

A Place Called Zamora: The Zamora Series, Book One

LB Gschwandtner

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Glimmers of discontent and secrets arise in a city that's under authoritarian rule in A Place Called Zamora, a promising start to a new dystopian series.

In LB Gschwandtner's dystopian novel *A Place Called Zamora*, an unlikely love blossoms and a brutal regime begins to lose its grasp on the beaten down populace.

A series of wars and ecological disasters force the remnants of humanity to huddle in isolated cities. One such city, Infinius, suffers under the unyielding, vicious rule of The Regime, led by Premier Villinkash. Villinkash enacted a decisive cleansing of history through a technology that wipes memories. One of his other effective means of controlling the population involves a rigged motorcycle race promising the victor a path into his inner circle—a race wherein the winner is a product of intense political backstabbing.

In a strange twist, a young orphan, Niko, escapes the centers dedicated to wiping memories and winds up winning the race. Niko eschews the trappings of wealth and the predetermined prizes to lift a young girl, El, out of poverty with him. His choice throws a wrench in the works and sets into motion a series of events that lead he and El to journey beyond Infinius in search of a safe place, known as Zamora.

The narrative adopts an unusual pacing and leaps about in time. The thread of Niko winning the race and fleeing with El anchors it, and key characters and events are expanded upon through short flashbacks and retellings. Niko's victory during the motorcycle race leads to a violent, bloody encounter with El before the narrative rewinds to retell events from El's perspective. There's some confusion as to what is happening in real time.

Within the book, much attention is devoted to populace control, and the related technology includes drones and screens that are always on and that are capable of tracking everyone. Villankash's command structure is built on a hierarchy that presumes impermanence: no one is safe and can be demoted on a whim. Huston, Villankash's second in command, is rendered evil; he pops up in the story to sow discontent. However, as Huston's backstory is revealed, he becomes more dynamic—difficult to frame as either good or evil, despite his high-ranking position within the regime.

Another standout character is Old Merrie, an elderly woman known for her scavenging abilities and her tendency to spout gibberish as a cover. In an exchange between Old Merrie and Huston, Old Merrie adopts an accent dripping with whimsy to shift attention off of herself; Huston sees through her charade. Their unspoken words show that both are aware of each other's subterfuge, while their careful banter highlights their attempts at surviving at any cost. More subtle are the formal speech patterns of those who survived The Collapse versus the more cobbled-together speech patterns of those who grew up in the city. Among these interesting characters, Niko and El's romantic connection is underdeveloped; Niko falls for El after they are forced into each other's lives, but beyond this, this connection is bland, evident only through token gestures of affection.

This first series title introduces its major characters well, and reveals the nature of Villankash's rule. Glimmers of discontent and secrets arise, making *A Place Called Zamora* a promising start to a new dystopian series.

JOHN M. MURRAY (July 27, 2020)

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