

An Absent Mind, by Eric Rill
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Review by Jordan Nelson

Eric Rill, author of *Pinnacle of Deceit* and *The Innocent Traitor*, takes a turn from thrilling mysteries to his first literary novel about a man's bout with Alzheimer's and the struggle that threatens to topple an already unstable family.

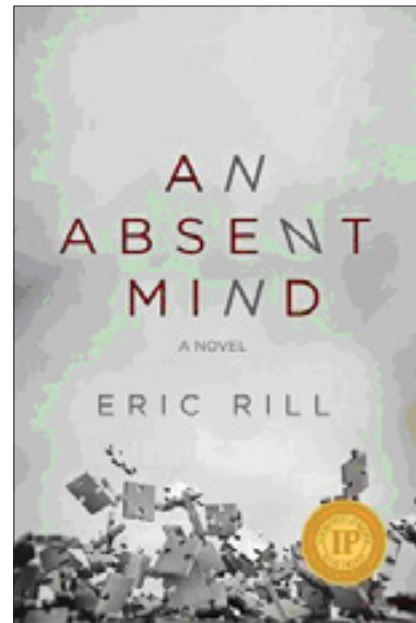
An Absent Mind opens from the main character's perspective as he relates a recent episode in which he removed his pants, tried to board a bus, and was hit by a car after wandering into traffic. Saul Reimer was left mostly unharmed, but as the chapter's title would attest, this alarming event was only "The Beginning of The End."

Saul is soon after diagnosed with Alzheimer's, a disease that leads to a gradual deterioration of the mind as the patient loses cognitive functions, memories, and motor skills, before the body is finally left inoperable. Rill offers an interesting view of Saul's affliction as the reader reaches into the progressively incoherent, frantic, and suspicious thoughts of a dementia patient.

One cannot help but pity Saul as he tries to deny what the reader already knows to be true. In the beginning, he excuses his memory loss as being normal—something that everyone goes through. Even after the episode with the car—of which he remembers only pieces—he adamantly states, "I've had such a good memory all my life. So I'm way ahead of the game. Even if I lose a bit, I'll still have more than most men my age."

Some readers have called Saul's story a depressing one and written it off as "a downer." However, this only speaks to the accuracy of Rill's portrayal. Dementia is not a cheery subject and Rill does not try to cast it as such, drawing from his own eight-year battle with his father's Alzheimer's. Undoubtedly, the book is littered with dark moments as Saul's actions slip from incoherent and suspicious to hostile and violent. He lashes out several times at his family, screaming and cursing at them, until his violence eventually grows physical.

There is much more to the story, however, as Saul grows increasingly incapable of offering an accurate account and the focus of the story shifts to the changing family dynamics. With the once-powerful patriarch all but incapacitated, Saul's wife and children grow into their new roles as caretakers and supporters. Unfortunately, it is when the story is told from the family's perspectives that the character development begins to break down.



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Although each family member is described as being radically different from the others, their thoughts and view points all seem relatively uniform. For example, Saul's wife, Monique, is described as being a submissive, nervous, image-obsessed housewife. Yet, even from the beginning, her reflections are thoughtful and bold, making assertive statements and remaining undyingly loyal to her husband despite how his public outbursts affect her reputation.

In this regard, I believe it was Rill's intention to show a development in all of the characters—growing closer and stronger as Saul deteriorates—but the only one to show any major change is the son, Joey, when he makes an uncharacteristic sacrifice towards the novel's end.

With that said, the book on the whole is highly enjoyable. It is easy to read and though the plot is relatively simple, the pacing is fast enough to keep most readers interested. The characters are relatable, if not a little flat, and the story serves as an excellent lens into the mind of an Alzheimer's patient. *An Absent Mind* is an excellent choice for any reader looking for a novel that is both compelling and honest, as Rill relays the hard truth about a family's battle with Alzheimer's.