

Missing: A Folly Beach Mystery

Bill Noel

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Solid characters, delightful prose, and well-paced action set Missing apart from other amateur-detective novels.

Love, loss, scruples, and power are the scaffolding upon which Bill Noel builds a book that is one heck of a read. Dealing with change is the theme running through *Missing: A Folly Beach Mystery* as a barely visible thread that holds everything together.

The book follows retiree and widower Chris Landrum, co-inheritor of a substantial sum of money with his friend and occasional business partner, Charles Fowler. They've done some private detective work more by chance than design, garnering a reputation for keen analysis and common sense.

In this outing, Chris is sought out by a teen who thinks he saw a woman being abducted. Chris and Charles agree to look into the matter, and they open up a can of worms: the new mayor is a soulless shark who plots to turn what he refers to as "my island" into a paradise for the wealthy. Complicating this power play are the discoveries of three dead women on or near Folly Beach.

Anyone who has lived on an island will recognize this novel's atmosphere. Set in South Carolina near Charleston, there's a sense of being elsewhere after leaving the mainland. The separation of island and mainland mirrors the book's divide between generations, political ideals, and social status. Noel deftly soaks *Missing* with just enough descriptive terms to make the sensation of clean ocean air and unspoiled beaches lift from the page like a mist.

More than the setting, however, it's the characters who are most memorable in this story, thanks to their solidity and variety. Dude Sloan, the surf shop owner, ghosts in and out of the story with details and rumors spoken in his own dialect of English. Charles's elderly and effervescent Aunt Melinda is dying slowly, but she insists on making her last days memorable. The relationship between Chris and Detective Karen Lawson is easygoing, based in mature experience and no expectations. All the characters are three-dimensional, familiar personalities, as Noel has mastered the art of showing more than telling.

The technical errors in this novel are minimal (extra words, spelling errors such as "shutter" for "shudder," among others). Of particular concern is the description of the murder weapon, where the murderer is described as wielding a knife, when further up the page long shears are used as a weapon.

The cover art and back cover summation work well to snag a reader's attention. Both are sparse but elegant. The text itself is smooth and very easy to read.

With its delightful prose style and well-paced action, *Missing* sets itself apart from other amateur-detective novels. Just enough loose threads are left at the end to make a follow-up novel quite feasible.

J. G. STINSON (January 2, 2014)

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