

Every Parent's Worst Fear

Staincliffe's latest a riveting suspense tale

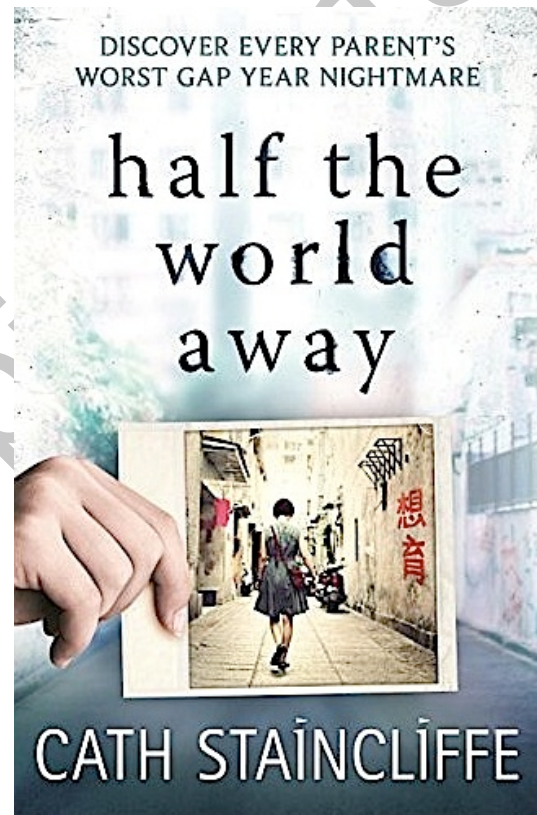
Suspended Sentences

by Jim Napier

After graduating from university British student Lori Maddox wants a break. Like many recent grads she's decided to spend her gap year abroad, photographing her travels and posting her adventures on a blog site. A twenty-three-year-old with a sensible head on her shoulders, her plans include stops in Thailand, Vietnam, and Hong Kong. Her family, mother Jo, father Tom, and stepfather Nick are delighted. They wouldn't dream of standing in Lori's way. In September they drive her to the airport, happy that she is opening a new door on her life.

For a few days everything goes well; then the emails cease. Soon, however, she resumes posting on her blog and their concerns disappear. More weeks go by and Lori posts from Vietnam. She's made a new friend, an Australian named Dawn Jeffreys, and together they plan to visit China. On Christmas Day they Skype Lori, and Everything seems to be going really well: she's enchanted by the sites she's photographed in her travels, and she's picking up bits of the language. In February she emails them with some surprising news: she's working for an agency in Chengdu, China, tutoring locals in English. It's giving

her some welcome income and made it possible for her to prolong her stay.



But by April there are some worrying signs. It's been nine days since Lori's last post on her blog, and she's not answering Jo's emails. Two more days pass and Jo considers contacting the British police. They take the details, but she is, after all, an adult, and they're not overly concerned. They promise to pass the information on to the Chinese authorities and suggest that she contact a charity group

named *Missing Overseas*, where Jo posts the details of Lori's disappearance. Before long she gets a call from Lori's friend Dawn, who's hardly reassuring: the last time she'd heard from Lori was three weeks ago.

Faced with the intransigence of the Chinese authorities and the well-meaning-but-ineffectual British diplomat in a nearby consulate assigned to help, Jo and Tom decide to journey to China themselves and conduct their own search. What they encounter will turn out to be every parent's worst nightmare: unable to speak the language, unfamiliar with the customs involved in approaching total strangers, and ill-equipped in investigative techniques and international protocol, they find themselves truly strangers in a strange land, utterly isolated and at loggerheads with the system at every turn.

In *Half the World Away* Cath Staincliffe deftly taps into the concerns of many parents who are blessed with talented children entering adulthood, committed to broadening their range of experiences yet at the same time anxious,

even apprehensive, about what unforeseen situations they may encounter. Her narrative is terrifyingly believable, and will send a chill deep into the heart of parents with children approaching maturity. It is the age-old dilemma of wanting the best for your offspring, yet wanting to keep them safe and look after them for as long as possible. It is, of course, an unwinnable situation, which makes its resonance with readers all the stronger. Staincliffe's forte lies not only in her ability to create and absolutely compelling tale featuring believable and engaging characters, but also in her talent to explore the nuances of their relationships; the tension that arises between Lori's mother Jo and her ex as they search for Lori spills over into Jo's relationship with her present husband, and threatens to poison their relationship as well. It all makes for very convincing reading. In the end the award-winning author has produced yet another superbly layered suspense tale that will leave readers satisfied, yet profoundly disturbed.

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Since 2005 Jim Napier's reviews and interviews have appeared in several Canadian newspapers and on such websites as *Spinetingler*, *The Rap Sheet*, *Shots Magazine*, *Crime Time*, *Reviewing The Evidence*, *January* magazine, the *Montreal Review of Books*, the *Ottawa Review of Books*, and *Amazon.com*, as well as on his own award-winning crime fiction site, *Deadly Diversions*. He can be reached at jnapier@deadlydiversions.com