

Book Review: After Annie
By Anna Quindlen

What happens when the matriarch of a family, the glue that holds everything and everyone together, dies suddenly?

How do those left behind keep it together? *Do* they keep it together?

Those are some of the themes running through Anna Quindlen's new novel, "After Annie." It's a story of love, loss and hope, and it's very well written.

When 37-year-old Annie Brown collapses to the kitchen floor as she's preparing dinner, a brain aneurysm killing her instantly, her family – husband Bill and four children ages six through 13 – are left to pick up the pieces. Over the course of a year, unfolding one season at a time, the story rotates through each member of the family – including Annie's long-time best friend Annemarie, her sister Kathy, and Bill's mother Dora – to illustrate how Annie's death impacts everyone differently.

And everyone has a story to tell, multiple stories and experiences they shared with Annie. These backstories provide a poignant picture of Annie's life and her relationship with each of the other characters. The interactions between characters are simultaneously humorous and depressing as each tries to find his or her footing in this new environment they were suddenly thrust into.

We quickly learn that the commonality in all of their lives is Annie, and her voice in their heads is ever-present as they attempt to navigate life without their spouse, mother, sister and best friend.

Perhaps the best writing in the book is how Ali (Alexandra, the oldest of the Brown children) must grow up quickly to help care for her father and brothers. She has to

juggle these newfound responsibilities of adulthood while trying to make sense of her own teenage life.

Despite the overwhelming void left behind by Annie's death, hope overcomes adversity. Annie's presence within each character, her spirit living on within them, provides a light to guide them through the darkest of times.

There's no superfluous writing here. Quindlen's narrative is descriptive and gripping within an efficient 285 pages. And while it's inappropriate to use the term happy endings when the subject matter is a devastating family loss, in the end Quindlen reminds us to never give up hope.

This is the first book by Quindlen that I've read, though I've heard a lot over the years about her writing; about her ability to understand and make sense of the human psyche, and to capture it on paper. And I'm happy to say all I'd heard is true. Quindlen knows her stuff.

"After Annie" is a brisk, easy read that reminds us of the power of the human spirit. I give it 4 out of 5 stars.