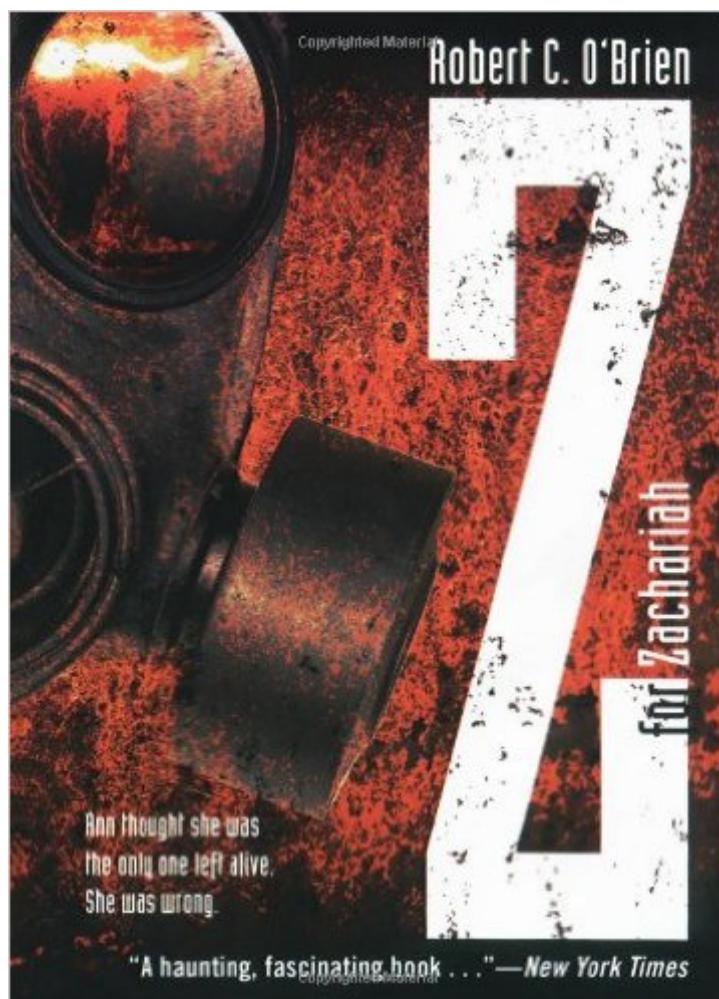


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# Z For Zachariah



## **Synopsis**

Is anyone out there? Ann Burden is sixteen years old and completely alone. The world as she once knew it is gone, ravaged by a nuclear war that has taken everyone from her. For the past year, she has lived in a remote valley with no evidence of any other survivors. But the smoke from a distant campfire shatters Ann's solitude. Someone else is still alive and making his way toward the valley. Who is this man? What does he want? Can he be trusted? Both excited and terrified, Ann soon realizes there may be worse things than being the last person on Earth.

## **Book Information**

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Age Range: 12 and up

Grade Level: 7 and up

## **Customer Reviews**

Z for Zachariah was one I wasn't that impressed by at age 10 when I first read it (or about there), but years down the road (in college) a reread completely changed my mind about this book, and about the goals O'Brien had set about to accomplish with it. I've always been a fan of O'Brien, so I can't say I had completely written the book off, but this much later reading revealed some things that I think only the most perceptive young readers are going to pick up on, which is unfortunate because it really is a book for them. Starting with the most superficial, I am probably more impressed here with O'Brien's writing than anywhere else. O'Brien purposely drenches the story in detail, allowing the reader to pause and contemplate the strangely serene post-apocalypse environment. This of course is a tool--O'Brien uses Biblical allegory throughout (for the purpose of the story, not

for the purpose of the proliferation of religion), and this entire scenario with the beautiful valley that cannot be left is all too obviously a cousin to the garden of eden. This surprising immersion in the pastoral setting (of what is apparently the end of the world) is equally matched by the strong and vital voice of Ann Burden, who like the scenery stands in sharp contrast to death--a contrast that I think sets this entire book in motion. I for one found Ann's voice is what made the book work.

Through sincerity and an honest analysis of her feelings we are propelled into the heart of the story, which is not so much about nuclear bombs but about 'growing up -as- epic adventure' (Henke, Children's lit in Education, Summer 82). As a young reader, I think I only saw the surface of this story which is not in of itself very compelling--a man comes into the valley, a relationship develops, the man becomes deranged and starts hunting the girl, so the girl leaves. The story however is much more than this. It is actually all about the last two chapters. It is about Ann -not- killing Mr. Loomis. It is about Ann's evolution as she moves from a child that can only consider life in the valley to confronting the entire world--one which seems dead and hopeless. The message finally is an uplifting but difficult one which does not try to make the burden (Burden--clever?) of growing up any less grim. Today's young people are going to be faced by a world full of 'deadness', or perhaps a world that seems to have gone insane (this premise was carried out well in the animated film Princess Mononoke, another great YA work.) It is a great effort to bring Ann's innocent voice into a world that would gladly stomp it out, and yet Z for Zachariah leads us to believe that this is the very challenge of growing up, and makes strong argument for investing in the dreams of young people for tomorrow.

In Sunday School when she was much younger, Ann Burden learned the alphabet from "The Bible Letter Book." A was for Adam, B was for Benjamin, C was for Christian. "The last page of all was 'Z is for Zachariah,' and since I knew that Adam was the first man, for a long time I assumed that Zachariah must be the last man." Now, nearly sixteen, Ann has had to come to terms with the fact that she just might be the last woman. The earth is dead everywhere the bombs fell. Ann's valley, a "meteorological enclave" with its own self-contained weather system, escaped the radioactive fallout, but her family and neighbors were killed when they went out to search for other survivors. Keeping up the family farm, taking supplies from the neighbors' general store, she has managed well enough in the year that has passed since the war. Then, one day, she sees smoke in the distance, and every day it's a little closer. Someone else has survived, and is exploring, camping out, certain eventually to find the last spot of green in the still-radioactive landscape. Ann is excited at the prospect of having some human companionship again, but can't help worrying, too: "suppose

it was someone mean, or even cruel, and brutal?"Ann's "Zachariah" turns out to be a research chemist, John Loomis, who was in an underground laboratory when the bombs hit - along with a prototype radiation-proof suit. Wearing the suit, he's wandered around the country for a year before he finds the valley. Despite his precautions, he chooses the wrong stream to bathe in when he finally removes his suit, and Ann must nurse him through the agonies of radiation sickness. Will her new companion, this Adam to her Eve, be taken from her almost as soon as they've found each other? And if he doesn't, then what happens? Listening to the fevered Loomis's delirious rantings, Ann finds herself suspecting the the man in whom she's suddenly invested so much hope is holding back a sinister secret. Robert C. O'Brien's "Z for Zachariah" is, along with Peter Dickinson's "Eva," about as bleak as any novel can get, let alone one targeted to the juvenile audience - bleak even for the post-apocalyptic genre - and, like "Eva," it's gripping and thought-provoking and likely to haunt the reader for years. O'Brien originally intended this is a novel for adults; I don't know whether he changed his mind or if it was his wife and daughter, who completed the novel from his notes after his death, who decided it belonged in the YA market. However it happened, O'Brien managed to create a novel that should engage and enthrall adults, adolescents, and even mature preteens. It's a deceptively simple novel, a quick read, and Ann is an engaging and sympathetic narrator. At the same time, the real richness to be found in this novel comes in contemplating it afterwards, weighing, evaluating, questioning, reconsidering. Ann and Loomis are people who have survived, and inevitably been changed by, a year of isolation, grief, fear, struggle, and repeatedly dashed hopes. O'Brien sets them down together in a sort of perilous paradise, and what happens there is as inevitable as it is unsettling.

The good thing about this book is it starts out right in the action, that's what I like about books. This book starts you out in a families valley that they live in. Everything is going well when suddenly a strange green cloud peaks at the tip of the valley. The parents of Ann Burden(the main-character telling the story) tell her that they are going out of the valley and into town to see what happened. They go out but they never come back. But before they left, her brother jumped into the back of the truck without the parents knowing. The dog loves the boy so much that it runs after him and it never comes back either until the middle of the book. But while this is all going on she is getting a long all by herself when a figure keeps getting closer and closer to the valley. She investigates to find it to be a scientist who has a biochemical suit. It protects him from the radiation. She hides in a cave because she is afraid that he might do something to her. It is a very good book to read. I think the book is very good and keeps your attention. The only bad thing is that it is not a good book for

someone who is not over 12 because you really can't understand some of the technical terms but that's about it. I recommend this book to any student interested in a science-fiction novel and it would interest anybody else who would be interested in what the world may very well be like in the next century. I also recommend this book to teachers because they might be interested in sharing this book with the class. It is a real mindboggler in how the plot takes you right into the story.

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