

Philosopher spins novel on abuse and healing

The Disappeared is an apparently straightforward title for his new novel. But the writer and philosopher Roger Scruton has created a radiantly beautiful aesthetic whole in which there is even more going on than initially meets the mind's eye.

The novel is set in present-day Yorkshire and weaves together a rich cast of characters that includes Muslim immigrants to Britain from Afghanistan and Iraq. Given that the book's overt theme is human trafficking and sex slavery, it is no small achievement on Scruton's part that he is able to find a beautiful story to tell.

To his credit, whenever ugliness, criminality, and profanity occur in the book (and how could they not, given its overt theme), they are unequivocally depicted as ugly, criminal, and pro-



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C.S. Morrissey

fane. So much mendacious art today seductively glamorizes evil, but this novel does not. And because it is able to portray so categorically the ugly as ugly, this novel is also able to portray so luminously the beautiful as beautiful.

The story is one of abuse and, ultimately, healing. Part of what makes it so beautiful is the way the narrative brings together many storylines involving many characters. In the end, we see how everyone has been connected all along as part of one larger story.

The novel's social worker, Iona Ferguson, speaks near the end about one of the other female characters. In her words we hear Scruton

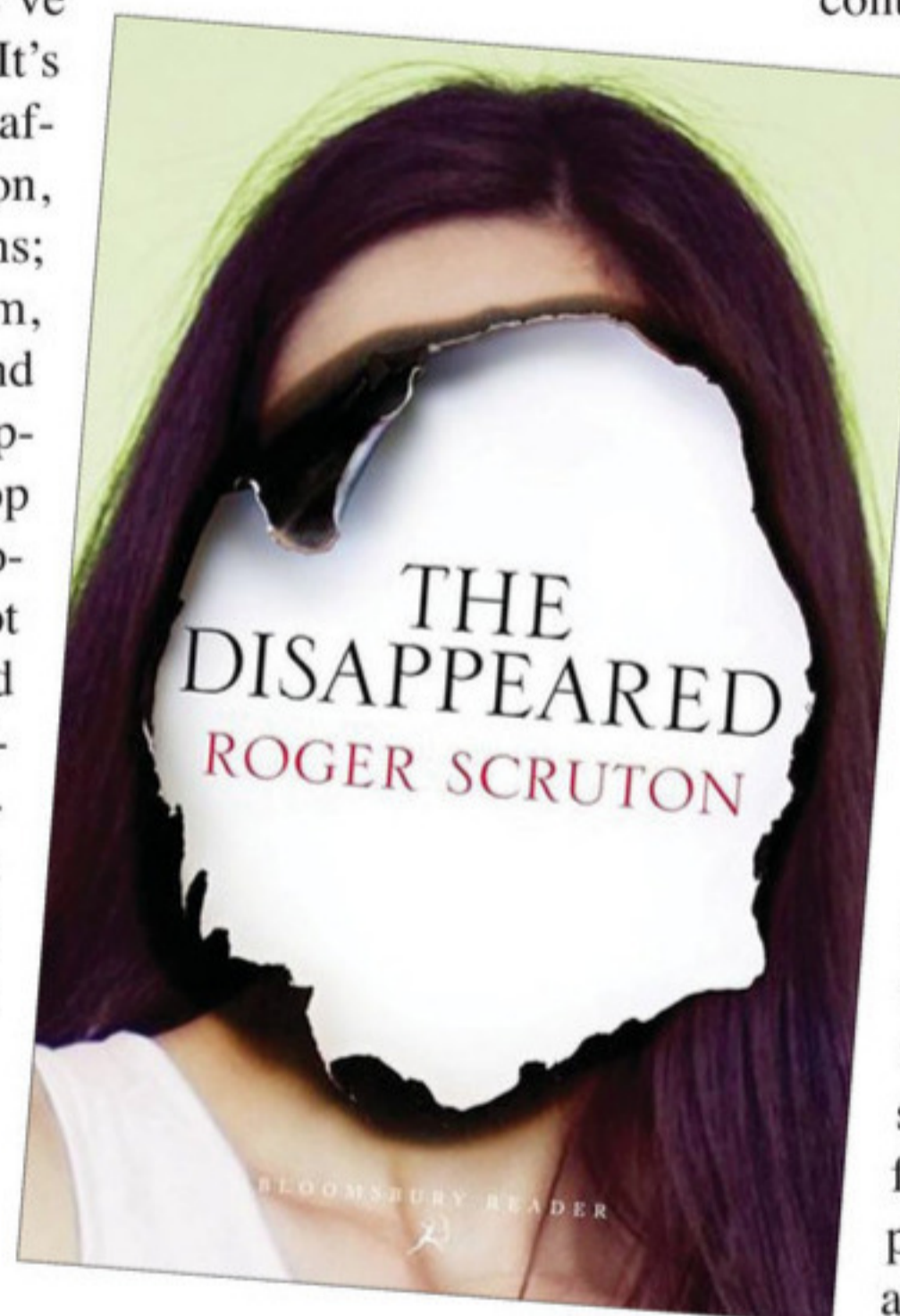
emphasizing his gently humane purpose in crafting his unifying story:

"This thing we've been living through. It's not about people trafficking, immigration, community relations; it's not about racism, multiculturalism, and all the things I am supposed to put at the top of my agenda as a social worker; it's not even about forced marriage, honour killing or the enslavement of women. It is about that girl and how to give her back her life."

This resolute focus on the dignity of the individual human person enables the novel to attain the heights of aesthetic achievement. But as part of its ascent, the story also incorporates grander philosophical

and historical themes into its social setting.

Yes, the book is overtly



about abduction and rescue. The title, *The Disappeared*, unmistakably refers to the kidnapping of one of

the main female characters. But as Scruton unfolds the drama, he also invites us to contemplate another kind of disappearance.

One of the key protagonists, Stephen Haycraft, teaches literature at St. Catherine's Academy, a formerly Catholic institution where the church, although part of the school, is no longer in use; it is kept locked.

"St. Catherine's had started life in the nineteenth century, as an independent Roman Catholic secondary school, accepting boys from the age of 11 and preparing its best scholars for the priesthood. Now it was fully integrated into the State system, took girls as well as boys, and did its best to educate its 400 pupils to the level required for university entrance," writes Scruton.

Indeed, times have changed at St. Catherine's Academy. Among Ste-

phen's brightest pupils are two Muslim boys, Farid and Hazim, who ask him to read the Koran with them outside class. Seeking a quiet refuge, Stephen unlocks the unused chapel and takes the boys inside. "Is it OK to read the Koran in a Christian church, sir?" asks Farid.

We learn about Stephen's view of religion, as Scruton describes how Christianity has been "a fleeting and uncertain visitor in Stephen's life" ever since his youth: "He was the only child in a family of atheists, who viewed worship as the hobby of simple people, like stamp collecting, clay pigeon shooting or model railways."

However, when his parents divorced, Stephen took up reading the New Testament and started visiting a Catholic parish. He continues this quest, begun at the end of grammar school, by attending evensong when at Oxford. As Scruton tells it:

"By then he had acquired, from Bach and Haydn as
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Culture dies without faith

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much as from the study of English literature, an acquaintance with the Christian faith and its cultural meaning. He had joined the extensive crowd of believers in belief. The Christian religion, he decided, was the heart of our civilization. This heart had grown old and weak, and culture had been put in the place of it. But the heart transplant didn't take, and our civilization, after gasping for awhile, had died."

It is precisely this disappearance of Christianity, as the heart of European culture, that Scruton's novel also contemplates.

"Along with the millions of civilization's orphans, he was waiting for a revelation that he knew would never come," writes Scruton, portraying Stephen's dilemma. "Yet, in the real troubles nothing else, he believed, had ever offered consolation. For in the real troubles it is not the body but the soul that is threatened."

We also learn that *The Disappeared* is the title of a heavy metal song composed by another one of the novel's main protagonists. Scruton describes with great sympathy the soul of this man which finds expression in rock music, part of the modern culture that replaces

Christianity in modern Britain.

Scruton also contrasts contemporary popular culture with the reaction of the Muslim immigrants to this formerly Christian world: "They had come to this country looking for material prosperity and moral dignity. And they found themselves without work, and surrounded by a corrosive nihilism."

Disappeared? Perhaps, but not forgotten. And worth rescuing.

C.S. Morrissey is an associate professor of philosophy at Catholic Pacific College. □