

A RIGHT OF PASSAGE TOWARD ACCEPTANCE AND UNDERSTANDING

a review by
Betina Entzminger

Megan Miranda. *The Last to Vanish*. Simon and Schuster, 2022.

BETINA ENTZMINGER earned her PhD at UNC Chapel Hill and is a Professor of English at Bloomsburg University in Pennsylvania. She is the author of *The Belle Gone Bad: White Southern Women Writers and the Dark Seductress* (Louisiana State University Press, 2002) and *Contemporary Reconfigurations of American Literary Classics* (Routledge Press, 2017). Her latest book is a memoir, *The Beak in the Heart: True Tales of Misfit Southern Women* (Rivercliff Books, 2021).

MEGAN MIRANDA has authored six Young Adult novels and seven psychological thrillers, including *The Last House Guest* (Simon and Schuster, 2019) and *The Perfect Stranger* (Simon and Schuster, 2017), which were *New York Times* bestsellers. She grew up in New Jersey, attended MIT, and then pursued a career in the biotech industry in Boston before moving to North Carolina, where she pursued her writing career in earnest.

PHOTOGRAPH BY PAUL GEMPERLINE



A small town with a big secret buried in its past. A young female narrator digging for the truth. These are staples in Megan Miranda's mystery thrillers, ones we find again in her latest novel, *The Last to Vanish*. Like Miranda's 2016 novel, *All the Missing Girls*, this latest book is set in a fictional town in North Carolina, Cutter's Pass in this case. One of the best aspects of the novel is this strong, believable, and fully developed female narrator, Abby Lovett, who is not seeking, nor does she find, a romantic partner. The candid, journal-like voice in which she speaks directly to the reader makes her likeable and engaging. The novel also features other strong women characters, including Celeste, hotel owner and Abby's mentor, and Rochelle, the sheriff's right hand. In addition, the natural-sounding dialogue and accessible, lively writing make the book an enjoyable read.

Cutter's Pass sits near the Appalachian Trail, which makes the scenic Passage Inn, where Abby has lived and worked for the past ten years, a stopover

for hiking enthusiasts. The town is not best known for its views, though. Rather, it is notorious for the mysterious disappearances of six people at intervals over the last twenty-five years. The first to vanish were a group of young men, dubbed the fraternity four, who set off from Cutter's Pass on a hiking adventure in 1997 and were never seen or heard from again. In 2012, college student and experienced hiker Alice Kelly also disappeared without a trace after a last sitting at the local tavern. Two others, Farrah Jordan in 2019 and Landon West in 2022, go missing, the last one seemingly from the inn itself. The novel begins when Landon's brother, Trey, checks in to the Passage Inn looking for clues, drawing Abby and the reader into his quest.

Of course, the disappearances had been investigated by the police, but to no avail. Trey West and, increasingly, Abby can't help feeling that the locals are hiding something. This tension between insider and outsider serves as a key theme and driving force throughout

the novel. The hotel's name itself, The Passage Inn, is at once a kitschy reference to the nearby Appalachian Trail sought by tourists and a subtler suggestion of Abby's passage beyond the community's protective social boundaries. Even though she has lived there for a decade, Abby still feels that she has not been accepted into the community's trust: "I'd realized that Cutter's Pass would only exist for you in the parts you were here for, and the rest would remain an impenetrable history. I'd learned that I'd find more camaraderie and friendship in those that were like me – not from here" (125). Abby discovers, though, that even the locals leave much unspoken among themselves.

Abby's desire for acceptance competes against her desire for truth. Secrets are kept for a reason, and the possibility of exposing what others want hidden provides the novel's sense of danger. Yet at times, rather than organically developing this suspense, the novel works too hard to tell us there is something sinister about the town, and the suspense seems unearned: "Something was wrong. Of course something was wrong. Something was very wrong here. I understood that. We must've all understood that, on some level, whether we wanted to face it" (62).

Another important theme the novel develops, which makes it feel more like a Southern novel despite its author's New Jersey origins (she now lives in North Carolina), is the con-

nectedness of past and present. Cutter's Pass, Abby tells us, is a "place where the present slipped effortlessly into the past" (105) and where "[t]he past had a thousand ways in" (243) to the present. A recurring plot device throughout the book is the inn's capricious internet and phone connections, which suggests its isolation from the modern world. The novel's figurative ghosts, however, overcome these obstacles and adapt to social media, computer, and cell phone technology. Miranda expertly conveys the past's collective haunting of both long-time locals and would-be insider, Abby.

The novel also inevitably touches on the beauty and danger of nature.

The mountain location, its streams and views, draws hikers to Cutter's Pass, but it can also trap them. Near the novel's close, Abby describes the trail leading from the Inn in this way: "We'd just passed the curve, where you turn around, and the trees and rhododendron have already closed around you in a tunnel of shadows, and you can't see your way

back out" (318). The author could have made even more use of the beautiful natural setting; only a few scenes take place on the mountain itself. Instead, it focuses mainly on the human structures, both physical and social, which can be an even greater danger.

The resolution of *The Last to Vanish* is complex and largely satisfying. The best mystery endings are surprises that ultimately feel somehow inevitable. The reader thinks, *Of course! It all makes sense now. Why didn't I see it?* For the most part, this mystery's solution felt right in just that way. Yet, a few more breadcrumbs along the way would have made the ending nearly perfect. ■



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