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Among the Missing (review)

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bodians Celebrate The Buddhist New Year Once Again,” where the following effectively detailed scene unfolds in Phnom Penh:

Whole families glide on single bikes; children
 clasped together like still-warm
 slices of bread. Young women –
 side-saddle, coal-black hair loose
 to the waist or pinned by chrysanthemums –
 Barely touch the thighs and shoulders of young men.

I wish I could remember the High Holy Days,
 when daughters of Jerusalem danced barefoot in groves
 of figs, arbors of grapes, lilies in their hair,
 in linen robes that spun up at their ankles,
 singing out to the young men of Nazareth,
 of Bethlehem. They danced after the sheep
 was slaughtered, burnt whole and offered – a sacrifice

The Bible names The Holocaust, “all consumed.”

Here and elsewhere in *A Cracked River* Hirschhorn’s abidingly humane vision graces a mature and philosophical poetry that gazes squarely into the inescapable trauma of modern humanity and refuses to blink.

Dan Chaon, **Among the Missing**, Ballantine

Reviewed by Anna Leahy

In Dan Chaon’s “I Demand to Know Where You’re Taking Me,” the second story in his new collection, we are introduced to a woman, Cheryl, whose brother-in-law has been convicted of committing three rapes. It’s possible the brother-in-law, Wendell, is innocent of the crimes, according to his brother, Tobe, and it’s also possible Wendell has indeed committed six rapes. The seemingly sensational, pivotal character of Wendell, however, is absent, technically speaking, from the story. Certainly, we know some of the details of the crimes: “The assaulted women had been attacked in their homes, blindfolded, a knife pressed against their skin. The first thing the attacker did was to force the women to kneel down and lick his bare feet.” But the story is not about Wendell and whether he actually committed the rapes, though that question lingers in various ways for the reader and for Cheryl. Instead of writing directly about Wendell, Chaon writes about Cheryl and the parrot who mimics the absent Wendell’s voice. The story is one of deflection, and that is the literary art at which Chaon excels in *Among the Missing*, a National Book Award finalist.

Chaon, a Nebraska native, now lives in Cleveland Heights and teaches at Oberlin College. His first collection of stories, *Fitting Ends*, appeared in

1996, and he's now at work on a novel, *I Wake Up*. Among the stories included in *Among the Missing* are "The Illustrated Encyclopedia of the Animal Kingdom," which won a Pushcart Prize in 2000, and "Big Me," which won an O. Henry Award in 2001. Chaon is racking up impressive and well-deserved accolades for his writing, which is marked by its absences and beautifully commonplace characters.

Chaon, interestingly, reveals the process behind his deflections in an interview for Oberlin's web site. When asked about the inspiration for the story "Safety Man," which opens the collection, he says, "I wrote the story shortly after the death of my parents, when I was thinking about the way we process grief in this country, and how you can be both really crazy and basically functional at the same time. Also, I saw an ad for a 'safety man' in a catalog and I just found it enormously amusing and interesting." The "also" of Chaon's writing is its strength and its center, time and time again, and the choice of the title "Safety Man" indicates clearly Chaon's appreciation of this also, this deflection.

Perhaps *Among the Missing* does have some flaws. A review in the *New York Times Book Review* claims, for instance, "Chaon occasionally produces work that feels more like sketches than fully realized short stories." The occasional sketchiness, however, becomes integral to the art of deflection and to involving the reader in the pleasure of literary ambiguity, of holding two or more possible readings in one's mind at once. What might be a flaw in other writing is transformed into a vital pleasure in reading this collection. The ambiguity or sketchiness can demand much of the reader, but Chaon's writing rewards the reader more than adequately.

Perhaps, Chaon relies too heavily on characters who drink too much. Few, if any, of these characters are defined as alcoholics, yet the implication is that their drinking is important to their struggles or motivations. In "I Demand to Know Where You're Taking Me," Cheryl "hoped that he [her husband, Tobe] wasn't drinking too much, but she suspected he was." In the title story, father and son discuss, over beers at a local bar, the mystery of a car accident, an event from which this story gains its deflection momentum and in relation to which their own family dysfunction is defined. Later, in "Falling Backwards," we find Colleen at various stages in life caught between a son who struggles with alcoholism and a father who, when she is twenty-one, "finds his bottle of Jack Daniels under the kitchen sink" after a tornado hits and who, when she is seven, invites her to his workplace as he drains his Saturday evening beer. The final story, too, involves drinking that seems more than casual, perhaps a coping mechanism for family members trying to communicate years after the suicide from which this story has been deflected. The drinking plays too similar a role for these characters. While deftly handled in any individual story in the collection, the repetition of this ambiguous drinking of various degrees becomes an unusually overt motif for Chaon and also a slight crutch in character development when the book is judged as a whole.

The motif of the missing works far better and more broadly and holds the collection together extraordinarily well. The absent characters – the dead father of the speaker in “Prodigal,” Wayne and Jill in “Passengers, Remain Calm,” Ricky in “Here’s a Little Something to Remember Me By,” and numerous others – provide the context by which we understand and care about the characters who are actually present in the stories. As human beings, we all live among the missing as well as among those who are here at any given moment. Chaon’s writing is engaging enough, subtle enough, and powerful enough that this idea is no trick or lesson. His use of deflection in each story allows him to render this basic human truth in the collection as a whole.

The greatest strength of the collection, though, is that every story stands on its own. It’s no wonder that two stories have won national awards, for it’s difficult to pick the best one in *Among the Missing*. “Big Me,” the O. Henry Award winner, is certainly ambitious; this story is extremely funny and also provocative, with a twelve year old who imagines himself a detective in a large metropolis, a detective who investigates a man he believes to be his older self. “Prodigal” may be the most distinctive piece stylistically because it depends on a contemplative, reminiscent, first-person address by a father to his son. Or, perhaps, “Prosthesis” is the most stylistically distinctive piece because it achieves so much depth in just seven pages and because it makes some of the most overt claims about any of the collection’s characters in its final paragraph. The events from which each story deflects are often shocking, by their very nature, but each story focuses not so much on those loud events as on the related incidents and moments of individual grace, mystery, and imagination.

Each story asks a different version of the question: who are you now and how have you become that person? Dan Chaon’s writing makes the question worth contemplating through each character and each story. Without relinquishing to an easy answer, *Among the Missing* satisfies our desire to ponder and to appreciate the variety of choices and also the lack of choices we each face and accumulate daily as we continue to become ourselves.

Judith Minty, **Walking with the Bear: Selected and New Poems**,
Michigan State University

Reviewed by Elinor Benedict

With toughness, honesty, and a spare kind of beauty, Judith Minty pours an intimate understanding of the earth, as well as of what lies above and beneath it, into this artfully assembled volume linked with images of “the bear.” The imagery is both visual and linguistic. Under a cover almost blazing with a red and black woodcut of a bear on the prowl by Anne Lar-