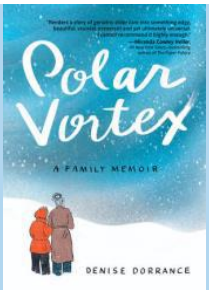
Discussion Guide



Polar Vortex
Denise Dorrance

The Experiment
2024
256 pages
ISBN: 978-1615199051

Eldercare

Summary

With cinematic illustrations and moving yet humorous prose, award-winning author and cartoonist Denise Dorrance shares the two most haywire months of her life: the phone call after her mother is discovered lying confused on the living room floor, the mingled shock and familiarity of a harsh Midwestern midwinter, the attempt to settle her homesick mother into a care facility, the limiting and limitless inanities of the United States health care system, and the impossible decisions about what comes next. Incorporating vintage postcards, photographs, and letters, Dorrance brilliantly captures the sadness, frustration, and gallows humor of suddenly having to care for an aging parent and facing the moment of transition between life as you've long known it and life as it must become.

Questions

1. How does the author convey her mother's experience of living with dementia and the ways in which her memory is affected?
2. How does the author use humor in the context of this serious, often dark, story?
3. The author returns to her childhood home to care for her mother. Do you think, in some ways, she becomes like a child again in this situation?
4. The author's sister is a character in this story, and the two women disagree on how to care for their mother. What do you think are the rewards, complications, and challenges when siblings share responsibilities for caring for their elder parents?
5. The author is an American living in England who returns to the United States to care for her mother. What do you think are the contrasts and similarities between these two
6. nations, each with a very different health care system, in caring for a parent with dementia?
7. How has reading this book affected your own views on how to care for an elder parent, and on how to talk with your children about the kind of care you want?
8. The setting of this book is an impending blizzard and freezing weather pattern (the "polar vortex" of the title). How does the weather affect the story?
9. As we grow older, what are the tensions and tradeoffs between safety and independence?
10. One of the characters in this book is Death. How does this character interact with the author? Does Death match the author's preconceptions—or your own?
11. This memoir is a graphic novel. How do you feel the illustrations complement or enhance the author's story?

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