

The Disappeared

Rebecca J. Sanford

Blackstone Publishing (Jul 30, 2024)

Hardcover \$27.99 (272pp)

979-821238536-7

In Rebecca J. Sanford's multigenerational novel *The Disappeared*, women contend with a military dictatorship in Argentina that leaves lingering questions.

In the 1970s, Lorena and her husband are taken in the night by the junta. Esme, Lorena's mother, shoulders the responsibility of raising their son. She holds out hope of locating her daughter, though no arrest records exist. Decades later, Rachel, who believes that she was left at an orphanage as a baby, has to choose whether or not to investigate her origins, knowing that learning more could upend the relative happiness of her youth.

Tension arises from the fight for justice, which clashes with instinctive silence for self- and family-preservation. These crosshair motives, first depicted in Lorena's wavering between joining a left-wing activist friend or remaining passive and uninvolved in politics at her husband's behest, culminate in Esme's tale: she must keep herself safe as the only adult relative left to raise her grandson, but maternal love compels her to band together with other mothers and grandmothers who also lost their children, defying the junta's quelling of protests, public outcries, and other "subversive" activities.

The prose is naturalistic, aching, and apprehensive; the search for truth, no matter how determined, is plagued by self-doubt. When Esme feels misgivings, she depends on the solidarity and words of fellow women: "Don't you dare forget what you saw happen that night." The chapters jump across geography and decades, befitting the fragmented histories and selfhoods resulting from the orchestrated "disappearings." Rachel is haunted by the "blonde ghost" daughter she is meant to replace and is pressured into gratitude for her happy adoptive life, despite her growing sense of a stolen past.

A tumultuous wartime saga, *The Disappeared* follows mothers and daughters as they fight for personal and political truth.

ISABELLA ZHOU (July / August 2024)

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