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Moon Bear

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Editor's Choice:

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Media type:

Book

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Bear bile, extracted from the gall bladder of black bears (moon bears), is in traditional Chinese medicine, credited with the ability to heal a myriad of adverse conditions, from cancer to hangovers. The bile is usually obtained by capturing bears in their native SE Asian countries. This appalling, though lucrative, practice is carried out in 'bear farms', such as the one Tam, aged 12, is sent to work in when his father dies in a landmine explosion. Tam's family has been exiled when their village's land is seized in the cause of 'progress'. The death of his father means that Tam, too young for the hard work of farming the inhospitable land of their new home, is now the wage-earner for his family.

Moon Bear is not for the faint-hearted. Conditions for the caged bears in the city bear farm are brutal, and conditions for Tam, exploited by 'the Doctor', his boss, are not good either. Nursing a sick baby bear gives Tam a purpose; the developing rapport between him and the young animal makes Tam determined that somehow he and his charge must get away from the farm, providing an edge-of-the-seat story as he struggles to outwit the cruel Doctor

Lewis delicately captures the misty, beautiful air of the mountain landscape of Laos and the contrasting bustling traffic-filled streets of the city. Description is not overdone, but anyone who has been to the magical land of Laos, or seen documentaries about it on television, will easily visualise the settings. This contrasts with the brutality of the conditions in which the bears are kept.

Moon Bear raises questions about the exploitation of indigenous people in the cause of modernisation and the exploitation of animals in the cause of traditional medicine. Tam's story has a happy outcome, but it will rightly cause readers to reflect on issues such as these.

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