

JENN ASHWORTH “ GHOSTED : A LOVE STORY ” 2021

IN 2019’s *Notes Made While Falling*, a piercing amalgamation of memoir and criticism, the writer Jenn Ashworth described how, while recovering from a traumatic caesarean section, she became addicted to serial killer documentaries.

This is a habit that Laurie, the troubled narrator of Ashworth’s discomfiting new novel *Ghosted: A Love Story*, happens to share.

Laurie and her husband Mark meet at a wedding, where they are mistaken for a couple by another guest – a psychic who, according to Mark, “sees things. She sees dead things. Talks to dead people.”

The pair initially bond over the case of a disappeared child later found to have been murdered by one of her parents. Fifteen years later, when Laurie returns home to their high-rise flat from her shift as a cleaner at the town’s university, Mark has vanished, leaving behind his mobile phone and wallet. Curiously, it is several weeks before Laurie contacts the police, and by the time they come to interview her, she is on autopilot. “Any history of mental ill health?’ I shook my head. Did she mean Mark, or me? I didn’t ask.” She is sleepwalking through her job, drinking heavily at night, binge-watching TV – much the same, it transpires, as when Mark was still there.

From her debut novel, 2009’s *A Kind of Intimacy*, Ashworth’s work has explored physical discomfort, violence and sexual misadventure. She writes explicitly of physicality and its detached and often petrifying opposite – disembodiment. There are moments in *Ghosted* that are at once terrifying and blackly humorous; at its core is a saturating sadness. For Laurie, her home on the 16th floor is simultaneously a prison and a refuge; its spare room, with iron bars at

the window and faded nursery wallpaper, contains a quivering, cold atmosphere that keeps her out.

The novel sizzles with disappointment and urban alienation. Laurie longs for the claustrophobic intensity of her marriage to Mark, even as her anger at his departure derails her. “We had ended up bending each other’s bodies and personalities into a shape that would fit nobody else’s. The slow and uncomprehending recklessness of it astounds me now.” Like the similarly abandoned wife of Marie Darrieussecq’s *My Phantom Husband*, Laurie finds that Mark’s disappearance triggers memories of her difficult childhood. She is prone to blackouts and a mysterious amnesia, in which the real and abstract merge. Her once-domineering father is now reduced to frailty by dementia. His carer, the intimidating, unreadable Olena, sinister and benign by turns, is a marvellous, multilayered creation, a fixed rock in the meandering stream of Laurie’s uncertainty.

“One need not be a Chamber – to be Haunted” wrote Emily Dickinson. *Ghosted*, for which Ashworth, commendably, opts for an ending as ambiguous as its beginning, is an impressive reminder of the uneasy silence reverberating on the other side of grief.

One ordinary morning, Laurie’s husband Mark vanishes, leaving behind his phone and wallet. For weeks, she tells no one, carrying on her job as a cleaner at the local university, visiting her tricky, dementia-suffering father and holing up in her tower-block flat with a bottle to hand. When she finally reports Mark as missing, the police are suspicious.

Why did she take so long? Wasn’t she worried?

It turns out there are many more mysteries in Laurie’s account of events, though not just because she glosses over the facts. At the time, she couldn’t explain much of her behaviour herself. But as she looks back on the ensuing wreckage - the friendships broken, the wild accusations she made, the one-night stand - she can see more clearly what lay behind it. And if it’s not too late, she can see how she might repair the damage and, most of all, forgive herself.

A profound and moving account exploring love, relationships and memory. This was an absolute treat to read. The novel follows a young woman whose husband suddenly disappears one day, her delayed reaction and recollections about their marriage, as well as her struggle to care for her ageing father. Beautifully written. And how often do you find a novel set on a university campus, told from the perspective of a cleaner, instead of a brooding academic or misunderstood student.