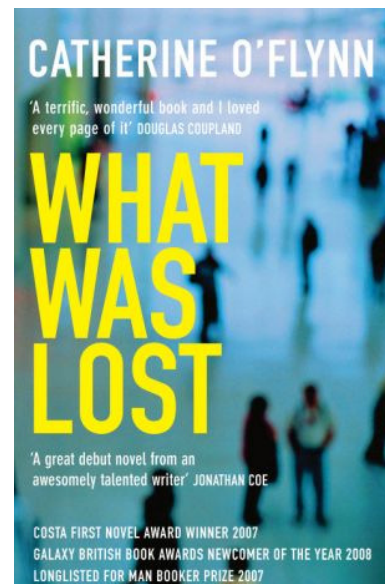


What Was Lost: Catherine O'Flynn

About the Author

Catherine O'Flynn was born in Birmingham in 1970, where she grew up in and around her parents' sweet shop as the youngest in a large family. She has been a teacher, web editor, mystery customer and postwoman. Her first novel draws on her experience of working in record stores – and of growing up as a child intrigued by clues, suspects and methods of detection. It was listed for every major UK literary prize, including the Booker, the Orange and the Guardian First Book, and it won the Costa First Novel of the Year, the British Books Awards Newcomer of the Year and the Guildford Festival First Novel Prize.



The Story

The 1980s. Kate Meaney - with her 'Top Secret' notebook and Mickey her toy monkey - is busy being a junior detective. She observes goings-on and follows 'suspects' at the newly opened Green Oaks shopping centre and in her street, where she is friends with the newsagent's son, Adrian. But when this curious, independent-spirited young girl disappears, Adrian falls under suspicion and is hounded out of his home by the press.

Then, in 2004, Adrian's sister Lisa - stuck in a going-nowhere relationship - is working as a deputy manager at Your Music, a cut-price record store. Every day she tears her hair out at the horribly bizarre behaviour of her customers and colleagues. But together with security guard Kurt, she becomes entranced by the little girl they keep glimpsing on the centre's CCTV. As their after-hours friendship intensifies, they investigate how these sightings might be connected to the unsettling history of Green Oaks itself.

Reading Group Questions

- Green Oaks shopping centre is portrayed throughout the novel both as a refuge from real life, and potentially soul-destroying. Kate and Kurt seek escape there, while other characters, such as Lisa and Ed, risk being consumed by it. How are these two aspects of Green Oaks explored throughout the novel?
- One of the anonymous narrators comments on how thankful he is that Green Oaks provides a new focus for his and his partner's lives, remarking ironically 'Thank God for Sunday opening.' [Ch. 25] How far does O'Flynn present Green Oaks, and places like it, as having replaced older ideas of community such as church-going?
- What signs are there throughout the novel of what Green Oaks was before it became a shopping centre? How do they continue to affect the lives of the characters who work there?

- What do the brief interludes from the point of view of unnamed characters add to the novel? Why do you think these characters are kept simply 'anonymous'?
- O'Flynn has stated in a brief essay about her novel that 'While the characters may have little or no belief in themselves, it is the faith of their friends that provides their salvation.' How far is this reflected in the relationships of characters such as Kate and Adrian, or Lisa and Kurt?
- Some reviews of the novel have criticised the abrupt switch between the two time periods (1984 and 2003/4). What does this shift away from Kate do to you as a reader? Do you see why the author chose to do this? Did it work for you?
- What is lost in *What Was Lost*?

Further Reading

Fiction

The Big Sleep by Raymond Chandler

The Afterglow by Anthony Cartwright

High Fidelity by Nick Hornby

Watch Me Disappear: Jill Dawson

Non-Fiction:

No Logo by Naomi Klein

All Consuming by Neil Lawson

Resources

Guardian audio interview with Catherine O'Flynn:

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/audio/2007/nov/09/books1224>

Vulpes Libris interview: <http://vulpeslibris.wordpress.com/2008/03/12/interview-with-catherine-oflynn>

Independent article on Catherine O'Flynn: <http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/news/novel-shortlisted-for-top-award-was-rejected-by-15-publishers-758887.html>

Telegraph review of *What Was Lost*:

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/books/fictionreviews/3667303/Man-Booker-2007-Prize-What-was-Lost.html>

Catherine O'Flynn – CV

Name: Catherine O'Flynn *Age:* 37

Location: Birmingham. Lived in Barcelona and Sitges for two years where *What Was Lost* was written.

Education: Studied Economics and Social Studies at Manchester University – specialising in Anthropology.

Inspiration for the book:

I had a job working long hours at a large shopping centre – and there were many things about it that made me want to write: the trance-like state of the shoppers consuming everything in their wake; the eeriness of the empty centre at night; the constant awareness of surveillance; the differing experiences of staff and shoppers; the industrial past buried beneath it. I kept writing about it - almost obsessively, I really wanted to pin down the essence of the place – but at that stage there was no plan for this to be a novel. Then I heard a story doing the rounds amongst the centre security guards of a child being seen on one of the CCTV monitors in the middle of the night and that image stayed with me and was the starting point for the novel.

Childhood

There are certainly similarities between Kate and myself at that age. There was a ten-year age gap between my closest sibling and me and so I spent quite a lot of time on my own. I had various Usborne books filled with advice on clues and suspects and methods of detection. It never occurred to me to take these with a pinch of salt – they were gospel to me. There was (and still is) a branch of Lloyds Bank near where I grew up in Nechells. It was a gleaming 1960s structure, which seemed unspeakably glamorous and a likely hub of international crime. I used to sit outside for hours and take down car registration numbers diligently. I can't fully express my disappointment that nothing remotely clandestine ever occurred.

Favourite authors:

Some of the authors I've enjoyed most are: David Foster Wallace, Patricia Highsmith, Jim Thompson, Dashiell Hammett, Anne Tyler, Cormac McCarthy, Mervyn Peake, James Ellroy, Gordon Burn, Toni Morrison, Anthony Cartwright, Alice Munro, Kazuo Ishiguro, Jonathan Coe.

Career:

I've had lots of jobs. I've noticed a worrying pattern in my working life where previously thriving businesses tend to fold not long after I've worked there – specifically, after I've been promoted to a position of responsibility. I try not to think too much about this. I do jobs that seem to fit in with my life at a particular point in time. I've been an editor, a freelance journalist, a shop worker, a teacher, a web manager, a civil servant, a mystery customer, a postwoman.