

Missing Values: An Analytic Thriller

Michael Grigsby

Solstice Publishing

(331pp)

979-887385371-7

A horrific kidnapping forces reckonings on the subjects of human violence and ethics in the perspective-driven thriller Missing Values.

In Michael Grigsby's moralistic thriller *Missing Values*, people with hazy ethical codes explore what it means to be evil—or to do good.

Patrick—whose brain is mathematical and brilliant, and who has endured lifelong trauma and grief—is the father of a teenager, PJ. But PJ has been kidnapped by Kane and Mabel, siblings who are also human traffickers. They transport PJ and their other kidnapping victims across the country, hoping that this will be their last mission for Red Ring, the largest trafficking ring in the nation.

Patrick becomes determined to rescue his son from harm. He teams up with LaWanda, a recent graduate of the FBI who is motivated, in part, by her own family experiences with human trafficking. Forced into unexpected, sometimes absurd situations for what they feel is the greater good, Patrick and LaWanda call their own values into question, asking what it means to be good or evil. In the end, such philosophies overwhelm their individual stories, though.

Oscillating between the perspectives of Patrick, LaWanda, Kane, and Mabel, the book establishes its varying stakes in quick succession. It also builds tension via new discoveries of what human beings are capable of. Stories of trauma, cycles of abuse, instances of corruption, and thoughts about human nature versus nurture are explored alongside gruesome accounts of brutality. In the end, the book dwells longer on gore than it does on the complexities and long-lasting effects of trauma, human trafficking, and sexual abuse, muting these sensitive issues. And lectures about analytics and statistics are included, too, as well as moments of levity. These various approaches lead to a dissonant text.

Further, while Kane and Mabel are made to personify the cycle of abuse, their characterizations are often quite flat. Kane has been stripped of his humanity and seems beyond redemption; Mabel, whose body was exploited since she was a child, is portrayed as damaged first. They have no named desires beyond escaping the Red Ring, and their expressions of hatred and apathy toward others are repetitive to the point that they lose their impact. Still, their relationship is developed with the most nuance of any in the text, marked by continual loyalty. The book's secondary characters are less involving; each new villain is introduced via their own form of depravity, with people functioning as sensationalized horror figures whose vile actions seem more competitive than compelling.

A son is kidnapped, forcing a father to push past his moral boundaries, in the philosophical thriller *Missing Values*.

NATALIE WOLLENZIEN (March 5, 2024)

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