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Book Review: ‘Elizabeth is Missing’ by Emma Healey

Posted by [Rachel Casey](#) on [May 5, 2016](#) [May 5, 2016](#)

Elizabeth is Missing, the debut novel from Emma Healey, deals with the consequences of a deteriorating mind and the process of getting older.

Maud, an elderly woman with onset dementia, is trying to deal with the world around her as her memories fade and her surroundings become unrecognisable. There is only one thing she is sure of. Her best friend Elizabeth is missing. She can’t remember the last time she saw her, but the notes in her pocket with Elizabeth’s name tell her something is wrong.

No one will believe her though. She tries to tell her daughter, her carers, and even the police, but they won’t listen to her. And while trying to figure out what happened to Elizabeth, Maud starts to delve into her past and examine the mystery surrounding the disappearance of her sister, Sukey, seventy years ago.

Elizabeth is Missing is a book that tries to be a few different genres at once; mystery, thriller, psychological, historical, contemporary. Unfortunately, it doesn’t quite hit all of its targets. It’s not the gripping and unforgettable mystery that’s described in the book’s blurb, and it did take a few chapters to get fully into the story.

There is a mystery at the centre of the book. There’s two, in fact. Is Elizabeth really missing? And what happened to Sukey when she disappeared after the Second World War? You figure out early on that something isn’t right with the way Maud is seeing Elizabeth’s disappearance. She visits Elizabeth’s house and phones her son in the early hours of the morning, incessantly repeating that Elizabeth is missing to everyone around her. It gets to the point where it’s annoying rather than intriguing, and it’s a bit too predictable to be a mystery.

Sukey’s disappearance holds you for a little longer, but you still figure it out before the end. She disappeared with her husband, Frank, without any warning, but he returns a few weeks later, without her and with no knowledge of where she is. Maud begrudgingly befriends Frank in the hopes that he can shed some light on Sukey’s whereabouts. The book weaves between the past mystery and the present, showing how Maud’s weakening mind jumbles together the facts of both.

One thing *Elizabeth is Missing* does do well is deal with dementia and the ways it can affect people. There’s no sugar-coating in its portrayal, and it can be difficult to read at times. There are a few scenes where Maud can’t understand why her daughter, Helen, is so frustrated with her, and sometimes she doesn’t even recognize her at all. These scenes are heartbreaking to get through, although it’s more sympathy for Helen that makes these scenes so affecting. It’s so hard for her to see her mother deteriorate mentally in front of her. All she can do is go about her life as normally as she can because she knows there’s nothing else she can do to help Maud.

I didn’t find that I sympathized with Maud as much during the book, which was unusual as it’s her perspective the story is told from. Even in the flashbacks, she comes across more as a stropky teenager than a sympathetic character. I don’t know if this was intentional on the author’s part or just the way I read it, but if it wasn’t for Helen, there wouldn’t be much to empathise with in the story.

The ending is a bit of a let-down as it’s quite predictable, but if you focus on the characters rather than the mysteries, then it’s satisfying. This book is about people rather than plot. It’s character driven, and is more about delving into the mind of a dementia sufferer and seeing how it affects the way she sees the world and the people around her. It’s not a difficult book to put down and it won’t grip you enough to have you itching to turn the page, but it’s worth a read if you’re interested in these psychological aspects.

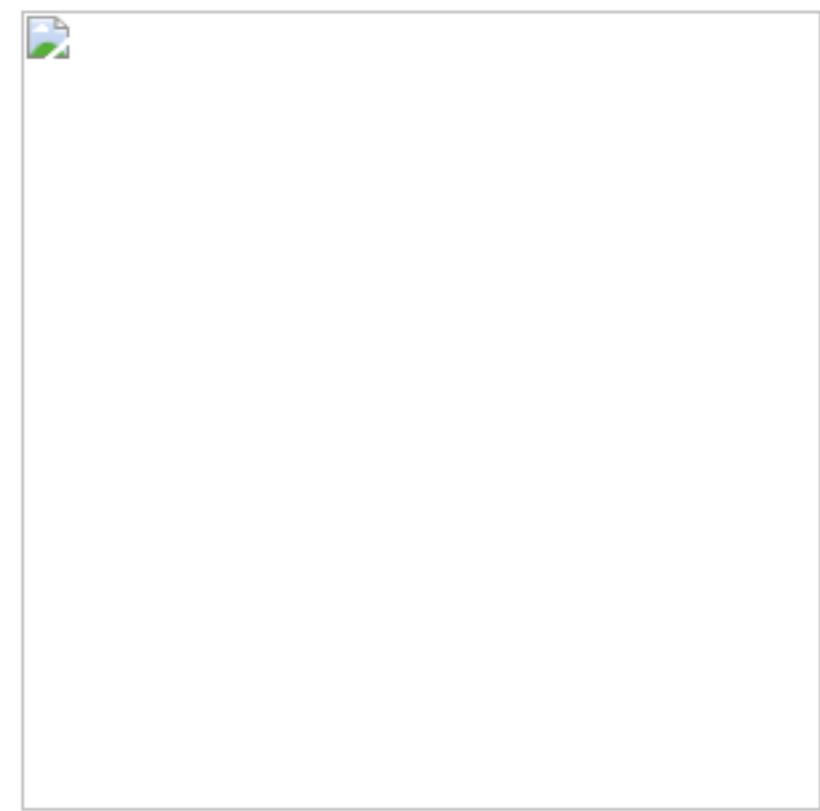
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