A Penguin Readers Guide

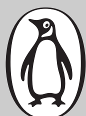
The Disappeared

About the Book 238

An Interview with Kim Echlin 239

Discussion Questions 246

Suggested Further Reading 248



ABOUT THE BOOK

"This thing is true: time is no healer." This biting phrase exemplifies not only the gravity of Kim Echlin's third novel, *The Disappeared*, but also the lyrical prowess of its author, who can express monumental events and emotions with just one line. (In fact, some of her chapters are just that.) Through her narrator, Anne Greves, Echlin brings to life a raw, passionate story set against the aftermath of the 1970s Cambodian genocide—the slaughter wherein some two million people perished under the murderous Khmer Rouge regime.

Anne is only sixteen when she first meets Serey, a captivating musician from Cambodia who is five years her senior and working in Montreal as a math tutor. Their attraction is erotic, and they quickly begin an all-consuming relationship. Contrary to Anne's father's wishes, the two blissfully spend days on end in Serey's apartment, making love, listening to music, and sharing stories. Written almost as a personal letter to the seldom-named Serey, the book chronicles a love affair that goes on to span a lifetime, with the narrative moving fluidly between decades, sometimes within the same page, as Anne recounts her most intimate thoughts.

Serey had been sent to Canada to escape his country's political turmoil, and as the only one in his family to get out before all communication was cut off, he has been captivated by thoughts of home. And so when, after four long years, the borders are finally reopened, Serey is compelled to return, leaving Anne in Montreal.

More than ten years pass without any word. Still passionately in love with Serey, Anne learns the Khmer language and then embarks on her first journey to find her beloved.

She arrives in Cambodia's capital, Phnom Penh, at a tumultuous time for the city: it is preparing for the country's first democratic election. Anne soon befriends a local taxi driver named Mau, and with his help she is eventually

able to find Serey. They seem to resume their relationship where they left off, but much has changed—in Serey's life and in Cambodia itself. Serey lives a separate life from Anne during the day, and at times he is distant. Although he tries to shield Anne from the horrors he has come to know, she finds a way to visit the Killing Fields, called Choeung Ek, as well as the notorious Tuol Sleng prison where thousands were killed. And yet through all of this they discover a slow, gentle rhythm to daily life and once again find joy in being together.

In the book's penultimate section, Anne sets out to find Serey after he once again goes missing following an explosion at a public rally. Along the way she learns more about his secret life and encounters first hand the ongoing power struggles in Cambodia. As *The Globe and Mail* put it, "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." In the novel's closing pages Anne returns to Montreal, where she attempts to continue the agonizing task of simply living.

Named one of eight essential spring books by *The Walrus* magazine, *The Disappeared* will keep you up at night no matter what the season. Somehow Echlin has deftly interwoven the chilling barbarism and incredible beauty of humanity into a seamless tale of one woman's lifelong journey of love and yearning for her own "disappeared." ■

AN INTERVIEW WITH KIM ECHLIN

Q: Did you spend time in Cambodia before or during the writing of this book? How long did the research take? The book's epigraph by Vann Nath, one of the only survivors of Tuol Sleng prison, is "Tell others." Why did you use that?

I travelled in Cambodia for a short time with a medical research group working on inoculation programs for children. During my visit I was moved by the various memorials to those lost during the Khmer Rouge time, almost thirty years before. From large museums, such as Tuol Sleng in Phnom Penh, to small, hand-written signs nailed to trees out in the countryside, people expressed a powerful will to "not forget." I met a woman in a market who told me the story of losing her entire family, and when I responded, "Can I help? What can I do?," she answered, "Nothing. I just want you to know." Vann Nath said "Tell others," and my experience in Cambodia was that many people wanted the truth to be told.

It seems to me that an individual's hope for freedom and justice exists almost independently of any particular political regime. Under a repressive regime, people will resist covertly if they can. In less repressive regimes, people will speak up. The current trials in Cambodia are the result of international pressure as well as the openly expressed desire for these trials by Cambodians like the artist Vann Nath, or Youk Chaang, who continues to gather information for DC-Cam (Documentation Centre of Cambodia). Of course, *The Disappeared* is a work of fiction; every country has stories of injustice and "disappeared," including Canada, where we're currently witnessing the Indian Residential Schools Truth and Reconciliation Commission. The work to protect freedom is ongoing. ■

Q: Delving into the stories behind the Khmer Rouge must have been difficult. Did you find it was at times too painful to think about or too all-consuming?

So many people I talk to about *The Disappeared* have told me personal stories of their own or their family's struggles with oppressive regimes. The question of *when* and *how* to

remember comes up over and over again. There's an old Grimm's fairy tale called "The Singing Bone," in which the bone of a murdered man is dug up many years later, and, when blown on, sings its own story. In our oldest stories we see the need to believe that the truth does come out. Even when it is painful.

But to your question. After World War II, the philosopher and musicologist Theodor Adorno famously wrote, "To still write a poem after Auschwitz is barbaric." Many years later he softened this, saying that "Perennial suffering has as much right to expression as the tortured have to scream."

Writers began to respond to the events of World War II very soon after the war's end, including Paul Celan in his poem "Death Fugue," but in many cases it took years for this writing to be published and translated. In no way do I think that bearing witness to atrocity through art gives undue notice to perpetrators. But I can see that sometimes it takes years for people to be able to hear the stories.

There are some beautifully written and devastating memoirs of the Khmer Rouge years from Cambodia, as well as wonderful theatre, dance, and music. We have stories from Mao's China that the Chinese call "scar literature" and memoirs and literature from Argentina and Chile called *testimonio*. In Canada we have had several commissions that collect the stories of groups who have suffered here, particularly during periods of war.

Each group's story is particular. But a common thread that connects all of them is the belief that people affirm themselves through storytelling. Stories teach and delight. They allow both speaker and listener to become more conscious, to know history, to reflect on moral and ethical questions. Yes, reflecting on these stories is painful. ■

Q: Language is always paramount in your novels. Did you study Khmer to better understand your characters and the setting of the book?

The challenge in this book was to find a language that could tell the stories from the genocide and accurately reflect Khmer culture. I wrote many, many drafts, and had very good linguistic and cultural consultants in Cambodia.

During the writing, I experienced a loss of language until a wonderful translator and mentor, Linda Gaboriau, said to me, "Take me into the centre of the darkness, show me what it is." After that, I reread the testimony of those who have suffered in war or genocide, and I noticed that the style of telling is very pared down. People say, "I was tortured," "I was raped," "I was thrown in a mass grave and managed to get out." There is little embellishment, no metaphor, little description beyond the plain recounting of the event. I wanted my style to reflect this kind of language: spare, essential. This is the place language begins, in very direct communication between two people.

And then I noticed that some of the greatest love poetry also has this spare, essential quality. The oldest written love poems in the world, Inanna's songs of love from Sumeria ("My love, your eyes are beautiful, your face is sweet") or those from the Bible's Song of Solomon ("O, that you would kiss me"), as well as love lyrics in contemporary music (The Beatles' "She Loves You"), use direct, unadorned language. It seems that our deepest, most intense experiences belong to a place that language can hardly reach. When this is so, I think the rhythms that hold the individual words together become very important. ■

Q: The first half of the book reads almost as a love letter to Serey. Most people can only dream of the kind of love shared between Anne and Serey. Do you really believe in such heightened romantic love, or that there is a single person we are meant to be with?

I think we meet many people through our lives that we are "meant to be with," if we are open. In a certain way, I was meant to meet the woman in the Phnom Penh market who shared her experience with me, but that encounter could only have happened as a result of many other people in both our lives who inspired us—her to speak out, me to listen. In that brief, chance moment, one could say we were two souls meeting.

When Serey calls Anne his destiny, he is speaking in a romantic context. But his words were more prophetic than perhaps he knew in the beautiful moment of falling in love. Anne and Serey are lovers before either of them can know that their shared destiny will end with Anne being the sole person in the world who knows, and finally tells, Serey's story. Without her, he would have been murdered and forgotten. Without him, she would not have known the love that does not seek to alter. So destiny and memory transcend time and become linked. ■

Q: Many of the characters—most prominently Anne, Serey, and Sokha—lose loved ones in the war (or under warlike circumstances) and are profoundly traumatized by it. How do you think an individual can overcome an inner agony as deep-seated as theirs?

This is a big question. It may be that the answer is as individual as each person. Serey joins an opposition movement; his brother Sokha rejoins the army. Anne searches for the truth of her particular situation and is forced to confront the universal questions we find in *Antigone*: How do we live in the conflicting, and often irreconcilable, interests of the state and the individual? Does the state have the right to deny the individual human desire to name and honour their dead?

To speak about overcoming trauma, I would defer to Jean Améry, an Auschwitz survivor and the author of *At the Mind's Limits*. Améry wrote, "Whoever has succumbed to torture can no longer feel at home in the world." He writes that trust cannot be regained, that the tortured stay tortured. None of the characters in my story "overcome" their traumas of loss or pain or betrayal. For this reason, the novel is about language and memory, about how our use of language is a moral choice. Do we use the language of propaganda that renders the other less than human? Do we use the language of resistance in order to keep revealing the truth? For as Camus writes in *The Rebel*, the language of rebellion "reveals the part of man which must always be defended." Do we use memory to name the dead, to remember their stories, to work toward justice? ■

Q: Was it difficult to keep the story's focus on Anne and her perspective, and not delve too deeply into the politics of the time?

After the Pol Pot regime (1975–1979) and the withdrawal of the Vietnamese, the United Nations Transitional Authority was mandated to supervise the administration of Cambodia and to attempt to create conditions for a democratic election in 1993. The work was very complex. There was starvation and sickness; huge numbers of refugees were living on the borders. Most of the country's educated people—the artists, the Buddhist monks—were killed. Roads and bridges had been destroyed, farming was in disarray. The country was (and still is) heavily mined. There were many different political factions who used violence and force to achieve power. There was a generation or more of young people who had been separated from their families and indoctrinated by the Khmer Rouge, and large numbers of young men who knew nothing but war.

What I wanted to tell is the story of complex turbulence that accompanies a shift in political systems: how the

defence of freedom and individual rights requires continual vigilance (and opposition when things go wrong), how secretive governments create the conditions for the breakdown of human rights. These are conditions we see all over the world, the West included. When innocent citizens of democratic nations can be extradited and tortured, as happened to Canadian Maher Arar, when the military forces representing democratic nations can practise torture in hidden prisons as we all witnessed at Abu Ghraib, then we can be sure of this: Individual human rights are everyone's responsibility, and people around the globe must find the courage to speak and to resist their own governments if freedoms are corrupted or devolve.

But *The Disappeared* is a novel, Anne's story. I wanted these issues to be told through her individual story and to make the particular politics implicit in that story. ■

Q: This book and your previous two novels, *Elephant Winter* and *Dagmar's Daughter*, revolve around strong female characters. Do you see any similarities between them?

I like these strong female characters. When I talk with readers I feel an enormous appetite in women to explore both their strength and their emotional connectedness, which still tend not to be honoured in the dominant culture. I like telling stories of women who act on their passions. ■

Q: Can you tell us what you're working on now?

I'm currently working on new fiction and a new nonfiction book that brings together my research on the "literature of testimony." I think it was Elie Wiesel, the writer and Holocaust survivor, who wrote, "If the Greeks

invented tragedy, the Romans the epistle and the Renaissance the sonnet, our generation invented a new literature, that of testimony." This is a phrase that South American writers such as Chile's Ariel Dorfman have adopted. And so, in this non-fiction book, I'm looking at examples from the literature of testimony that have moved me—in truth commissions, in plays and novels—and thinking about what it means. ■

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Anne says, "What I learned from my mother was that those we love can disappear suddenly, inexplicably. And then there is nothing." How do you think this belief affects the way Anne lives her life?
2. In Montreal, Serey says to Anne, "I like how you speak your mind and do not try to please me. Your mind is not Asian at all." Discuss the ramifications of this sentence for Anne and Serey's relationship in Montreal and in Cambodia.
3. Years into their relationship, Serey says, "Do you remember in those days, the shock of an Asian guy with a white girl, or a black with white, or a French with English, all of us pretending nothing was forbidden?" At another time, Anne says, "I never felt any forbiddenness of race or language or law. Everything was animal sensation and music." Do you think their attraction was wrapped up in the appeal and inherent danger of "the other"?
4. When Anne learns of Serey's secret life working for the opposition, she is surprised. Do you feel that they really knew each other, or were they "putting on a face" for the other?
5. Serey joins an opposition movement, his brother Sokha rejoins the army, and Anne searches for the truths inherent in her particular situation. Discuss

how these individuals try to balance the conflicting and often irreconcilable interests of the state and the individual.

6. Early on in the story Anne says, “I learned the prayers but not to pray.” Discuss Anne’s relationship with faith and spirituality as it unfolds throughout her life.
7. Would you say Kim Echlin believes that history shapes us or that we shape history? How is this manifested in *The Disappeared*?
8. How is parenthood characterized in this story?
9. How were you affected by reading about the genocide in Cambodia? Did you already know about Pol Pot and the Khmer Rouge, or did the story help to educate you about what happened there?
10. Did Serey challenge your notions of good and evil?
11. Anne says, “I would never be that self again. I was drowning in you. I would keep going back to you. Impossible not to.” Did her love for Serey sabotage any chance she had for a new life after his death? Can someone ever fully recover from such a loss?
12. Eventually Anne is the sole person in the world who knows Serey’s story. Why does she decide to tell it? Does she find comfort for herself through doing so? And what is likely to happen to Anne now that she has given us her testimony?

SUGGESTED FURTHER READING

Kim Echlin has drawn from a wide literary tradition of reflecting on history and conscience. Here are some of the works by writers whom she admires:

Fiction
Ma Jian, *Beijing Coma*
Ariel Dorfman, *Death and the Maiden*
Eduardo Galeano, *Century of the Wind*
Milan Kundera, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*
J.M. Coetzee, *Disgrace*
W.G. Sebald, *Austerlitz*
Michael Ondaatje, *The English Patient* and *Anil's Ghost*

Non-Fiction
Václav Havel, *Open Letters*
Jorge Semprún, *Literature or Life*
Uwe Timm, *In My Brother's Shadow*
Tzvetan Todorov, *Facing the Extreme*
Jean Améry, *At the Mind's Limits*