

'The Benefits of Being an Octopus'

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ROYALTSON — Seventh-grader Zoe Albro lives in a trailer, the least cared-for unit in a northern New England trailer park, with her mother, her three younger siblings, and her mother's latest boyfriend, Lenny. We first meet her as she struggles to look after the three squabbling younger children while trying to finish her homework — preparing a packet of papers for a class debate. Her mother works an evening shift at a local pizza

place, and Zoe's main task is to keep the kids in order in her absence, so they don't bother Lenny, who actually owns the trailer.

One of Zoe's only possessions is a DVD about octopuses, which she has played so often she knows it by heart. Zoe takes the octopus's many attributes as a guide to her own life, in particular its propensity to change color to blend in with its surroundings, and its ability to fire off ink as protective



BENNETT

cover while it escapes from threatening situations.

Zoe's admiration for the marine creature gives the book its title — "The Benefits of Being an Octopus" — and she fantasizes that it would be a major benefit to have eight arms

to deal with the myriad problems that beset her and her family.

Zoe's mother is grindingly poor, and it gradually be-

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Octopus

FROM A1

comes clear that the main reason she has moved into Lenny's trailer is to give her children somewhere better to live than the old car that was the family home for several months. Lenny seems pleasant enough at first, but we begin to see that he is mentally abusing Zoe's mom, and unfairly blaming her for anything that goes wrong.

Life has left Zoe herself with so little confidence that when her teacher invites her to join the school debate club, Zoe doesn't think she's worthy of mixing with the more prosperous students, who can afford to buy pens and paper, and wear good clothes. Zoe, in contrast, has to borrow pens, and wears only hand-me-downs. These include a faded camo jacket, which is enough to have her tagged as pro-gun

when the debate club begins to discuss gun rights. When a shooting incident happens in the playground, she gets bracketed with one of her only two friends, who's considered a suspect simply because he goes hunting with his dad.

Zoe's other friend, Fuschia, comes from a similarly deprived background, and they have both developed the habit of keeping themselves below the radar at school, and avoiding any challenge that might put them in the limelight.

At first, "The Benefits of Being an Octopus" might seem too grim a book to bear, but even as difficulties pile up for Zoe and her mother, we see her learn how to face them. Zoe takes courage from considering how an octopus would respond to a challenge, and she is also supported by her social studies teacher, who's come from a tough background herself.

When Lenny loses his job because he lost his temper at

work, he manages to blame Zoe's mother. Then, when he finally finds another job, he expects Zoe's mom to change hers, so that she's at home in time to cook his supper. As matters come to a head, Zoe finds support in unexpected places and, together with her friend Fuschia, discovers the courage to get help, and to persuade her mother to stand up for herself. Zoe also embraces the challenge of the debate club and is surprised to find that she is good at debating, and valued by both her teachers and her fellow students.

"The Benefits of Being an Octopus" has proved a popular read among the sixth-graders at the Village School, and they have recognized that it describes a life they are lucky enough not to lead. But it is also an inspiring story of courage in adversity, and the value of friendship in solving the most intractable problems.

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Volume CCCXXI No. 638
Athol, Massachusetts

\$1.00

THURSDAY
February 13, 2020