

## A Bear on Trial

**Jiannina Camillo**

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*A Bear on Trial is an eye-opening political saga concerned with the fates of bears and humans, too.*

A mountain bear upends a mayor's burgeoning career in Jiannina Camillo's novel *A Bear on Trial*, which was inspired by true events.

Just as Zita, Pianalto's single mother mayor, embarks on an overdue vacation with her teenage daughter, Melissa, a mountain bear attack leaves a father-son hiking duo, Roberto and Dani, stranded and wounded in the mountains outside of the town. Her vacation aborted, Zita is called to the rescue operation.

Melissa resents how her mom's work takes precedence over her. In her anger, she plans to run away to find her father in London. Meanwhile, the dangerous rescue mission succeeds, only to explode into a controversy covered by news outlets all over Europe. Fighting for both her fragile relationship with her daughter and her job, Zita exercises diplomacy with those who want to kill the bear and those who want to save it.

The bear crisis adds fuel to the book's already tense Italian climate. Immigrants, most from the Middle East, are dying trying to cross the Mediterranean, and Italian citizens feel threatened by immigrants as well as bears. The book draws parallels between the bears' and the immigrants' struggles.

Roberto and Dani argue that the bear, whom Roberto calls Gretel, was defending herself when she growled to warn them not to come close to her cubs. They do not blame her for their pains. Zita parallels Gretel as she fights to protect her daughter through puberty. The juxtapositions are intriguing and evoke compassion for all involved.

Zita's struggles center the novel. She models modern womanhood in her multiple roles as a mother, daughter, mayor, and romantic partner. She is feisty—she slaps a coworker who tries to kiss her—and has high moral standards, as when she rejects a bribe from a businessman trying to capitalize on the bear problem. Multiculturalism comes in through Zita's ex-partner, who is British, and through Roberto's wife, who is an immigrant. All involved are complex and distinct, realistic and admirable.

Dialogue drives the book forward, with conversations used to lead in to discoveries and conclusions. Town debates are a highlight; as factions and parties argue about what to do with the bear, Italian democracy is seen at work, while the underhanded dealings that give politics a bad name are also a factor. Zita is thoughtful in assessing her values, taking into account all of her constituents and considering their various agendas.

Interludes devoted to Gretel and her cubs punctuate the narrative; they are objective and emotional additions, while moments of natural beauty help to balance the book's controversies and family dramas. *A Bear on Trial* is an eye-opening political saga concerned with the fates of bears and humans, too.

MARI CARLSON (March 25, 2020)

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