



The Wildcat Behind Glass

Alki Zei

Karen Emmerich, Translator

Yonder (May 7, 2024)

Hardcover \$18.00 (240pp)

978-1-63206-364-9

Alki Zei's novel *The Wildcat Behind Glass* is a timely portrayal of childhoods interrupted under fascism.

First published in 1963, this is the story of an affluent Greek family in 1936, when a dictator took control of the country. Seven-year-old Melia and her older sister Myrto don't understand what a dictatorship is, but they love that their caretakers have left them alone since it began.

Melia describes the world around her with a simple awe; for example, an adult's hand is "cold and soft, like bread." She and her sister bicker often, idolize their cousin and their grandfather, and have vehement opinions on topics they don't understand. However, when the sisters' fascist headmaster courts Myrto into his "youth organization," a replica of the Hitler Youth, with promises of leadership and gold stars, their sibling bond is tested. Myrto is beyond excited and can't understand why her family disapproves, leaving Melia trapped in the middle.

The novel elucidates how fascist governments utilize children: to spy on their families, to swallow ideologies while they're at their most impressionable, and to threaten their families with compliance. For example, Melia and Myrto's father worries about losing his job at the bank; his boss says there will be "consequences" if he doesn't allow Myrto to participate in the headmaster's phalanx. As Greece's fascist government rises, so does the novel's action, and Melia is dragged into the battle for democracy.

Combining innocent childhood adventures with dangerous high stakes, *The Wildcat Behind Glass* is a sweet coming-of-age story in which a Greek family resists fascism in the 1930s.

LEAH BLOCK (May / June 2024)

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