

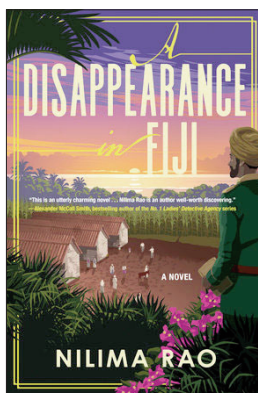
BOOKED & PRINTED

LAUREL FLORES FANTAUZZO

In the worst of cases, the powerful do not share in the panic that might follow a person gone missing. The disappeared's immediate family may suffer, frantic to capture investigators' waning attention. But leaders' judgmental assumptions may overtake urgency instead. Perhaps the missing person wanted to stay missing. Perhaps the missing person even deserved their own disappearance. Such assumptions justify bureaucrats' own neglect, and even collusion. In those cases, when officials find it more expedient to move on, it may be up to a society's equally neglected misfit—an unlikely investigator—to intervene and pursue the person gone. This issue, *Booked and Printed* examines disappearances across different eras and countries and the ambivalent outcasts who take on missions to seek out the missing.

* * *

In 1914, the archipelago of Fiji suffers from outsiders' colonial appetites. After years of enslaving indigenous Fijians, British overseers have coerced large populations of India into indentured servitude on the islands. The white overseers call the Indians, pejoratively, coolies: workers who labor in horrid, dehumanizing conditions, harvesting sugarcane and growing cotton. A constabulary provides some semblance of order on the island, though mostly in service of an agenda favorable to the colonizers. This is the richly combustible setting of author Nilima Rao's debut mystery, *A Disappearance in Fiji*.



With Rao's deeply researched plotting and characterization, the novel immerses readers in a rarely explored era. Occupied Fiji is filled with colonial torments, petty striving, and lovely, if afflicted, physical atmospheres. Our guide through this complex landscape is Akal Singh, a twenty-five-year-old,

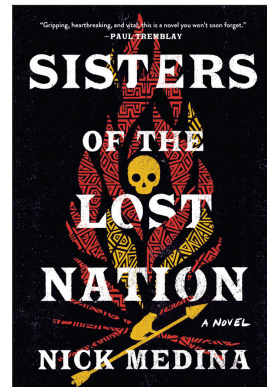
India-born officer. He is a rather successful Muslim Sikh overseas, but he misses his previous post in colonial Hong Kong, and he remains rankled with regret over a critical mistake he made there. Fiji's heat, lack of roads, downpours, and his own fallen status grate on Singh. When a British priest claims the disappearance of an indentured Indian woman is a kidnapping, Singh feels little more than irritation at first. Rather than claiming solidarity with the Indians forced into servitude, Singh often tells himself he is different, at a higher station of work and caste. He even hesitates to step into

laborers' living quarters, though their cooking spices remind him of his homeland.

Through Singh's ambivalence as a misfit on colonial British islands, Rao shows the power rankings of the time and setting. The Indian woman's disappearance nets Singh surprising allies and unexpected foes. There is a British doctor for whom the Indian workers' conditions are intolerable; Singh's constabulary boss, who wants nothing more than for the missing-person case itself to disappear; and Singh's Fijian coworker, whose sense of humor and community shore him up and keep him accountable. The woman's daughter's sorrowful, demanding gaze haunts him. As Singh grows closer to the truth of the woman's vanishing, the rampant, systemic sins of colonialism grow even clearer, to him and to the reader. Colonist extraction steals most cruelly from the bodies of women and children, as Rao takes pains to portray. While Singh is slowly changed by the dreadful realities he discovers, so, too, is the reader.

* * *

In the contemporary United States, teenager Anna Horn confronts other ravages of history while handling the myriad responsibilities of the eldest daughter. Her parents have violent, destructive fights. Her beloved, live-in grandmother is ailing and feeble. Her classmates bully her daily for her masculine gender presentation, and the principal blames her for her own pain. The reservation's nearby casino offers her part-time employment as a maid, and a drug-addled manager enlists her in cleaning the most clandestine and disgusting floor for extra cash. To help herself survive each unpredictable moment, Anna revisits memories of her tribe's storyteller, a woman who herself went missing and was found dead years ago. Most elements of tribal life treat Anna as an outcast. The storyteller's abandoned trailer becomes Anna's sacred retreat, the place she goes to revisit the stories that give her comfort, meaning, and belonging.



For Anna, there are threats in nearly every moment. But the worst comes when her younger sister, Grace, goes missing from the casino herself.

In his own debut, Indigenous writer Nick Medina makes the intriguing choice to create a fictional tribe—the Takoda—to engage in the contemporary trials of Native peoples. *SISTERS OF THE LOST NATION* portrays both the enduring survival and the pernicious oppression of Indigenous Americans, with brushstrokes of supernatural horror. In scenes where Anna's family begs for help, a white, off-reservation officer treats them with grim, familiar contempt. Federal regulations hamstring reservation police who do their best to help, with few resources. The evils of human trafficking plague the casino, as does the connivance of some men who suffer from substance use disorder and greed in equal measure.

Throughout the afflictions she endures and witnesses, Anna is a compelling and courageous protagonist. Her coming of age as a person who embodies two genders is one of the novel's most graceful gestures.

The entry into the plot may take a moment for some readers. There seem to be two prologues: one from Anna's youth, and one flashing forward to the story's climax; the book likely could have used just one. But though the structure may take some getting used to in the beginning, the mystery's rewards are many, and its conclusion will come as a genuine surprise.

Anna's family's frantic grief and helplessness will stay with readers long after the book ends. Audiences won't help but think of the suffering so many Indigenous families face in North America when women and girls go missing. Their disappearances remain one of the continent's most horrifying, indefensible scourges.

What Anna becomes for her tribe—as other two-spirit individuals were before her in real-life tribal histories—shows what restoration might be possible when fit leaders come into their own power, bolstered by healthy relationships to both the living and the dead. *Sisters of the Lost Nation*, and Anna, will linger for a long time in readers' memories.

ALL POINTS BULLETIN: THE SECRET HOURS by Mick Herron will be published in September from Soho Crime. • **NO HOME FOR KILLERS** (Thomas & Mercer) by E. A. Ayamar is now available. • Gigia Pandian's **THE RAVEN THIEF** appeared in March from Minotaur.