



The Disappeared

Kim Echlin

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A sixteen year old girl falls in love with a Cambodian student.

A revolutionary closes the borders of a country for four years.

Families, friends, lovers disappear.

Kim Echlin's powerful new novel tells the story of Anne Greves, from Montreal, who meets Serey, a Cambodian student forced into exile when he cannot return home during Pol Pot's time of terror. Anne and Serey meet in a jazz club where their shared passion for music turns into a passion for each other, against the will of her father. But when the borders of Cambodia open, Serey is compelled to return home, alone, to try to find his family. Left behind, and without word from her lover, Anne tries to build a new life but she cannot forget her first love. She decides to travel to the war-ravaged country that claimed Serey. What she finds there is a traumatized and courageous people struggling to create new freedoms out of the tragedy that claimed their traditional ways, their livelihood, and a seventh of their population.

"Despair is an unwitnessed life," writes Anne as she searches for the truth, about her lover, and about herself. "If we live long enough, we have to tell, or turn to stone inside."

From its first page, *The Disappeared* takes us into the land of kings and temples, fought over for generations. It reveals the forces that act on love everywhere: family, politics, forgetting. Universal in its questions about how to claim the past, how to honor our dead, and how to go on after those we love disappear, it is a story written in spare and rhythmic prose. *The Disappeared* is a remarkable consideration of language, truth, justice, and memory that speaks to the conscience of the world, and to love, even when those we love most are gone.

The Disappeared Details

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Author : Kim Echlin

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Claire says

A bit disappointing...thought it would be an interesting lens to look at the awful Khmer Rouge period in Cambodia but it ended up being more about the self-indulgent quest of a Canadian women to find her lover. What was most disturbing to me was that the main character did not seem to connect her plight with that of the hundreds of thousands in Cambodia who had lost loved ones...nor did the character remain connected/interested in the country and the plight of its people once she was finished with her "adventure"...maybe I just didn't like the character, but maybe if the character development had been better I would have?

Mohamed Al says

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Imogen says

This was amazing. Beautifully written, the novel follows a Canadian named Anne as she travels to Cambodia to find her lost lover after the genocide in Cambodia. While very hard-hitting, and as so many others have said, haunting, I could not put this book down. I grew very attached to Anne as she retold the story of her and her lover, Serey. I highly recommend this novel, it was an engaging love story, that also brought to light the horrendous slaughter of millions of people in Cambodia under the dictatorship of Pol Pot.

Jennifer (aka EM) says

This is a treasure of a book - almost no one on my friends' list here at goodreads has read it. And I know, I know ... I throw four and five stars around like candy on Hallowe'en. BUT: this 2009 Giller nominee is stunning. It almost ripped my heart out. A Montrealer - 16 y.o. Anne Greves - falls in love with a Cambodian refugee, Serey. This is her love letter to him, spanning more than 30 years.

Our disappeared were everywhere, irresistible, in waking, in sleeping, a reason for violence, a reason for forgiveness, destroying the peace we tried to possess, creeping between us as we dreamed, leaving us haunted by the knowledge that history is not redeemed by either peace or war but only fingered to shreds and left to our children.

Loss, loss, loss - personal: of parents, of children, of lovers ... and then, set in the midst of loss at a global level (Cambodia during the genocide).

When he read to me he sometimes looked at the black and white picture of my mother on my bedside table. The focus is soft on the young woman holding a baby, me, and our eyes are locked together. Papa's voice would drift away and I learned to wait quietly until his attention flickered from the photograph back to the page. I think I began to read this way, studying the words in an open book, waiting for absence to be filled.

Beautifully and poetically written with an intentional and very effective use of spare, contraction-free, 'clean' language that packs a HUGE punch. (I will come back when I have more time and share some nuggets with

you)*. And then: the subject matter: love and loneliness and the most massive loss and grief.

At dawn I dreamed of a lover whose body knows things she does not. I had lost my voice and we were in a restaurant called the Courthouse and I was calling for you but you could not hear. My father's presence was somewhere on the edges of the dream. You woke me and smoothed my hair and said, You are calling my name. Do not worry, oan samlanh, I will always be here.

The ocean has one taste and it is salt. I believed your body but I knew the words were untrue.

The description of erotic and passionate love through the voice and character of Anne Greves is astonishing; the clarity (cf. language, above) and punch of her descriptions of how all-consuming her love for Serey is - I don't generally go for these kinds of stories, but this one is truly a cut above.

I never felt any forbiddenness of race of language or law. Everything was animal sensation and music. You were my crucifixion, my torture and rebirth. I loved your eyes, the tender querying of your voice in song. ...People do not like to think of love as a crucifixion but I know now, thirty years later, that if a person is tough enough for love nothing less than rebirth will be required.

(view spoiler)

(hide spoiler)]

I cannot recommend this book highly enough. It is at the top of all my five-star books this year.

* ETA: as promised. I've picked some passages out from the very early part of the book, so they are hopefully not too spoiler-y (and one I hid - because it does reveal a plot point so be forewarned). I literally just flipped through to random pages in the first 25 to find them and I notice now how not only beautiful the language is but how intentional the imagery. When language is this spare, then every word matters - of course - but here, it seems even more true; it seems that this spare, poetic language is doing even more work than I thought on first read.

I continue to be awed and moved by this book.

Ebtihal Abuali says

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Selma says

Šesnaestogodišnja Kana?anka se zaljubljuje u studenta iz Kambodže. U revolucionarnom previranju vlasti zatvaraju granice njegove zemlje na ?etiri godine. Nestaju porodice, prijatelji, ljubav...

Sarah ~ says

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Vonia says

Canadian girl falls in love with Cambodian boy. Boy must return home when borders reopen. Girl devastated. A decade later, she takes herself across the world to search for him in Cambodia. Girl finds Boy. Genocide everywhere. Tragedy, Trauma, Death, Loss, Grief, Violence, Injustice have changed him, though, irrevocably. Girl & Boy have a child. Child is stillborn. Boy is unable to stop himself from seeking revenge for the invaders who have taken away his entire family, town, and life. Serey fails to remember that he still has Anne. Anne who traveled the world and conquered time and space to find him. And that they love each other. Her first true love. His first true love. And it does, indeed, last a lifetime. But he fails to realize this. He is blinded by the past; Blinded by revenge.

The very best part of this novel, however, is the flawless writing. I rarely use the word beautiful to describe writing. But I have no other choice here. Somehow, the words are masterfully woven together to paint beautiful pictures; to evoke deep emotion. And that takes talent.

Well written, an important portrayal of the scale of loss genocide causes, and a love story that is palpable.

Louise says

This was a beautiful story of the power of love, the grief and indecency of loss, and the strength and potency of the human spirit to keep going amid dangerous and perilous conditions.

Anne Greves is a sixteen-year-old living in Montreal, Canada when she meets Serey, a Cambodian who is 5 years older than she is and a musician. Immediately they begin a passionate, sexual relationship. One day

Serey decides to return to Cambodia to find his family whom he hasn't heard from in over a year. A daring decision on Serey's part as Cambodia was suffering in the aftermath of Pol Pot's savage revolution.

Ten years pass by and Anne has never heard from Serey and decides to go to Cambodia herself to find him. Unbelievably, Anne finds him and their reunion is as passionate as it was ten years ago.

Anne stays in Cambodia with Serey, becomes pregnant with his child and is excited and anxious waiting for the birth of their child. One day Anne is overcome with fever and rashes and is admitted to a local hospital. The doctor examines her and finds out she has dengue fever. What about their baby?

Suddenly Serey disappears and Anne hires a taxi driver she has come to know, Mau, to drive her to another city named Ang Tasom where she suspects Serey to be. What does Anne discover?

A haunting novel that will stay with you long after the last page has been turned.

Ann says

Not your normal love story- this one has bite. A love affair begun in Montreal between a native and an exiled Cambodian. The time extends through Pol Pot genocide atrocities to the 'democratic' experiment after the killing fields. This book throws one from horror upon horror to blinding beauty of Lotus blossoms and much envied relationships in all their human diversity. The book is a prize winner. Read it all of you courageous lovers of the many faces of human life.

Ben says

The Disappeared disappoints

A review by Ben Antao

The reason I chose to buy and read *The Disappeared*, the 2009 Giller short-listed novel, is that I expected the author Kim Echlin, 54, would supply a few insights into the Cambodian war of the 70s and 80s. Instead, the story turns out to be a search for a Montreal woman's lover, a Cambodian student with whom she falls in love at the age of 16. After Serey returns to Cambodia in the 80s to find his family, Anne Greve travels to Phnom Penh to find her lover.

There is too much telling and not enough showing in this novel. Part of the problem is that the narrative is conveyed in the first and second person (I and you). While this POV lends immediacy to action and emotion, it also creates snap images like one-second TV cutaways, giving a sense of reportage of the horrors of the Cambodian genocide. This feels like second-hand reporting of the war, gleaned from research, not imaginatively recreated.

The writing in short sentences, short paragraphs and chapters gives pace to the story, but not density of

texture that a novel is supposed to have. The descriptions of the lovers' life in Montreal evoke verisimilitude suggesting that the author knows the area firsthand. However, such an air of reality is missing in the narrative of Anne's life in Cambodia.

If the author had chosen a third person POV to tell this story of love and loss, she'd have been able to crawl inside the minds and hearts of the characters in a way to bring the horrors of the Pol Pot's Khmer Rouge regime alive and afresh on the page. Alas, this does not happen.

Dec. 14/09

Krista says

Our disappeared were everywhere, irresistible, in waking, in sleeping, a reason for violence, a reason for forgiveness, destroying the peace we tried to possess, creeping between us as we dreamed, leaving us haunted by the knowledge that history is not redeemed by either peace or war but only fingered to shreds and left to our children.

The Disappeared is my very favourite type of book: it introduced me to a new time and place (I learned something) using language that I found to be spare and beautiful (and consequently, I felt something). In addition, I love books that go from what is familiar to me (St. Joseph's Oratory in Montreal) to what is foreign (a marketplace in Phnom Pehn). Throw in big themes of love and death and memory, and what's not to like?

As the book opens, we learn that the narrator is recording the events of thirty years earlier, when as a girl of sixteen, she met Serey – the great love of her life – who was a Cambodian exile; sent abroad to study and now unable to return home during the murderous reign of Pol Pot. The narrative takes the form of a love letter (always referring to Serey as “you”) as Anne Greves remembers their early days together and the strain that it placed upon her relationship with her father; a distant man, an immigrant himself, who was forced to raise Anne alone when his wife died young.

A girl understands with her first lover that there is no daughter who does not betray the father, there are only great crashing waves of the woman to come, gathering and building and breaking and thrashing the shore. I watched my body's swelling and aching and flowing and shrinking as a sailor watches the changing surface of the waves. I let you do anything. I did anything I wanted and the dirty sheets of Bleury Street became my world.

Set against Anne's naive and urgent love is Serey's concern for his family. As a musician, he plays for her a two-stringed chapei, singing traditional folk songs and lullabies that recall the smokey blues they enjoy at Montreal clubs. Where Anne is open and effusive, Serey is reserved and respectful; his family never far from his thoughts; he having had no news of them for the four years of Pol Pot's Killing Fields.

I tried to telephone and the operator said there were no more lines to Cambodia. I went to the post office to send a wire. No lines. I gave the clerk a letter to mail and she said, I'm sorry. There is no more service. I dropped the letter in a mailbox outside anyway and four days later it came back to me with a stamp: undeliverable. Do you know what it means to send a letter to your family and read that it is undeliverable?

When Serey learns that the Vietnamese have invaded Cambodia and reopened its borders, he rushes back home to find news of his family, insisting that Anne wait for word from him. And word never comes. Eleven years later, Anne thinks she sees Serey at the edge of a crowd on TV, and finally, she goes in search of him. (This is not really a spoiler, as the opening paragraph sees Anne arriving in Phnom Pehn.)

Once she's on the ground, Anne finally faces the reality of a country that has lost a quarter of its population to genocide. As in Montreal, Anne discovers that love and death in Cambodia are never far apart from each other, and by introducing a fellow Montrealer whose job it is to exhume mass graves and count the victims, author Kim Echlin is able to organically pepper her story with the appalling facts of this atrocity.

Why do some people live a comfortable life and others live one that is horror-filled? What part of ourselves do we shave off so we can keep on eating while others starve? If women, children, and old people were being murdered a hundred miles from here, would we not run to help? Why do we stop this decision of the heart when the distance is three thousand miles instead of a hundred?

That's all the plot I'll record because much of the pleasure in reading this small book is derived from the discoveries along the way. There is also much pleasure to be found in the writing itself: consistently poetic and controlled. *Her eyes held my grief, and her body gathered in my pain and knit it into herself as if she were an old marsh creature weaving baskets from rushes.* I recognise that a sentence like that won't be to everyone's taste, but it satisfies mine. Reading a book like *The Disappeared* feels like a bit of a rebuke: Pol Pot was in power just forty years ago, and even today, Cambodia is ruled by a "superficial democracy" (Hun Sen has been Prime Minister since 1985); but who remembers the Killing Fields? Who gives a thought for Cambodia today – despite its dismal rankings on all international rankings – when the newscasts are filled with other, noisier tragedies? For many reasons I am pleased to have found this book and I enjoyed it thoroughly.
