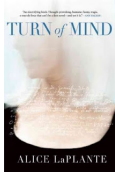


Turn of mind

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This week Tennessee Lady Vol's basketball coach, Pat Summitt, made headlines with her announcement that she had developed Alzheimer's disease. Coincidentally, I was reading this very readable novel on the same subject.

But how do you write a book from the viewpoint of someone suffering from this disease? Not only write it but combine it with a family drama and a murder mystery? This engrossing book does all of these beautifully.

"Something has happened. You can always tell. You come to and find wreckage: a smashed lamp, a devastated human face that shivers on the verge of being recognizable." That's Alice LaPlante's compelling opening. In her first novel, she helps us understand Alzheimer's disease from the patient's eyes.

I don't mean to make the novel sound bleak. It's amazingly life-affirming. In one scene, Jennifer gets free and wanders around Chicago during a summer evening. She experiences the sensual feel of wading in the cold lake water, then she enjoys a conversation with friendly strangers in a restaurant. Later, two homeless men take up her offer of a free room in her home, but she no longer has a home. Her daughter, Fiona, and her son, Mark have sold it.

Overhanging the novel is the mystery of what happened to Jennifer's best friend, Amanda, who was Fiona's godmother. Not only has she been murdered but someone has cut off the digits of her hand. A clean, professional job.

Jennifer does not always recognize her children, red-haired Fiona--now a business professor--but still bearing the snake tattoo from her wild youth, and Mark, the handsome, dark-haired lawyer, who has a drug problem. Fiona plays along with whoever Jennifer believes she is that day, but Mark always insists on the truth, I am your son, not your husband and not your father.

LaPlante has imagined a dementia patient's daily life down to the last detail--she describes Jennifer fighting against her night restraints, her need to endlessly walk around the assisted living facility, her distrust of people, and her quick bursts of anger.

And memories from the past keep breaking through, both joyful and sorrowful ones. Viscerally, Jennifer recalls nursing her children and how hard motherhood was for her, how easy being a surgeon despite the hard work, the sad cases. Fleeting, she recalls moments from her married life, remembers in what ways she and her husband failed each other. She also thinks of Amanda, particularly her cruel streak where she deliberately made her friends reveal their secrets, their failures. But now Amanda is dead and how she died is another terrible secret shrouded by lost memory.

An amazing book that you won't forget. For another novel about memory loss, try Lisa Genova's Still Alice.

Posted by Dory L. on August 26, 2011

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