



***Disappearing Earth*, by Julia Phillips**  
***Reviewed by Cindy Kennedy, February 2020***

Julia Phillips' debut novel *Disappearing Earth*, deemed a 2019 Top Ten book by the New York Times, was a National Book Award finalist. The intriguing tale is set on Kamchatka, the remote north-east Russian peninsula.

The story begins on a sunny August day with two young sisters, Alyona and Sophia, playing near the shoreline on Kamchatka's eastern coast. The girls look out for one another while their mother, Marina, a journalist, is at work.

At the ocean's edge, Alyona tells her younger sister legends about the mountains and seas that isolate Kamchatka from the rest of Russia. In one tall tale, Alyona describes a tremendous earthquake and its huge, engulfing wave which swallowed up an entire town on the peninsula. Sophia is fascinated by the fable, and the two sisters hike back to town. On their way home, however, an unforeseen incident happens, and the girls go missing.

Throughout Kamchatka, there's speculation that the two sisters drowned or perhaps were kidnapped by their father in Moscow or by a stranger. The insular peninsula's topography, it seems, would prevent anyone from taking them off Kamchatka undetected: "And air and sea were the sole options for leaving. Though Kamchatka was no longer a closed territory by law, the region was cut off from the rest of the world by geography. To the south, east, and west was only ocean. To the north, walling off the Russian mainland, were hundreds of kilometers of mountains and tundra. Impassable."

Detective Ryakhovsky oversees the investigation. One witness, Oksana, a researcher at the volcanological institute, claims to have seen a man "in a shiny black car" drive by with two young girls as she walked her dog. The trail, however, goes nowhere, and Oksana begins to doubt herself.

Long-simmering tensions between Kamchatka's white Russians settlers and the indigenous natives reach a boiling point. While the police actively search for Alyona and Sophia, who are white Russians, they let the missing-person case of Lilia, a teenager from a reindeer-herding family, go cold. No one suspects that the two cases might be related until the missing girls' mothers meet by chance.

Ms. Phillips' vivid description of Kamchatka—its expansive tundra, towering volcanoes, and glassy seas—renders the peninsula as a fascinating character on its own. *Disappearing Earth*, indeed, marks the bright beginning of an emerging writer's promising career.