

Songs for the Missing: A Novel

By Stewart O’Nan
(Viking)

Reviewed by Kristianne Huntsberger

The missing person posters with hypothetical faces of lost children ten years after their disappearance always get to me. What is it like to be the parent who holds on to the hope that even after a decade, their missing one might be found? What is it like to live in a suspended world with no emotional closure? Even though the news you expect to receive is the very thing you dread, it is impossible not to crave it.

In Stewart O’Nan’s newest novel, eighteen-year-old Kim goes suddenly missing and the lives of her family and friends are turned upside down. Her parents drift and collide with one another while trying to hold onto the uneasy hope they can’t bear to give up. Her younger sister recedes into the dramatic shadow that Kim’s disappearance casts and her friends discover their Midwestern suburbia of summer jobs and late-night river bank parties suddenly populated with police detectives and media crews. Neighbors volunteer to sweep the river bank, though nobody wants to admit that they are looking for a body. Nobody knows how to admit that Kim is gone.

It is his focus on the complicated feelings of loss and suspended hope that allows O’Nan to create a compelling cast and turn an otherwise harrowing true-crime novel into something more human. He is skilled at catching characters at their most vulnerable, as they address their deepest moments of doubt while trying to maneuver the unsettling presence of the unknown. I was hesitant to pick up the book because the drama of a missing child seemed too easy, too sensational. I was pleased to discover that O’Nan paid more attention to the subtleties. Kim is not a simple foil, she is a catalyst for the people that remain and are forced to discover the impact of all their missing things.