once treating him for free, tells Antonia that ICE is about to arrest and deport the illegal immigrants in the area. Skillfully portraying frustration, indignation, love, and grief that complicate moral responsibility, "Afterlife" is always perceptive and above all, compassionate. A short book, it contains such a variety of tones that a reader who wants to appreciate it fully should probably read it twice, once for the plot and once for the artistry of its writing. A good read, both times.

Laura Stevenson lives in Wilmington and her most recent novels are set on Boyd Hill Road.



One-Minute Book Reviews

Laura Stevenson

