



Afterlight

Jaap Robben

David Doherty, Translator

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Set in the Netherlands, Jaap Robben's novel *Afterlight* is about an elderly woman's work to discover what happened to her child.

In the book's present, Frieda is in her eighties. After her husband, Louis, dies, she is deemed too sick to live on her own. She moves into assisted living. Her son, Tobias, and his pregnant wife, Nadine, try to help her adjust, but Frieda is unpleasant and demanding. Her fights with her son are continual.

The book's second storyline is centered in the sixties, when Frieda was young, single—and gave birth to a baby in squalid conditions. She was not married; the baby was the result of a passionate affair with an older, married man, and it was taken from her just after its birth thanks to the scheming of the doctor and nun in attendance. Sent to recover in the hospital, she was humiliated and called a sinner; those with the knowledge refused to divulge where her child is. Thrown out of her parents' home, she became an outcast in a narrow-minded, religious society. These traumas shed light on her caustic behavior when she's older—including because Frieda has kept secrets. Indeed, she never told her husband about her past.

In time, Frieda discusses the events of her youth with Tobias. With the help of modern technology, he works to track down the baby's father, who may have had a role in the baby's disappearance. The novel hinges on Frieda's hopes to finally learn the fate of her child.

With its tight sentences and a fast pace, *Afterlight* moves like detective fiction. It's a poignant novel in which a single pregnant woman is mistreated in her conservative society; she remains resilient and determined to honor her baby's memory.

YELENA FURMAN (May / June 2024)

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