

Zebra Forest

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Recommended for Ages: 10-13

Annie is an eleven year old living in the eastern United States during the Iran Hostage crisis. She lives in a lone house with her grandmother, whom she calls Gran and her 9 year old brother Rew in the town of Sunshine. Due to the absence of parents and the grandmother's disorder (some kind of obsessive compulsive retraction) and hoarding, Annie learns to run the house from an early age, visited periodically by a social worker named Adele Parks. She spends her time in the woods, with black and white birch trees, reading with her brother and making up scenarios for the history of their murdered father, Andrew Snow. They know that their mother left them a few years after Rew was born, and that their father was killed. The two children dream up outlandish scenarios based on their father, taking from the news that Annie picks up in her errands around town. They also enjoy reading a torn edition of *Treasure Island*, missing the first half of the book, which they circumvent by inventing their own beginning. Rew, an introspective child, is very intelligent and helps his sister run things in the house, he is also very stubborn and honest

One summer night, a man breaks into their house, dressed as a prisoner and grabs the two children from the living room, promising he will not hurt them. Hearing the commotion, the grandmother enters, she stands for a moment and then says Andrew. The father, who had not recognized them, barricades himself in the house, and the grandmother explains how he killed a man, he was serving sentence in the jail that is across the forest. The children are angered, especially Rew, who storms out after screaming at the man. A tense night ensues, as the other three wait in silence. The next morning, Andrew sees a police car approach and hides with the children in the basement. He covers their mouths and they are able to listen to the police describe the mass breakout from the prison, 50 prisoners escaped and the police are warning residents to be careful, the grandmother listens, thanks them and dismisses them without saying anything. After that, Andrew decides to stay in the house until he sees a better way of getting away and a long period of time ensues. He learns of the living arrangements and is surprised to see how his mother's health deteriorated after his arrest but gradually begins to establish a relationship with Annie. She is troubled, being pulled in different directions, since the grandmother locks herself up in her room and Rew resents the father so much that he consistently promises to run away and tell the police, however, knowing that that would entail leaving Annie and the grandmother alone with Andrew, he doesn't go through with it.

Throughout the period that Andrew lives with the children, Annie consistently draws parallels to the hostage crisis in Iran, but she is unable to paint Andrew in such a dark light as the Iranians. Rew spends time planning a way of warning the police, but the house's isolation, and the grandmother's fear of mailmen and solicitors ensues that the plan is almost impossible, until he drafts a letter which he makes Annie promise to leave in a mailbox addressed to the police. When Andrew sees how disorganized and dirty the kitchen and living spaces are, he realizes that Annie is the one that goes to town to conduct the daily business. He grants her permission to go and gives her a list of supplies to buy, due to his prison employment as a cook, he realizes that the food available in the home is of bad quality, and the unkempt state of the kitchen shows the chaotic existence. Annie is surprised by the supplies and is fearful that on her trip to the town store she will be caught and forced to confess. Scared, she buys the supplies but does not drop off the letter. On her return, this angers Rew, who becomes even more hostile and retracted, causing a break in their usual routine spending time together. Gradually, she begins to open up to her father, learning things about his childhood, his father and his

wife. He also describes the crime, stating how he saw the wife dancing with another man after leaving the house without warning, angered, he killed the man and was convicted of manslaughter. The period in the house is tense, due to Rew's anger and frequent outbursts and the grandmother's complete withdrawal and refusal to speak. This goes on for more than a month until one day, angered by his father's stories, Rew flees the house. The other three chase after him into the forest and the grandmother is injured by a falling branch. This causes them to return home dejected. Rew is even more taciturn and Andrew decides to go back to prison, knowing that the life he is living cannot last. So, on the day that the hostages are released from Tehran, Andrew returns to prison, with Annie's promise that she will visit him, and the agreement that at the expiration of his sentence, 5 years later, he will return to them. Annie restarts school happier and Rew is more relaxed and finally opens up during a jail visit.

The book had a very interesting premise and is written very well. The surprise factor was absent for me, since the father was mentioned a lot in the pages previous to his arrival, but younger readers might enjoy the surprise. The small number of characters, augmented slightly by Molly, the store's clerk and one of Annie's friends, makes this story very personal and focused, something that I think is valuable, albeit with some excessive focus on the protagonist's attitude towards Rew. The living arrangement that results with Andrew staying in the house is very well written, but the characters stay flat (with the exception of Annie), so the resolution feels slightly forced. Rew is always angry and withdrawn and resents the similarities in interests with his father. The social worker is content to talk to Annie outside the house while Andrew is inside, something which, along with the grandmother's problems, seems very inattentive. A thing that I did like was the way that food and the kitchen were used to make Andrew more human as a character, since they allowed him to forge a better connection. It might be a good book to read in class in middle school and explore the way that troubled families interact, a topic which is difficult to teach to children.

I would recommend this book, but would warn readers that the end is weak and does not conclude the plot well.

Recommended Readings:

Tangerine by Edward Bloor

Every Day After by Laura Golden

Annie and The Old One by Patricia Martin