




Zebra Forest

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In an extraordinary debut novel, an escaped fugitive upends everything two siblings think they know about their family, their past, and themselves.

When eleven-year-old Annie first started lying to her social worker, she had been taught by an expert: Gran. "If you're going to do something, make sure you do it with excellence," Gran would say. That was when Gran was feeling talkative, and not brooding for days in her room — like she did after telling Annie and her little brother, Rew, the one thing they know about their father: that he was killed in a fight with an angry man who was sent away. Annie tells stories, too, as she and Rew laze under the birches and oaks of Zebra Forest — stories about their father the pirate, or pilot, or secret agent. But then something shocking happens to unravel all their stories: a rattling at the back door, an escapee from the prison holding them hostage in their own home, four lives that will never be the same. Driven by suspense and psychological intrigue, *Zebra Forest* deftly portrays an unfolding standoff of truth against family secrets — and offers an affecting look at two resourceful, imaginative kids as they react and adapt to the hand they've been dealt.

Zebra Forest Details

Date : Published April 9th 2013 by Candlewick Press (first published April 1st 2013)

ISBN : 9780763660413

Author : Adina Rishe Gewirtz

Format : Hardcover 208 pages

Genre : Childrens, Middle Grade, Realistic Fiction, Young Adult, Historical, Historical Fiction, Fiction, Family

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From Reader Review *Zebra Forest* for online ebook

Cindy Dobrez says

I read this in a gulp. I can't wait to booktalk it with my middle school students. I would disagree with the publisher's designation of ages 9-12 on it. I'd nudge it to 12-14 even though the kids in the story are younger.

Besides the suspense and the subtle exploration of lies and truth I was moved by the description of the birch and maple zebra forest with its smells and mood and stark contrast to the shades of gray in the story.

Claire says

Annie B (for beautiful) and Rew live with Gran- she tells them they are named Morgan for her mother, but Never Forget- they are really Snow's- they just cannot tell anyone. As far as the children know Gran is the only family they have- Grandad has passed away, Dad is dead in a violent fight, and Mom abandoned them on Gran's doorstep.

They have moved from the city to the edge of the Zebra Forest, named by the kids for the trunks of the birch and oak trees that create light and dark stripes. In the shade of the forest they tell fanciful and amazing stories; extrapolations on the heaps, stacks, shelves and leaning towers of books and magazines the family reads. As Annie says it, Rew can think better, but Annie tells much better stories.

They are homeschooled until Adele Parks, the truant lady, arrives and makes sure the kids go to school. When Adele arrives Annie well and fully learns to lie. There is so much in their lives that they cannot speak of or just don't know. Some questions set Gran to brooding withdrawal and the children learn swiftly to avoid sending Gran to her room with their curiosity. Adele is a decent sort, she sees a lot of this and realizes that this is a family that needs gentle treatment.

Summer arrives, vacation stretches before the tiny family when there is a riot and prison break on the other side of the forest. Annie and Rew find out about this when they are surprised by a prisoner who blows into their house and keeps them hostage while authorities look for the many, many prisoners that have escaped. This is where the twisty turns step in.

(spoiler alert- reading the notes on the back of the book allude to what is coming still some are surprised by what comes next)

When Gran comes to see what the ruckus is she finds her son in prison garb holding the daughter who thought she was an orphan. Ms. Gewirtz gently leads this family to rapprochement, respect and love one very tiny step at a time as the escaped prisoner we know as Andrew Snow stays in his mother and children's house. Finally finding and then firmly and steadily claiming the family that so carefully disappeared in shame and grief when Gran became a Morgan and left the city.

This is not light reading, but the writing is deft and sure with lots of wonderful sentences producing grand themes to ponder, perhaps in the shade of a tree with the fragrance of the woods surrounding.

Melissa Mcavoy says

Very close to five stars: in fact I do think technically the book deserves it, especially considering it is a debut novel. The author pulls off a very tricky plot and manages to make it feel almost entirely unforced. The hostage situation the story revolves around is beautifully framed with a historical event- the Iranian hostage crises, and a fictional one close to the heart of the two child protagonists-Treasure Island. Not only is the children's unself-conscious exploration of the characters in Stevenson's iconic work a pleasure and good modeling in and of itself, it ties in beautifully with their growing internal and external awareness of character and character flaws. Tying this critical pre-adolescent/adolescent development to a hostage situation strikes me as brilliant. Isn't that in many ways structurally what kids are? Zebra Forest just ups the ante and creates a dramatic situation in which every character, adult and child, must negotiate their own release. I think this will resonate with kid readers whether they have a fraught family situation or not. The book has a unique quality and balance. There are sensational plot elements, yet the pacing feels quiet, almost slow. This seems consistent with the tedium of being held hostage, but may account for some readers' disgruntlement. The book is refreshingly short, with an admirable economy. Yet like a great poem I keep mentally returning to the story and discovering additional riches and resonances.

Angie says

This book was so wonderful! I think anyone over the age of 10 will really enjoy it. I can't really describe what made me love it so much. The characters were all well written and each had their own quirks and fears that they worked through in this book. I loved the fact that reading and books played such a large part in all the of family, no matter what life had dealt them. I loved the imagery and the flow and the page-turning suspense. Most of all I really enjoyed the main character Annie. She responded to situations the way a normal human would. She used stories and books as entertainment for her and her brother. She was quiet when she needed to be. She loved her family and is extremely conflicted when family doesn't get along. Annie was realistic and down to earth.

Melodie says

This was an excellent debut story of a young girl dealing with a less than perfect life. Her younger brother has anger/impulse control issues and her grandmother struggles with depression that shows itself in hoarding and isolation. She accepts her life, adapting and making do. Her life takes a dramatic turn when there is a prison break which brings her little family face to face with the past. A parallel is drawn between her situation and the history of the time which is the Iran hostage crisis. I found it to be well done and overall believable. I would recommend it to 12 years and up.

Katy Vance says

With both parents out of the picture and a grandmother who can barely keep it together as her depression manifests itself in paranoia and hoarding, eleven-year old Annie B. is raising her younger brother Rew the best that she can. Then, as the Iranian hostage crisis rages in the background, Annie, Rew and Gran suddenly find themselves held hostage by the most ironic of captors. There are elements of this book that remind me

of so many books I've read before (Dicey's Song, that one book about the girl with the hoarder for a mom, Dead End in Norvelt, any book where parents are missing and kids fend for themselves, Room), but it is refreshingly new.

Oh! I so enjoyed this novel. Let me recount the ways:

* The beautiful writing. As the story progresses, the descriptions of the weather and the forest made me long for home, building a setting that reminds me of some kind of Walden-esque escape, if it weren't for the secret that looms beyond the black and white striped forest our likable main character Annie B calls the Zebra. When Gewritz talks about the branches of the late summer birches criss-crossing against the sky, I was immediately transported to a place more beautiful and peaceful.

* A deep, inextricable connection to the power of stories and reading. It made me want to pick up Treasure Island and reminded me that young children are so capable of rich, complex texts. It also shows how reading is the pathway to everything: empathy, life, education, compassion, understanding, travel. And how about the librarian shout-out? Me too, friend. Me too.

* Gewritz forcing you (and therefore also the young reader, albeit more hypothetical, less meta) to reflect on the parts of you that are your parents, nurture be damned. Who we are, how why are, why we are. And forgiveness for all of those things.

* Allowing people to be real: Annie B.'s parents are complex, screwed up people. So is her grandma. Life has gotten to them, stripped them down and left them to be ravaged. But as the social worker says, even though Annie's situation isn't the best, nobody's taking her away from there. It's a matter of making the life you want to lead. This story forces the reader to recognize the enormous gray area that exists within us all. No one is completely good or completely evil. We're all just trying to get along the best we can with the bodies and minds we've been given.

This book comes highly recommended. It's scary and heart warming and the language is fantastic. It doesn't offer any easy answers to the complicated things that befall us in our lifetime. It toys with the existential moments we all have about family and loyalty, about right and wrong. And it does all this in a manner which is accessible to middle grades students.

This book was courtesy of Candlewick Press (another favorite publisher of mine!) through NetGalley. It is scheduled for publication on April 9, 2013.

Linda says

I loved this book. It was different than any other book I have read. The growing relationship between Andrew Snow and his children was so well done. That said, I think it will take a sophisticated reader to appreciate this book.

April says

Perhaps this makes me sound like a total hipster, but I enjoy reading books that aren't very commercial. I love books that have some literary merit as well as entertainment value. When *Zebra Forest* by Adina Rishe Gewirtz popped up on my radar, I knew I had to read this middle grade debut. First of all, it's published by Candlewick, from whom I have come to expect intelligent books. Second of all, that cover y'all. That cover. Third, I love books about siblings and troubled kids. Fourth, it seemed like it would be a quiet and not very in your face sort of read — which is another thing that I very much appreciate. Thankfully, for me, *Zebra Forest* delivered on all fronts.

Read the rest of my review [here](#)

Rebecca McNutt says

At first I wasn't sure where this book was going, but as it went on, it painted an often shocking and vivid portrayal of family, and the people caught up in dysfunction. *Zebra Forest* is an excellent and intense middle-grade novel with more profound themes than the average book can handle.

Helen says

Oh, that cover. (Okay, got that out of my system.)

Zebra Forest is a lovely, still, gem of a book. As hinted at in the beautiful cover, dark things are hiding behind those trees. Not the monsters you expect; everyday household monsters, like family secrets and lies.

It's 1977. Annie and Rew live with their Gran. Their Mom left them in her care long ago, when their father died, killed in a bar fight. They are more or less happy--sometimes Gran is well enough to take care of them, sometimes they have to take care of themselves, but they get along well enough. Annie is absorbed by the hostage situation in Iran, watching updates on other people's televisions whenever she can, as they don't have a TV themselves.

What they do have is stories. Mostly, Annie and Rew make up stories about their father, and the thrilling situations he might have got himself into and out of. And a book--or rather, most of a book,(the front part is missing, somehow) *Treasure Island*, which they read over and over again.

Sometimes people, in the heat of the moment, do terrible things. Things that can't be taken back, or forgotten, or forgiven. Sometimes that person is your Mom or Dad. Is redemption possible? Can we love them anyway?

I can't tell you more without giving away the plot. But Gewirtz's voice is sure and confident, lovely and literary; the use of *Treasure Island* is a wonderful device, and the fact that Annie and Rew's copy is missing the beginning is a beautiful metaphor for the entire book.

Terri says

Before I read "*Zebra Forest*" by Adina Rishe Gewirtz (a debut young adult novelist), I had just finished reading "*The Ocean at The End of the Lane*" by Neil Gaiman, hearing Neil Gaiman speak about the book,

and thinking about books like "The Graveyard Book." It's funny how related books come to me in spurts - or is it just that I naturally just draw connections between the books that I am currently reading and thinking about? Anyway, all of these books feel familiar and similar to me. All contain young, essentially parentless children in a magical realism type of setting. All are similar in tone - dark. All feature children dealing with some pretty heady stuff. All are beautifully written. Gaiman's work, of course, is currently on the New York Times Bestseller List. "Zebra Forest" is already showing up on some early awards list possibilities for 2013. See: <http://blogs.slj.com/printzblog/2013/...>

"Zebra Forest" features an eleven-year-old first person narrator, Annie. She and her brother, Rew, live with their Gran, who spends days at a time locked up in her bedroom. Their mother walked out on them when they were young, and their father is dead. Their Gran has moved them from the city (Chicago?) to a small town. Behind their home is the "Zebra Forest" where she and her brother spend many hours playing, talking, storytelling, and imagining. Beyond the Zebra Forest is a prison. Annie has three goals for this particular summer: get taller, have a great adventure, and find out more about her father. When several prisoners escape from the prison on the other side of Zebra Forest, some of Annie's goals come to fruition. While the book is sold as a thriller, it is not a plot driven story. Character is predominant here.

"Zebra Forest" is beautifully written and evokes a cornucopia of sensory images and emotions, as in this description of the "Zebra Forest": "Outside, I could smell the Zebra. Even if for some reason I stopped feeling cold or hot or rain or sun, I bet I could close my eyes and still tell which season I was in just by the smell of the trees and dirt here. Spring was sweet mud and flowers. Fall had a kind of moldy edge to it, and winter was all dust and bark. As for summer, the zebra carried a mossy, thick aroma full of baking leaves and oozing sap, which I guess was its growing smell." Gewirtz also fills the pages with symbolism and metaphor between the Iranian Hostage Crisis and what is happening in Annie's life. There is an abundance of literary allusions, especially to "Treasure Island," as well.

Rich thematic material is also prevalent in the story: parentless children, the social welfare system, the value of education, truth and lies, good versus evil, mental health, family dysfunction, loyalty, loss, taking ownership for our choices, reality versus fantasy, and more are all found in the pages of this beautiful book.

I think, though Annie is eleven, the book will take a special reader. There is some heady and disturbing stuff here. A mature reader who enjoys character driven stories and, perhaps, is dealing with some of these issues in his/her life might find lots to like here. Highly recommended.

Children's Literature Network Selection for July, 2013

Paola (A Novel Idea) says

Originally posted at A Novel Idea

RATING: 3.5/5

I can definitely see this book becoming a classroom staple in the future, one of those novels you're assigned to read in 5th or 6th grade. Zebra Forest offers a glimpse into the world as rationalized, and mythologized, by a child. Annie and Rew are resilient, resourceful characters who are faced with some really tough moral and emotional questions. They're also children forced to be more grown up than they actually are, having to deal with problems that belong in the world of adults. The book was a solid offering for the genre that tugged at

my heart.

Annie is a very interesting character to me, largely because I have the added perspective of being a teacher. She's the kind of child I would find myself worrying about, wanting to take home and care for. It isn't that she's neglected, or unloved; she receives plenty of warmth from her brother and grandmother, even though Gran has peculiarities of her own. I think it's the fact that Annie has to be so self-sufficient and responsible for her age. Gran has grown unstable recently, retreating to her room and staring out the window for days at a time, often forgetting to even buy groceries during her bad spells. Annie takes on the job of keeping herself and Rew fed, sheltered, and out of trouble. She learns to lie to the social worker, to weather Gran's strange moods and embrace her good days. I work with children and it pained me to see Annie having to deal with so much, so soon. She carries on bravely, as many children do every day when living in a similar situation, and you can't help but feel for her as a reader.

If you've read the book's synopsis on Goodreads, you already know that Annie, Rew and Gran find themselves held hostage in their own home by one of the escaped prisoners from the jail on the other side of the woods. This is where the book's moral quandaries begin to present themselves. The children's first inclination is to be both terrified and repulsed by the man holding them captive, especially Rew. He's a murderer, after all. But the days pass, days that turn into weeks, and we watch Annie begin to see the man beyond the threat that he poses. It challenges every preconceived notion she had of what an escaped criminal would be. They laugh, they clean the kitchen, they dreamed of becoming a librarian. She sees what anger does when it consumes you. She realizes that the labels assigned to people are not necessarily the truths that define them. Most of all, she learns that even though some mistakes can never be fixed or forgiven, it is possible to accept them; to change for the better, by learning from what you did wrong.

While extremely short when compared to the books I'm usually reading, the length is perfect for middle grade and the age group it was written for. I did wish that there was more exploration of Rew's feelings, maybe a part of the book told from his point of view. I thought that he suffered from stagnation in comparison to Annie, who narrated the story and therefore had the more obvious growth as a character. I would have liked to see Rew have a bigger share of that growth. Instead he started to seem incredibly whiny and bordering on annoying about halfway through. He's portrayed as such an intelligent child, so why did he end up being stuck in a massive rut when it came to the situation at hand? I guess I expected him to be the one to come at it from a different angle. Instead, he sulked. I guess it makes sense when you consider that many very bright children are not as emotionally mature.

Zebra Forest tells the unconventional story of one family and one summer, but I think it goes beyond that. It's a story of atonement, second chances, and learning to see past what's on the surface.

Many thanks to Candlewick Press and NetGalley for letting me read and review an ARC of this book!

Xander ForeverBookish says

Here is my review for the ARC that I received of Zebra Forest. I won a giveaway at DogoBooks and Candlewick Press sent me this. Thanks, Candlewick! Enjoy! Annie lives with her brother Rew, and her Gran, and likes telling stories to her brother in the Zebra Forest, a forest of white, gray and chocolate birch trees. When they hear a knock on the door in the middle of the night, They are hostages in their own home- with a prisoner. Will the prisoner stay or leave? In a suspenseful page-turning debut novel, Adina Rische Gewirtz pens a story where brother and sister have to live in the situation they are in, and learn to love people; and

forgive them; even as they become involved in secrets about their family that they did not know; and most likely would not have learned.

What I thought about it:

Zebra Forest was amazing. The lies that are told, and the secrets that are revealed are wonderful. For a debut novel, it was very enthralling. I could not put it down. When I found out who the prisoner was, I was very surprised. The truth, sometimes can be shocking, as conveyed in this novel. Also, the mixed emotions of the characters were very interesting, with one day talking to everyone, and the next being locked in their room, angry, for a week. Also there is a very interesting conclusion that the reader definitely does not expect. Overall, amazing Adina Rise Gewirtz. Write some more novels!
Read more reviews at: www.mybookwormblog.wordpress.com

Bayla says

sneak preview available here

Ever since she was small, Annie's had three wishes:

1. Get tall
2. Have an adventure
3. Meet her father.

She knows none of them will come true. Especially not the last. After all, her father's dead -- killed by an angry man, Gran told her and her brother Rew for as long as she could remember.

But when there's a breakout at Enderfield, the prison on the other side of the Zebra Forest, Annie just might get her adventure -- and learn a lot she never knew about her family...

A beautifully written story about secrets and family, love, forgiveness, and second chances. Annie has a marvelous and unique voice, the characters are nuanced and deep, the story feels poignant and real. This book deserves to be an instant classic.

Some sneak peek snippets:

"After the woman left, Gran, staring out back at the Zebra Forest, said to me, 'I'm a liar, I'll admit. But I pride myself on being a really *good* liar. That's part of my educational philosophy, too, Annie B. Mark that down. Lesson one: If you're going to do something, make sure to do it with *excellence*.'" (p. 8 of ARC)

"A buzzing started in my ears just then. Gran once quoted some writer who said, 'The blood will out.' I'd never really understood what she meant. But now I think it must mean that your blood knows things before your head does. Because even as I struggled to make sense of Gran's words and the man's, the blood came rushing into my head, making me dizzy." (p. 37 of ARC)

"Outside, I could smell the Zebra. Even if for some reason I stopped feeling cold or hot or rain or sun, I bet I could close my eyes and still tell which season I was in just by the smell of the trees and dirt there. Spring was sweet mud and flowers. Fall has a kind of moldy edge to it, and winter was all dust and bark. As for summer, the Zebra carried a mossy, thick aroma full of baking leaves and oozing sap, which I guessed was its growing smell." (p. 87 of ARC)

Disclaimer: Although I am related to the author, this review is as unbiased as possible. If you don't believe me, read it yourself when it comes out next April!

Jane says

Meh. It's not that this wasn't well-written (it was), it's just that I didn't really connect with it. I was a similar age to the main character at that point in time, so it felt like I should have been able to settle in and feel at home in the time period, but it missed the mark for me somehow.
