Clarion Review

General

Spring Bear
Betsy Connor Bowen
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Four Stars (out of Five)

Everyone is forced to deal with some problems during the course of their lifetime. But when one misfortune leads to another, the accumulated challenges can seriously erode a person's ability to cope with adversity. In the face of hard luck, harsh weather, poverty, and cruel people, pulling out of a downward spiral requires determination and courage.

Evvie Mallow finds herself in just such a situation at the beginning of Betsy Connor Bowen's lyrical novella, *Spring Bear*. Evvie's troubles start when a tree falls on the cab of her father's truck, ruining Henry's mind and reducing him to a shuffling shell of his former self. Without the income he provided, Evvie and her mother, Bessie, struggle to care for him and to maintain their rural Maine household. Bessie relies on guidance from Brother Fuller, who rants about salvation but provides little substantive help. Lester Darrow, an erstwhile bear hunter and supposed friend to Henry, takes advantage of Bessie's submissive nature in disturbing ways. When Evvie discovers she's pregnant at age fourteen, her dreams of a brighter future seem even more remote than before.

Meanwhile, local game warden, Armand Pelletier, has loved the woods since childhood and wants to stop bear poachers who harvest the animals' gall bladders to sell for use in Chinese medicine. He suspects the culprit might be down-and-nearly-out Darrow. "The man was worth going to a fair amount of trouble to catchÂ…Lester Darrow was known as the best bear hunter around," Pelletier tells himself.

A child in Evvie's circumstances learns to trust her intuition when making decisions. Wondering how to proceed with the pregnancy, she seeks solitude in the pre-dawn silence of the hill behind her house to listen for that inner guidance. Bowen writes, "Then she asked if the baby was hers to take care of. A voice said no. Then she asked if she should get out of this place right away. There was no answer."

Evvie's resolve to escape is strengthened when Darrow drags her from the car of a woman she hopes will adopt her child, then pushes her into his truck and slams the door. "She watched him shove that city lady up against the steering wheel and wrap the rope tight around herÂ…he tied her into that little red carÂ…then locked the door from outside and pocketed the key," Bowen writes.

Bowen is a former teacher of literature and writing. She now lives in central Maine where she writes and works as a journalist and video producer. Bowen tells this story of north woods people in realistic language that reflects their everyday life, depicting scenes and characters clearly. Time sequencing seems unclear later in the book when an occurrence in March precedes a scene set in February. Events leading to the book's conclusion could be more carefully detailed. Additionally, the small, light print may challenge older readers.

This book will appeal to readers who appreciate a compelling story written with literary sensitivity. Those who prefer a more upbeat theme may not like Bowen's tale of unremitting hardship.