

Book Review: The Girls Left Behind  
By Emily Gunnis

I've read a lot of well-written books over the years, as well as some not-so-well-written. And I've found one of the common denominators linking not-so-well-written books is the presence of inconsistencies.

That's the case with "The Girls Left Behind" by Emily Gunnis. There's some good character development and an interesting storyline, but the inconsistencies littered throughout hinder the book's overall cohesiveness.

For example, the story – which takes place in England – unfolds over four different timelines: the 1940s, 1975, 1985, and 2015. In and of itself, that's not necessarily a problem, and I often enjoy reading stories with multiple timelines. The problem here is that the events of the four timelines do not appear in consecutive order, which leads to confusion.

The story opens in 1975 when Constable Joanna Hamilton, fairly new on the police force, is called to the site of a domestic disturbance. A fire ensues, the quarreling husband and wife are killed, and Joanna has no option but to bring the couple's two young girls (Holly and Daisy) to Morgate House, where orphaned children are treated poorly.

Fast forward to 2015, and Superintendent Joanna Hamilton is only five days away from her retirement. Human remains are dug up on the beach during an excavation project, and a necklace found among the remains resembles one held by one of the young sisters she brought to Morgate House 40 years ago.

Now we bounce back to 1975 and meet Gemma Smith a teen orphan living at Morgate House, whose lifeless body is soon discovered on the beach – the same beach (right below the cliffs adjacent to Morgate House) where human remains will be dug up 40 years later.

In 1985 we learn that Holly and her sister Daisy are separated (Daisy is removed from Morgate House and placed with a foster family), and shortly thereafter Holly disappears. Back to 2015, and we find that Daisy is now a caregiver at a facility where Joanna's mother, Olive (Daisy doesn't know Joanna is Olive's daughter), is her favorite patient.

And then shortly thereafter, we're taken back to 1944 to learn of Olive's experience during World War II as a motorbike rider who, along with an acquaintance, Lorna Price (who we've already learned runs Morgate House with her husband), helped break coded Nazi messages.

Are you dizzy yet?

One example of the inconsistencies (without giving away too much of the story) is that before her disappearance, Holly had given a letter she'd written to her sister (after they were separated) to a policeman who promised to get it to Daisy's foster parents. Yet somehow that letter winds up in the hands of Holly's English teacher 30 years later. Huh???

There's some decent character development here, in the sense that we get a pretty good understanding of what drives the main characters, as well as some minor plot twists. And some of the characters' backstories are interesting. But overall "The Girls Left Behind" doesn't flow or hold together well.

I give the story 3 (perhaps overly generous) out of 5 stars, and welcome your thoughts if you choose to engage.