

What Was Lost by Catherine O'Flynn-----May 2008... Winner of the 2007 Costa First Novel Award

Why had twenty publishers rejected the prize winning *What Was Lost* ? Why had they missed its potential? What would our group make of it? Would we be disappointed?

It didn't disappoint: funny and socially astute, with a keen eye for what is both ridiculous and disturbing in our consumer-driven society. One critic wrote: „it also had the courage of its convictions in tackling the fallout - alienation, loneliness and guilt - surrounding the disappearance of a young child.“

It has two narrative strands: the first set in 1984 and centred on Kate Meaney, a 10 year old 'private detective', and the second set in 2003/4 and split between Lisa Palmer, a deputy retail manager, and Kurt, an insomniac security guard. The setting for both, however, is the Green Oaks Shopping Centre, one of those depressing centres of twentieth-century consumerism. Opened in the later 1970s as the model of convenience, it has gradually become the kind of place that disconsolate couples and families go to on a weekend because buying stuff is better than spending yet another day in each others' company:

'This is how we spent our Sundays now. It's become quite the tradition... Go to Green Oaks and get that thing we need. Maybe when we're here we'll find something else we want as well... We haven't found anything we want to buy today. We're going in all the right shops but nothing's really grabbing us. It's raining outside, so what else would we be doing? Sitting at home staring at each other. Going up the walls on a Sunday afternoon, that's what we used to do. Thank God for Sunday trading.'
(This from one of the anonymous shoppers whose voices punctuate the main story.)

Thus the atmosphere that O'Flynn creates is one of soulless claustrophobia, of an endless round of meaningless purchase and profit - the epitome of banality; a haven for lost souls.

Sunday trading is not yet part of German culture. Some of us miss the availability of shops on Sundays- especially those of us coming from countries where Sunday shopping is the norm. eg Japan, UK, USA. Others found the idea abhorrent and hated the experience of modern shopping malls..We discussed the nature of modern consumerism and its impact on our lives. Workaholic cultures seem to breed a desire for frenetic spending- to shop, shop, shop. Workaholics only have Sundays free and they want to spend their hard earned money.

Spending time in a large shopping centre can seem a paradise or a nightmare. For the staff at Green Oaks, it is boring and monotonous .Yet for Kate Meaney there is something thrilling and dangerous about the place; as she would have it:

'Crime was out there. Undetected, unseen.'

Deserted by her mother in early childhood and lately bereft by the death of her loving father, Kate has retreated into a fantastical world of good and evil. She models herself on the Junior fact finder 'How to be a detective' (One of us still dreams of setting up

a detective agency., Some of us,when children, played at being sleuths.) We could see our young selves in Kate and admired her energy and understood her search for adventure.

Backed up by her partner 'Mickey', a stuffed monkey dressed in spats, she has taken to patrolling Green Oaks day after day, 'detecting' criminal activity. In her diary she minutely records the activities of her suspects:

'Friday 20th April: Woman in blue raincoat spotted once more on bench outside Mothercare. Today she had a pushchair, but still no child.'

'Tuesday 24th April: Nothing to report today. Man seen eating orange peel from brown paper bag. Followed him for 40 minutes but no further deviancy observed. Spent two hours outside banks - no one looked wrong.'

Kate searches for wrong-doing, certain that sooner or later she will 'see someone...with a different look on their face. Anxiety, or cunning, or hate, or desire, and she would know that they were a suspect.' Her obsession serves to counteract her loneliness.

She has no home-life to speak of - she lives with an elderly and indifferent grandmother - and has no trouble slipping off to the centre after school and at weekends. She maintains a very low-profile and no-one notices her.

She is amenable and quietly clever at school, and her only friends to speak of are Adrian Palmer, a young man in his 20s who works in a neighbouring newsagents, and Teresa Stanton, a classmate suffering systematic physical abuse. They both know about her 'detective agency', but not about her troubling fixation with the Green Oaks' Centre. Thus neither is equipped to counsel the police on her likely whereabouts when, one day late in 1984, she suddenly and mysteriously disappears.

Until, that is, the early hours of Boxing Day twenty years later:

'He never expected to see anything on the CCTV. No-one ever did on the nightshift...But then she appeared in the middle of the night... He saw the figure standing in front of the banks and building societies on level 2. It was a child, a girl, though her face was hard to see. She stood perfectly still, a notebook in one hand and a toy monkey sticking out of her bag. Kurt spun round to pick up his radio...and as he turned back to the screens he saw her disappear out of picture.'

The fuzzy, low-grade quality of this image is the stuff that horror stories are made of - the young child, missing for twenty years, coming back to haunt the same shopping centre she frequented in life. For Kurt, the security guard who sees it, it is a resounding wake-up call. Like Kate before him he pounds Green Oaks' corridors on the look out for crime (although he is hardly as inspired by the prospect) and like her he uses the Centre to blanket grief and loneliness. Having lost his girlfriend in a car accident, and given up all prospect of a 'real' career, he has offered himself up as a sacrifice to his role there; quietly though, slowly but surely, the monotony is carving up his sanity.

Kate's ghostly appearance is a catalyst for change, galvanising him to re-examine his life, particularly his relationship with his over-bearing father and with his own conscience.

The next day Lisa Palmer, deputy manager of Your Music and another victim of the tedium of Green Oaks', finds a stuffed monkey, dressed in classy spats, in one of the service corridors behind her store. Unlike Kurt, she has every reason to recognise it immediately, twenty years ago her brother Adrian was accused of the molestation and murder of its owner. Adrian's loss of reputation, being demonised unjustly, eventually costs him his life. His suicide reminded us of others unjustly accused of crimes against children who have had their lives ruined. Friendships between adults and children are regarded suspiciously. We have lost a sense of innocence and of community.

O'Flynn's novel is incredibly brave in tackling 'what was lost'. Not just the loss of Kate - she is the story's headline but hardly its first cause - or the subsequent waste of Adrian Palmer's life (or Lisa's, or Kurt's), but the loss of trust, family and wider community that underlies the narrative. The building of Green Oaks is ultimately destructive: it is built on the remains of industry, symbolic of the end of British manufacturing and the consequent loss of thousands of jobs. It has sucked the life out of local businesses - Adrian's newsagency is, ironically, one of the only shops to survive; the butcher's next door isn't so lucky. Even in Kate's time his shop is failing:

'Mr Watkin was an old man, Kate estimated probably seventy eight. He was a nice man with a nice wife but very few people bought their meat from him any more. Kate thought this possibly had something to do with the way Mr Watkin stood in his shop window swatting flies against the sides of the meat with a large palette knight. It was also a self-perpetuating situation, in that the fewer customers Mr Watkin had, the less meat he stocked and the less meat he had the less he looked like a butcher, and the more he looked like a crazy old man who collected and displayed bits of flesh in his front window.'

By 2003/4 the local shops have become a hang-out for gangs of youths: Kurt's mother, who insists on getting her groceries there, is brutally beaten at the end of the novel. But she is unrepentant:

'She just didn't like it there [at Green Oaks], couldn't understand why everyone flocked there and deserted the local shops where people knew your name and asked after your family. The attack had shaken her, but it wouldn't stop her.'

What O'Flynn seems to abhor most of all is the anonymity of modern life, the increasingly impersonal nature of our human transactions. It is the loss of intimacy and, concurrently, of basic emotional literacy that dogs the novel. This is a point forcefully made in the italicised vignettes at the end of chapters which interrogate visitors to the Centre - these 'shoppers', young, old, male and female, have no identity. O'Flynn uses the anonymous voices as a chorus - weaving a theatrical device into the narrative. Some of us loved this technique, others were irritated by it.

Their interior monologues are highly personal but nobody is looking, nobody sees; equally, nobody listens, nobody hears. This is the great irony in a novel in which looking and hearing are of the utmost importance.

In the end, however, *What Was Lost* is a novel about desire: the desire for love, for meaning, for contact. Kate's final day at the Centre is the day on which she meets the subject of her desire: the criminal:

'She had always known she would see something different in his face and as she drew closer she felt a thrill of recognition as his features became clearer. The man was looking towards the children's play area..

What Kate does not realise is that, almost simultaneously, the man recognises her, the much-contemplated object of his desire: the victim. You might call it destiny. Gavin, the security guard, has spent his life watching people. At last someone has been watching him. He is thrilled to be the object of interest. He wills her to follow him and lures her to her death. And Green Oaks is the monstrous, chaotic scene of it all, and symbolic of all the other wasted or deformed lives which O'Flynn describes:

'Four hundred thousand different stories on a busy day, floating up in the air like foil balloons, sticking to the ceiling. Green Oaks is more than bricks or mortar... The voices merge and give the place its own sound. No one notices it, but they all hear it: it's what brings them here - the low-level static hiss. If you could tune to the right frequency the individual voices would break through then then you'd hear them all. You'd hear what they were hoping to find at Green Oaks.'

Green Oaks is a malevolent character- the centre of a modern fairy tale - the innocent child is lured into the dangerous wood- to be met by the wolf. The tale of Little Red Riding Hood makes a clear contrast between the safe world of the village and the dangers of the forest, It also seems to be a strong morality tale, teaching children not to "wander off the path".

O'Flynn chillingly recounts Gavin's justification for Kate's death. He is sure it was fate. It has been his mission to find her. He claims Green Oaks chose him.

„ I felt a special sense of purpose, a mission. I'd walk along the corridors and it felt it was the place built for me. Everything was the right size, everything felt right to the touch. The walls seemed to hear me, the mirrors talk to me. I heard all the whispers, I knew all the secrets. It chose me and it chose her.“

Kate is to be entombed, like the child victims in Vilmnitz church and Vestenburg castle. He claims that there are entombed children all over Europe bringing prosperity, security and happiness. We were assured such horrible practices were part of German and Japanese history. Children were buried alive in buildings as a protection from the Devil or to prevent the buildings from collapsing during construction. Many of these buildings are of course believed to be haunted.

A shocking and very creepy ending.

Our conclusion: a zeitgeisty book- part ghost story / part mystery. Very well observed, humorous and sad, poignant and full of contemporary insights.

Well done to the tiny Tindall Street Press for publishing it!