

A dead body, a dying memory

An Alzheimer's patient may also be a murderer in a thriller you'll long remember

TURN OF MIND, by Alice LaPlante. Atlantic Monthly Press, 307 pp., \$24.

BY MARION WINIK
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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.

“Occasionally someone in uniform: a paramedic, a nurse. A hand extended with the pill. Or poised to insert the needle.

The opening passage of Alice LaPlante's first novel, a literary thriller about a 64-year-old retired orthopedic surgeon with Alzheimer's, establishes the crisp, super-intelligent, and brutally confused voice of Dr. Jennifer White, a narrator who will never herself fully grasp the story she reveals to us through images, reported dialogue, visions and excerpts from her notebook.

In this first scene, Dr. White finds herself in what she figures out is a police station. Why she is there, she has no idea. Later, she is back home, watching through the window as people dressed in black file into the neighborhood church. She asks the blond woman in her kitchen (her caretaker, Magdalena, whom she recognizes only occasionally) what is going on. Magdalena flips back a few pages in the notebook to show her a newspaper clipping: “Elderly Chicago Woman Found Dead, Mutilated.”

The murdered woman is Dr. White's longtime best friend, Amanda O'Toole — also her neighbor and godmother to her daughter, Fiona. Amanda died of head trauma, and four of the fingers of her hand were



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surgically removed — a bizarre detail that makes the doctor a prime suspect. But she cannot even remember from moment to moment that her friend is dead, much less whether she did it, or why.

Told in brief, haunting paragraphs, the book is divided into four parts, tracking Dr. White's deterioration. In the first section, she still lives at home. She attends an Alzheimer's support group and goes through her own mail, although news of endangered pandas and whales is as bewildering as the 19 percent decrease in her financial portfolio. She receives disturbing visits from detectives, lawyers and finally the ex-husband of her murdered friend. She is sometimes violent, sometimes incontinent. By the end of this section, a girl and a boy she

does not recognize have come to tell her she will be moving to the Memory Unit of an assisted-living facility.

The institution is not a pleasant place for Dr. White: a demeaning, confusing cuckoo's nest. “The woman with no neck is screaming again. A distant buzzer and then the muffled sound of soft-soled shoes on thick carpet hurrying past my door.” As Dr. White's anger escalates, she wakes one day into a moment of clarity and a plan. She does not take

her pills and manages to slip out the front door as a crew of painters arrives.

In the third section, the most lively and blackly humorous, Dr. White is on the lam, returning to her old neighborhood and workplace, performing medical examinations, sleeping on the streets with homeless people. This brief period ends quickly when she is nabbed by the detective investigating her case. She is incarcerated in a state mental institution; here it will end.

Throughout it all, Dr. White has flashes of crystal clear memory, particularly of episodes from the distant past and of the surgical and diagnostic minutiae of her profession. At other times, she cannot recognize her daughter and does not know if she herself is a man or a

woman. Her son is often confused with her dead husband, which smooths his way as he finagles large sums of money to support his drug and other habits.

The idea of a narrator with Alzheimers is a daring one, and LaPlante is certain in her footing — the verisimilitude here is unnerving. Weaving the existential mystery of dementia with the contrived mystery of a murder plot, she takes us into a world of gauzy shadows and scattered puzzle pieces. LaPlante makes sure that we fully understand the whole story at the end — by which time the narrator understands very little indeed. The solution to the mystery is a little awkward, perhaps a little amateurish — but the way in which it is revealed is remarkable.

EXCERPT
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selection
from “Turn
of Mind”



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