

After: A Cautionary Tale

Paul Meloche

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Dark but not hopeless, After is a postapocalyptic thriller about highs and lows of the human will to hope and survive.

Two couples try to survive when nuclear war breaks out in Paul Meloche's novel *After*, about the struggle to remain hopeful amid starvation, radiation fallout, and increasingly cold weather.

Max and Annie have been dating for a few years. Magda and Jan have been married for decades. Both couples are caught off guard when, in the not so distant future, nuclear war begins.

Max and Annie are on a romantic mountain hike in Norway when the world ends. Magda and Jan are in their home in the Netherlands when the window explodes from the force of a nearby bomb. Both couples are cut off from the world as inconsistent news, dwindling supplies, and illness become all too familiar. Max and Annie are far from home while Magda and Jan must decide if staying at home is the safest option. Alternating between the two couples chapter by chapter, the story explores their respective choices as a new reality takes hold.

A fast-moving book with clear timelines, *After* is a steady apocalyptic novel. Its tension is tightest when the story is at its most bare bones. The opening for both couples, particularly Magda's determined no-nonsense approach, is a highlight. Still, the creeping dread as bodies increase and hope dwindles is even-handed. It seems possible for all of the characters to make it out just as often as not. New friends are met and lost as both couples make their way through the changed world.

The differences between the couples also keep the story fresh. Max and Annie are still riding the high of their romance while Magda and Jan's marriage has stiffened with time and secrets. By the end of the novel, only a short time has passed, but the characters' arcs are complete.

Elements of the story are introduced in a stiff manner, though. The main secret that haunts Jan is revealed for the first time in a quick, clumsy way that is at odds with the established characterizations; it also undercuts Jan's climax toward the end of the story. And while the story switches between the couples every chapter, its switches between the people themselves are undersigned. At moments, it is unclear who is thinking what or what individual characters know. Of the four, Magda is the most vibrant, while Max's and Annie's developments are flat. Magda's determination is compelling, while Max and Annie are too perfect and interchangeable in their personalities.

After is a lean postapocalyptic novel in which couples struggle amid the horrors of nuclear war.

KATHERINE WOODS (January 9, 2025)

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