A slow-burn mystery for cool summer reading

'The Night She Disappeared' by Lisa Jewell

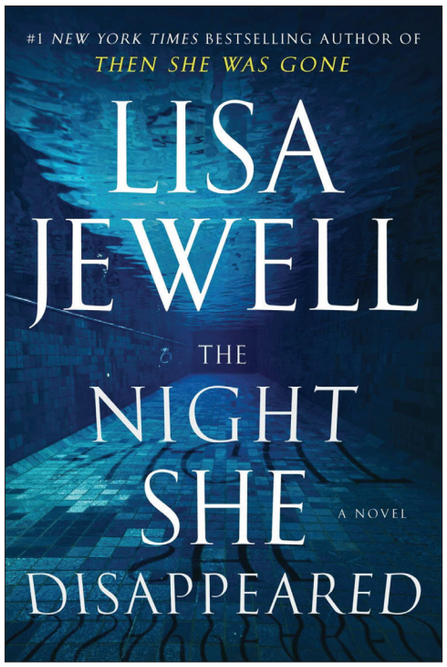
By Cheryl Hoefler
GO! Magazine

Okay, I don't really plan to spend ALL of my new-found free time with my nose in a book. But my first read out of the retirement gate sure is a compelling one.

I found this detective murder mystery by Lisa Jewell at a local Little Free Library. How could I resist a title like "The Night She Disappeared"?

The setting is a village in Surrey, England, where a couple, Tallulah and Zach, go missing after a summer evening out at a local pub — which has a delightfully British name, The Swan and Ducks. Their last known sighting was at a wild party at a country estate — ominously called "Dark Place" — on the outskirts of the nearby large woods.

About a year later, after the couple's case has gone nearly cold, a writer (Sophie) and her boyfriend (Shaun) move to a cottage at the edge of the same woods. He's the new head teacher at a nearby private boarding school, and oh,



did I mention she's a detective novelist from London? While taking a walk soon after moving in, Sophie discovers a crude "Dig Here" cardboard sign attached to a back fence. And we're off and running!

During the year the couple has been gone, there have been a flurry of questions and speculations on their disappearance by friends, family and locals: Were they victims of foul play at the estate? Or did they try to make their way home and get lost or hurt somewhere in the massive and mysterious woods? Zach had a ring and had been planning to propose; maybe Tallulah turned him down and there was a violent argument? Surely, they wouldn't just up and leave their young son for some carefree new life? Or would they?

How Jewell weaves all this together is quite masterful. The mystery unfolds in three time frames and from three perspectives: present day, when Sophie moves into the scene and starts digging around (literally, I might add); a year earlier, to the morning when Tallulah's frantic mother, Kim, realizes that the couple is missing; and months prior to that, from Tallulah's own viewpoint, on the people and circumstances leading up to that fateful evening at the pub.

Personally, I don't do well with jumping timelines, but Jewell heads up each chapter with the month and year, so you know where you are along the way. It's a complex story with lots of twists and turns, which keeps you on the edge of your seat, but at the same time easy enough to follow, which keeps you reading.

All the ingredients for a tantalizing, suspenseful tale are here: a secret tunnel, another "Dig Here" sign, illicit romances, booze, drugs, a slew of secrets and lies and enough suspicious characters to offer plenty of "who done it" options to keep the reader wondering and guessing as the timelines close in on the climactic end.

Although I'm somewhat of a language nerd and enjoy reading, I am by no means a fast reader. With this book, however, I found it impossible to slow down or set it aside, even briefly. Like a piece of leftover cheesecake in the fridge, this thriller kept taunting me to greedily devour more until the last bite was good and gone.

Jewell has a new book coming out in in August, "The Family Remains" — another intriguing title — which is apparently a sequel to her novel, "The Family Upstairs" (2019).

Looks like I've got plenty of retirement reading in my future.

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