

THE GIRL IN THE RED COAT by Kate Hamer

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Having been given this novel by a friend, I have to say it is not a book I actively chose for myself. Reading the title, and knowing there are so many books around with “The Girl” in their titles, I could not help wondering whether it was going to be a poor imitation of the rest. However, when I began to read it, I was pleasantly surprised to discover the story had a unique quality of its own.

The novel deals with an emotive subject, that of child abduction – the most profound of human emotions for any parent. However, while creating a realistic, page-turning psychological thriller, it is a measure of Kate Hamer’s writing that she also manages to preserve sensitivity for the emotions felt by both the parent and the child.

Set in Norfolk, the main character in the book is an eight-year-old girl, named Carmel Wakeford. Carmel has always been different from other children of her age. Often in a world of her own, she has a propensity to occasionally wander off. Her parents, Beth and Paul, are divorced and Paul now lives with his girlfriend, Lucy, leaving Beth to bring up Carmel by herself.

After previously losing Carmel temporarily in a maze, Beth becomes obsessive about keeping a constant watch on her, much to her daughter’s annoyance. Therefore, when Carmel lets go of her mother’s hand at a storytelling festival, becoming separated from her in the crowd, Beth gives in to panic – especially when she discovers her worst nightmare has come true. This time Carmel has really gone.

Alternating between the thoughts of both Beth and Carmel, we follow Carmel’s journey as she is taken to America and dragged from one state to another by the man who has abducted her. A religious fanatic, he believes that Carmel is gifted with the power of healing and that God wanted him to save her from a heathen mother. He also sees her as a means of making his fortune.

Having stalked her for weeks, the man tells Carmel that her mother has been involved in a bad accident, and that he is her estranged grandfather, who has come to take care of her while the hospital tries to save her mother’s life. As Beth had fallen out with her parents before her daughter’s birth – over, what they considered, her inappropriate marriage – Carmel has never met them, and so believes his story. Warding off Carmel’s constant requests to see her mother by telling her the doctors need space to do everything they can to save Beth, he eventually breaks the sad news that her mother has died from her injuries. He also convinces Carmel that her father is unable to look after her, and wants him to take on the responsibility on his behalf.

Meanwhile, Carmel’s disappearance has a deep effect on both Beth and Paul’s already strained relationship. While her ex husband reacts with anger and disassociation, Beth becomes more resolute. Although the police are actively searching for Carmel, Beth still feels the need to spend every day scouring the streets, looking for her daughter’s distinctive red coat. As she does so, she gradually discovers, from talking to other people, that Carmel’s strangeness may actually have been due to something more profound. However, as time passes, Beth begins to realise her efforts are futile, and

that, while still holding on to the firm belief she will one day see Carmel again, she also needs to find a way to get herself through life without her.

As the story progresses, the reader is carried along and absorbed by the harrowing mix of emotions – from Beth’s soul-destroying grief, as she struggles to cope with the loss of her child, to Carmel’s confused feelings, as she tries to make sense of not only her mother’s death, but also her new life in a foreign land, ruthlessly manipulated by a self-serving and delusional imposter who is utterly convinced of his own rightness. However, through Carmel’s turmoil and Beth’s unbearable suffering, also comes the discovery of inner strength and understanding for both of them.

The plot of the novel is well developed, and the characters are believable. As the story unfolds, it is easy to understand Carmel’s willingness to be guided by her ‘Gramps’. Alone and without her parents, he is now the closest thing she has to a family, and when he introduces her to his partner, Dorothy, and her two daughters, Silver and Melody, she is desperate to be accepted and loved. Despite sometimes being afraid of ‘Gramps’ mood swings and upset by Dorothy’s wavering affections, she is keen to please both of them... in case she loses them too. However, as time passes, although she gradually begins to question their behaviour and the life they wish her to pursue, she is also aware of being totally reliant on them to survive.

This novel is a brilliant psychological thriller that illustrates how vulnerable young children are to the manipulation of adults, and the potential damage it can do to their lives. I found it totally engaging and difficult to put down.

The only criticism I have is the ending. Without wishing to give anything away, it left me feeling a little cheated, as it appeared to end quite abruptly, leaving me with some unanswered questions. However, that would not prevent me from recommending the novel to others.

Born in the West Country, Kate Hamer grew up in rural Wales, where she still lives. For over ten years she worked on documentaries for radio and television, and in 2011 won the Rhys Davies short story prize for 'One Summer'. This is her first novel, which has been shortlisted for the Debut Dagger award, the Costa First Novel prize and has been translated into over sixteen different languages.