

Missing Mona: A Tommy Cuda Mystery

Joe Klingler

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This engaging and romantic story is packed with action and intrigue.

A disenchanted twenty-something's solo, cross-country road trip turns dangerous when a hitchhiker draws him into a Chicago crime web. *Missing Mona* is Joe Klingler's new thriller about cars, technology, and finding one's way in life.

When Thomas Kelsey—or Tommy Cuda, as he introduces himself to a striking red-headed hitchhiker named Mona—agrees to spend a few days being paid to track down Mona's missing friend in Chicago, he enters a twisted world. Corrupt cops and politicians, strip clubs, and back-alley dealings abound, with the action set to an enticing backdrop of blues music and local culture.

It's a world far more treacherous, exciting, and relationally rewarding than Tommy's day-to-day life working at Walmart and living in his well-off parents' suburban Ohio home. But is he in over his head? And will he be able to get out—and keep his grandfather's restored, mid-1960s Barracuda with him?

The narrative clips along nicely and has deep visual elements, often reading like scenes in a screenplay. Klingler taps into the mind-set of the post-recession millennial generation, displeased with what life has dished up and feeling bleak about their future prospects.

Though unworldly and naive about a lot of things, Tommy is a quick-witted protagonist. He navigates the treacherous path he has stumbled onto and lends wicked levity to the plot, darkly joking about the foibles and social expectations of the modern world.

Indeed, Tommy's arc is the quintessential journey of his generation, seeking and finding adventure while trying to unplug. He tosses his iPhone out of the car window early on and continually derides the 24/7 connectedness of contemporary devices. At a Chicago inn, he relies on a desk clerk to answer pay phone calls for him, and he collects his messages via sticky notes.

Missing Mona is dense with these small details. They often enhance its scenes, infuse fun, and help to develop the characters, but sometimes seem extraneous. Romantic scenes have a beautiful retro quality, sensuous in their buildup and without any cheap crudity. Action-heavy situations, though, are sometimes resolved too quickly and easily, while other plot threads play out too predictably. Characters and dialogue also lean toward B-movie territory.

A poignant focus on millennials and technology within fast-paced city scenes adds to the appeal of *Missing Mona*. This is an engaging and romantic story packed with action and intrigue.

KARYN SAEMANN (December 24, 2015)

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