



After Camus

Jay Neugeboren

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In Jay Neugeboren's contemplative novel, a marriage is haunted by French existentialist Albert Camus.

Tolle is a dancer who meets Camus—an intellectual titan who's portrayed in dynamic terms—at a Paris bistro just before his death. Later, she marries Saul, who is himself inspired by Camus's *The Plague* to become an AIDS doctor. Their marriage goes through ups and downs against the backdrop of AIDS, the wars in Vietnam and Iraq, and the surge of the National Front movement in France, where they live together when they're young and return to later to rekindle their spark. In time, Tolle and Saul make space to reflect on life, death, and the decisions they've made over the course of a lifetime together.

Varied and lifelike, the prose delights in wordplay (as when “pain zigzags along a ribcage”), vivifies midcentury Paris well, and applies an existentialist sensibility to its explorations of topical issues. Alongside its deep, detailed, and nuanced characterizations, conversations often carry its story forward, as do rich and heady internal monologues. People interrupt one another, talk over one another, hold forth, trail off, and emphasize particular words as they banter, bond, commiserate, swear at, and interrogate each other.

Even as it chronicles the central couple's at times rocky marriage, showing how it is impacted by broad social issues, *After Camus* is prone to making keen philosophical observations. There's a note about “the wherewithal people [have] with which to visit their meanness, stupidity, and incompetence on others”; another treats the passage of time as a matter of “years sloshing around in his head.” Further, its ruminative conclusion both evokes Camus's work and achieves earned poignancy.

JOSEPH S. PETE (March / April 2024)

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