

The Year without a Summer

Arlene Mark

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Mixing a teenage romance with political and environmental commentary, The Year Without a Summer is an inspiring novel.

In Arlene Mark's novel *The Year Without a Summer*, two teenagers cultivate their empathy and global awareness while working on a school project together.

Jamie's thoughts are more devoted to snowboarding than to eighth-grade science. Indeed: he's in danger of failing the subject. A school project that offers an impressive amount of extra credit catches his eye: he will have to debate a fellow student over the potential good and bad that natural disasters can bring.

Clara, Jamie's opponent for the debate, has firsthand experience with natural disasters: she survived Hurricane Maria in Puerto Rico. She's outraged by Jamie's indifference to natural disasters. Still, the two form an unlikely bond as they delve into their project.

Outside of the classroom, both students grapple with personal traumas. Jamie's older brother returned from Afghanistan forever changed by the war, and Maria's father is trapped in Puerto Rico, where natural disasters continue to besiege the island. These traumas force Jamie and Maria to open up to each other, and their vulnerabilities prove to be opportunities for growth.

In the course of the novel, Jamie transitions from a naïve student who's obsessed with sports to someone who is happy to help his brother and contribute to Maria's charity projects. Maria, who was forced to mature at a young age, helps Jamie along the way—just as she helps her mother to raise her little brother while her father remains in Puerto Rico. She's somewhat of an idealized heroine, though, who prioritizes her father's well-being over her schoolwork. Still, both students affect noticeable change at school as they grow together: several of their classmates end up volunteering to do charity work, too, following their examples.

As the story's focus shifts from Jamie's snowboarding competition to the students' upcoming debate, it holds interest. The characters express themselves ably—including Jamie's brother, who struggles with the weight of his painful memories. The three story lines—the debate itself, Jamie's brother's well-being, and Maria's father's status in Puerto Rico—are all resolved in a heartwarming manner, though the ending is somewhat fabulistic and didactic in comparison to the rest of the novel.

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JOHN M. MURRAY (April 28, 2022)

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