

FROM SATURDAYS BOOKS SECTION

Lost in the ruin of Cambodia

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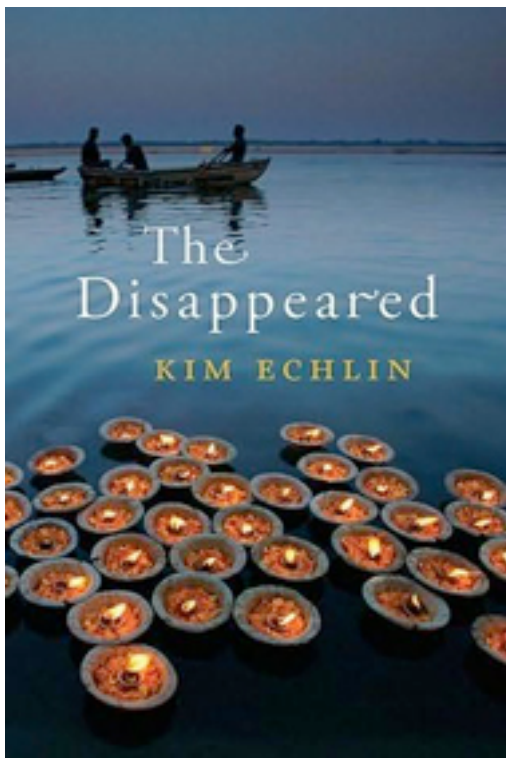
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"Tell others," commands the epigraph to Kim Echlin's third novel. Concise and eloquent, the words, belonging to Cambodian genocide survivor Vann Nath, are a fitting portal into the precise, expressive story set to unfold.

Anne Greaves is a precocious 16-year-old. It is 1979 in Montreal, and she is at a club with friends listening to Buddy Guy play the blues. A man joins their table, his eyes on her. She asks where he comes from and he names the Asian nation of Cambodia, then at the mercy of the Khmer Rouge.

"Things are unimaginably free here," he says of Canada.

He is 21, a musician, now in his sixth year in exile in the West. The attraction is immediate.



The Disappeared, by Kim Echlin,
Hamish Hamilton Canada,
235 pages, \$29

For her, it is "that animal feeling, the smell of your leather jacket, the quiver in my stomach, Buddy Guy's voice and your breath on my ear." For him, it is, in part, the dare, "an Asian guy with a white girl," and "all of us pretending nothing was forbidden." They are soon lovers.

The affair is reckless and Anne's father, her only parent, is disapproving. But the two are magnetized, the pull at once erotic and spiritual. "I love you with or without a name," he tells her on their first night. She mentions his name, Serey, one of the few instances in *The Disappeared* when he is so identified. Another night, she dreams that she calls for him but he cannot hear. "Do not worry, *oan samlanh*," he says, mixing Khmer with English, "I will always be here."

Her premonition, it turns out, is well founded. Montreal, the title of the novel's opening section, ends in the wake of Serey's return to Cambodia after the fall of the Pol Pot regime. Its buoyancy, capturing the lightness and charge of first love, gives way to the weighted adult textures of the dominant middle part, Phnom Penh. Echlin's storytelling, shifting continents and years in a paragraph, gathers much of its pace and grace equally from her lyrical prose.

A decade has passed. Anne, who has not heard from her lover in all that time, has likewise never ceased being in love. She appears in the Cambodian capital on the eve of contentious elections, with the government brutalizing the opposition.

The ragged city, still in shock — like the entire nation — from its recent waking nightmare, is finely rendered: "Phnom Penh. The leisurely put-put sway to the traffic, rickshaws drawn by skinny barefoot men who run or pedal bicycles, four-wheeled remorques drawn by motorcycles, white UN vans, Red Cross trucks, military jeeps and buses, an elephant carrying lumber, the streets wrinkling up from the waterfront ..."

In the city, she meets first a driver named Mau, with "a scar across his left cheek," and then a fellow Montrealer who is in Cambodia helping chronicle the genocide. Forensic worker Will Maracle is actually from Kahnawake, the Mohawk reserve south of the city. "I like the intuition it takes to get bones together," he explains, "to make sense of the scene."

In Phnom Penh, Anne Greaves does finally locate her own "disappeared." The reunion of lovers is human and sad, a meeting of adults now separated by experiences and fates more than cultures or proprieties. In the book's final section, titled Ang Tasom, after a village outside the capital where Anne, Mau and Will Maracle travel, events turn harrowing — bone stripped of all flesh.

Emerging from those final pages is an act of love, and an image of horror, that elevates *The Disappeared* to a level of tragic intensity that it had been bound for from its opening sentences. To describe the act apart from its setting as the climax of a powerfully vivid narrative would be ruin its extreme beauty.

Readers of Kim Echlin's earlier books, *Elephant Winter* and *Dagmar's Daughter*, will be familiar with the tension in her fiction between a literary anthropologist's interest in archetypes and a poet's rendering of the sensory world. By the close of her luminous new novel, it becomes apparent that for her the two perspectives, or truths, are in harmony.

For all its brevity, *The Disappeared* still attends to the skulls and bones and slaughterhouses of Cambodia's agony. Anne's defiant visit to Tuol Sleng, the school-turned-prison where 14,000 men, women and children were killed — and from which Vann Nath, who provided that two-word entreaty to "tell others," emerged, one of just seven survivors — is about witness and record: "In Tuol Sleng," she writes, "a person is asked to stare."

But for the penultimate scene, the truth is definitely poetic. It may also be dramatic. The book, which can be read in a single sitting, builds toward a complex expression of annihilating loss and eternal love that is best experienced, in a sense, like the final act of a tragic play: as something inevitable and beyond the calculations of reason. The final line certainly speaks to that variety of wild human truth.

"Come and I will whisper your name to you one more time."

Contributing reviewer Charles Foran's latest book is Join the Revolution, Comrade.

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