

Reader's Report: *Echoes of the Lost* by Cindy Brown

Echoes of the Lost is an 80,000-word commercial mystery set in Portland, OR in 2018. There are multiple close-in third-person POVs, but most chapters belong to retired police detective Ster McCaffrey. Each voice has its own brand of humor sprinkled in.

Ster's life has been stagnant and lonely ever since his wife died, his foster daughter Lydia ran away, and an incident on transit that the media and his fellow cops hailed him a hero for—he tried to intervene when someone else was getting targeted by racial violence—left him with a Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI). Ster's solitary existence is disrupted when there's a knock on his door in the middle of a cold December night and he finds a two-year-old boy on his porch with no adult in sight. The only clue to the boy's identity is a cross medallion that Ster believes belonged to Lydia.

Thinking that the little boy, Elijah, might be Lydia's son and Ster's own grandson, Ster takes him in and searches for his mother. This quest takes him into the homeless communities of Portland, and Ster enlists help from a plucky librarian, a schizophrenic homeless kid trying to kick meth, a preacher, a lovable drunk, a convicted murderer who is also "mother to the world," and a young cop who's supremely uncool to the rest of the force. When Elijah's mom's body is found and it isn't Lydia, Ster is invested enough in the boy's safety and solving the murder to stay on the case. Along the way, Ster finds community, remembers what is to lean on and be leaned on by other people, and opens his life up again. In the end, Ster and his ragtag band of merry misfits identify and defeat the murderer, Ster's best lifelong cop friend.

Echoes of the Lost hits all the expected beats of a murder mystery—the trail of clues, the red herrings, the escalating threats from the murderer to try to stop the investigation—while still

feeling fresh and unique to this book. Like many contemporary mystery novels, there is personal growth for our main character that develops alongside the crime-solving plot, similar to *The Maid* by Nita Prose and several recent titles by Stacy Willingham, Megan Miranda, and Sally Hepworth. *Echoes* also includes social commentary without ever being sanctimonious about it, which is more and more common in contemporary mysteries. The most obvious comp title in this vein is *Long Bright River* by Liz Moore, with *Echoes* exploring some of the grittier sides of Portland. In our current age where some readers complain that detective novels are copaganda, it doesn't hurt that the murderer in *Echoes* is a decorated cop.

Echoes of the Lost is both gritty and sweet, funny in both dark and light ways, without ever veering too far into either extreme. The mystery is solved, the bad guy is caught, Ster learns to open his heart to friends and community, and the final scene takes place on Christmas Eve. But before it gets too hokey or saccharine, the book ends on a bittersweet note when Ster is almost reunited with his foster daughter until she decides she's not ready for that. This mixed ending strikes the right concluding tone for a modern mystery. It also leaves room for a sequel or a series, as Ster could come across other cases he could solve with his band of quirky misfits while continuing to grow.

I strongly recommend accepting *Echoes of the Lost* for representation. It's polished with no glaring developmental editing or copyediting issues, it has a strong plot that feels both familiar and unique, and the lovable weirdos who populate the story make it memorable and fun. Though there is grit, there is more hope. I listen to an inordinate amount of contemporary mystery audiobooks—something like fifty so far this year—and *Echoes* fits in seamlessly. I endorse this manuscript and recommend a yes with no reservations.