



## The Reel Life of Zara Kegg

**Brad Barkley**

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(213pp)

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*The Reel Life of Zara Kegg is an evocative romance novel in which teenagers fall in love during their beach town's offseason.*

Featuring vintage cinema, carnival work, and vulnerable, misfit teenagers, Brad Barkley's novel about unexpected love *The Reel Life of Zara Kegg* is atmospheric.

Zara is a high school junior who works as a part-time projectionist at the Palace Theater, which shows midcentury B movies. She lives with her father, a despondent sports writer who still mourns the death of Zara's mother. Though having made few friends since moving to their Carolina beach town, Zara notices Zachary, a theater regular whose awkwardness and sartorial blunders she finds charming. She learns that he doesn't attend school and that he lives in a trailer with his grandfather, whose concession stand earns them little money, and translates her concern into action.

Zara is an astute narrator whose sensory observations are used to enliven the beach during its offseason. Deserted fairgrounds, discount grocery stores where "carnies" shop, a Chinese restaurant that Zara's father frequents, and the nostalgic theater with its unused pipe organ hint that it's an impoverished place, though one that also benefits from its bygone glitz. Cinema-related images develop the atmosphere further: A "screen flooded with nothing but that bright white light" illumines Zara's loneliness through its haunting beauty.

Zara's encounters with Zachary come in between scenes devoted to her school and home lives and work at the theater. Through each, the plot progresses at a steady pace. Zara's and Zachary's gradual disclosures about their lives also flesh out the story: Zachary is sensitive, and his wit and eccentric dreams draw Zara into their deepening friendship, even as she disagrees with some of his choices, causing tension.

Zara herself is revealed in layers. She urges her father to keep up with his writing and shoulders painful memories about her mother's cancer. Her anxieties are covered in terms of her nervous habits, from doing pushups in the projection booth to her racing thoughts. The latter are matched by shifts in the narration's tempo; it features tumbling sentences and instances of panicky humor. Silly conundrums, as with the quest to find inflatable Godzillas for the theater, collide with serious conflicts throughout. Zara matures through each challenge, learning to accept outside advice and developing a better rapport with her father thanks to their rekindled shared interests.

Mental health issues are handled with care throughout. People express shame over their challenges, and witnesses sometimes feel helpless, unable to alleviate their problems. However, Zachary's issues are resolved in an off-page manner, thanks to quick interventions, straining credulity. And a few plot twists evoke 1980s teenage movies, including a school board meeting whose outcome is saved by quick-thinking heroics. Still, the book's conclusion is uplifting, and the book's recurrent threads cohere well within it.

*The Reel Life of Zara Kegg* is a sweet romance novel in which a dynamic young woman's outlook brightens after she connects with an unusual boy.

KAREN RIGBY (April 14, 2026)

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