



Oblique perspective on chilling horror

HERE'S an uneasy rhythm within Catherine O'Flynn's debut novel, *What Was Lost*. The book is divided into uneven sections, as the narrative moves from 1984 to 2003, briefly back to 1984, then forward for an equally brief finale in 2004. This means the story has a quiet building period followed by a strong, thumping main section, with two quick codas, one busy and plaintive like violins, the other a groan of sadness like a tuba's outburst. It's an unusual structure for a novel, and slightly disconcerting, but it's certainly not dull.

Kate, the little girl we meet in the opening section, is living in the author's home town, Birmingham, England, in 1984. Kate's is a tough life that got even tougher when her father died and she had to go and live with her grandmother. Her father bequeathed her a passion for sleuthing, giving her a children's book called *How to be a Detective*, which Kate takes very seriously.

This part of the book is marked by the sweet naivety of a child's view. Kate is a clever girl, and her grandmother wants to send her off to a school where she will get a decent education. But that kind of change frightens her.

As she visits the local shopping centre, a gigantic sprawling city of shops inappropriately called Green Oaks, Kate takes notes about possible suspects for crimes she's sure will be committed. The man on the bench near the bank: certainly casing the joint, she thinks. The fellow in the steel-rimmed dark glasses who looks like the bad guys in a television show: possibly a hired assassin staking out his prey.

As we follow Kate through the shopping

Rosemary Sorensen

What Was Lost

By Catherine O'Flynn

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centre and to her school, where she has to sit next to the most unruly student in class, then back to her home and on to the corner store, we are picking up clues for a crime that will become the mystery that dominates the second half of the novel.

But this becomes apparent only retrospectively, near the end of the book, after we have picked up the story two decades on from Kate's disappearance, at a point that seems, for a while, to be unconnected to her childhood.

O'Flynn says in her autobiographical note that she grew up "in and around my parents' sweet shop", and she mines those memories as well as her experience of working in record stores. In the record store in Green Oaks, a young woman named Lisa works alongside a collection of unhappy and slightly crazy misfits. Also working in the shopping centre, as a security guard, is Kurt, who one night sees a child on the video screens. Kurt and Lisa have connections to the past at the point when Kate disappeared.

Twenty years later, as they try to sort out their lives, Kate's history is gradually pieced together. It's not only Kate who was lost all those years ago but a kind of community and a way of life that Green Oaks has come to replace.

A more conventional crime novel would restructure the tale, forewarning us about the



Illustration: Michael Perkins

mystery and hinting which of the main players we should be watching most carefully. But O'Flynn's way, which is almost a reversal of the way a crime novel manipulates expectations, allows the mystery to fall back behind the novel's character portraits, like a shadow.

This technique, while it can make the novel seem occasionally inconsistent, as though this is two or three writing projects forced into one book, also makes *What Was Lost* sound honest and authentic.

It's also both funny and sad, always a good combination. It's particularly finely managed in O'Flynn's story, which contains some situations and events that are deeply harrowing stuff. The worst of it is buried at the centre of the novel in such a way that we find we have been walking

around it, without knowing, while the life of the poor harried workers at this grotesque shopping centre goes on. To come at such horror obliquely and gently is an interesting technique, and O'Flynn works her material well.

This explains in part why O'Flynn, 37, won the British Costa Award for a first novel, a coup for independent publisher Tindal Press. And why her book was long-listed for the 2007 Man Booker Prize. I do wonder, though, if she has the balance quite right between using the tawdry and tragic parts of human existence to create an entertainment, which, essentially, is what this novel is.

Catherine O'Flynn will be a guest at the Perth Writers Festival.