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Disappeared Review  
By Julie Wheelwright  
*The Independent* (2009)

Kim Echlin, *The Disappeared*, Abacus, £11.99, paperback, 235 pages

Despite everything that has been written about Pol Pot's regime in Cambodia 1975-1979, it is still possible to be deeply shocked by stories of the two million who died in the killing fields, were tortured in Tuol Sleng prison or who simply disappeared. Canadian novelist Kim Echlin has written a love story that exposes in terrible human detail, the consequences for several generations of Cambodians of living through 'Year Zero'. As her protagonist Anne Greves asks, 'why do some people live a comfortable life and others live one that is horror-filled?'

Answering that question becomes Anne's quest after she meets, in Montreal at the age of 16, a Cambodian refugee and musician named Serey. They fall deeply in love and seem bound together by their youth and their loss since Serey is exiled from his family while Anne's life has been shaped by losing her mother as a child. When Serey learns that the Cambodian border has re-opened after the Vietnamese invasion, he leaves Montreal to search for his missing family. For a decade Anne hears nothing from him, learns to speak Khmer and waits.

Convinced that Serey is still alive and after seeing him on a television news item, she leaves for Phnom Penh. Miraculously they are reunited and their relationship seems to resume effortlessly. But Echlin is far too talented a writer and far too committed to revealing the brutal truth of war to allow her lovers a happy ending. Anne's life begins another cycle of loss and separation when her 'trust in the world is destroyed.'

The novel's lyrical prose spins out Anne's interior thoughts, experiences and emotional responses to the brutality she encounters. The horror, however, is balanced by Anne and Serey's profound love; after their reunion in Phnom Penh she remembers, 'I opened myself to you as if I could be unzipped front and back. . . We became cannibals swallowing flesh and breathing prayers.' Anne laments, 'Please do not disappear. No one can mend my sorrow. I love what I lost.'

But, at times, the prose becomes overwrought and actually detracts from a deeper understanding of Serey's experience or those of the other Khmers Anne meets. It's almost a relief when Will, a gruff Canadian forensics expert, appears on the scene to help Anne in her search, muttering about his hope 'that our humanity might kick into a higher gear.' This is an ambitious novel that almost, but not quite, reaches its goal.

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