

It is difficult to classify the genre of the novel *The Summer of the Bear* by Bella Pollen. There is a timeline running through the narrative, but with frequent returns to earlier events. The book is largely a story about a family, with elements of a thriller, a spy story, and a touch of fantasy thrown in for good measure. The fantasy is provided by the bear that escapes from its owner and finds itself on a remote island in the Outer Hebrides. It is well written, often with a humorous turn of phrase and a fair degree of insight. Yet, underlying the story itself, this book is a description of how bereavement affected each member of the family.

The story opens with the bear's escape and arrival on the island. This is based on an actual event that is described in the epilogue to the main story. The family consists of a mother and three children and is introduced one by one at the start of a car journey from London to the Outer Hebrides. The mother, Letty, comes across as distracted; the elder daughter, Georgie, appears rather disconnected from the others, while her sister, Alba, spends her time tormenting their younger brother, Jamie, who appears to be on the autistic spectrum. The reason for the car journey is that the diplomat father, Nicky, had died by falling off the roof of the British Embassy in Bonn. Questions had arisen about his behaviour and there was the suspicion that he had committed suicide. This meant that the family had to leave the Embassy and were now travelling to the Outer Hebrides because Letty had been brought up there.

Bella Pollen describes the Outer Isles as places of magic tarnished by miles of barbed wire fencing and the tendency of the locals to leave rusty broken-down machinery to lie around. The locals tended to see themselves as very different from people on the mainland and a trip to Scotland was considered a major adventure. They also remembered Letty and the family with great affection. While on the island, they hear about the escaped bear and join in the search for it, since it is thought to be dangerous. After a couple of weeks or so, everyone decides that the bear must be dead and lose interest, after which the family tends to turn in on itself.

The rather suffocating air of embassy life, which appeared to owe much to the expectations of personal and family behaviour in military quarters, is well described. Nicky's death had been specified as suicide, with the added suspicion that he had been passing information to East Germany. This had made the situation particularly difficult for Letty and the family. As well as grieving for the death of her husband, Letty was assailed by doubts about him, which led to her effectively ignoring the children. Georgie missed her father, but seemed more concerned about her future and her developing sexuality. Alba comes across as a 'stereotypical' teenager with difficult behaviour and a resentment of a younger brother whom she felt had received more than his fair share of attention while being an annoying idiot. Nevertheless, it is Jamie's thoughts and behaviour that inspire much of the action in the book. He cannot believe his father was really dead and that he is still alive in the bear.

The ending of the book was a little contrived and almost cinematic, though still exciting. The truth about Nicky's contacts with someone in East Germany was discovered, as was the real cause of his death. *The Summer of the Bear* had been chosen at random, but everyone said they had enjoyed it.