

Part of the Silence

Debbie Howells

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Memory is slippery. Acted on by the present and our wishes for the future, the past changes shape. Like a boomerang, it can turn and slice us to ribbons. Nobody knows that better than Charlotte Harrison, who is drawn into a shocking crime, in *Part of the Silence*. Charlotte identifies a woman who's been found nearly battered to death—but whose version of the past is true? The woman, calling herself Edie Sherman, claims to have lost her three-year-old daughter. As the Cornwall police detectives investigate the assault and the alleged kidnapping, one thing becomes clear: there is no evidence that Edie's daughter ever existed. The mystery hinges on the memories of the many people involved—all of whom have a good reason not to tell the whole story.

Debbie Howells's latest novel is a disorienting, suspenseful thriller set in modern Cornwall. Nothing is what it seems. Happy relationships are shot through with conflict; best friends betray one another at the drop of a hat. Howells's masterful pacing reveals, slowly, the many flaws and cracks in her characters' lives and the surprising events that link them together. The novel's small, intimate scale amplifies its tension, as does Howells's use of her ensemble. Each character's perspective—especially their impressions of one another—adds to the suspense.

Howells, the author of two other novels, is an agile writer with a good sense for realism. Although *Part of the Silence* leans heavily on dialogue and character, Howells includes some gorgeous looks at Cornwall itself. In such a breathless thriller, this is a welcome respite: "It's too beautiful out here, the last of the sunlight fading into the horizon as the first of the stars become visible overhead," Charlotte reflects. "It takes a bottle of wine and all of this—the vastness of the dark sky, the sound of waves crashing against the layers of purple-hued slate below, the sense of solitude—for my mind to become still at last."

Enjoy the moment of serenity. *Part of the Silence* is unsettling from start to finish.

CLAIRE RUDY FOSTER (July/August 2017)

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