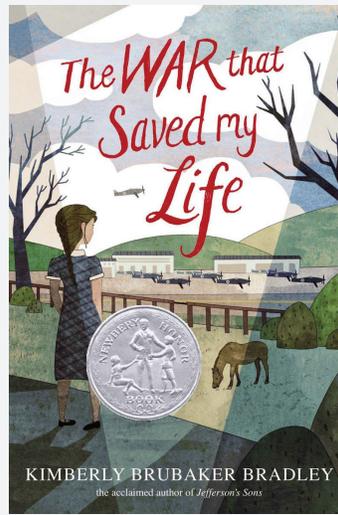


First Opinion: The Transformative Powers of War

Bradley, Kimberly Brubaker. *The War That Saved My Life*. Puffin Books, 2016.

Sara L. Schwebel



Set in England during World War II, *The War That Saved My Life* tells the story of two children whose widowed, working-class mother uses her daughter's clubfoot as the target for her vitriolic disappointment with life. Bright, sensitive Ada crawls on the floor at age ten. Denied both corrective medical treatment at birth and crutches as she grew, she has been made a prisoner of the family apartment. Her younger brother, Jamie, tells her about such things as grass and pears that exist in the larger world. But Ada knows that at age six he is pulling away from her and that when he begins school she'll be left alone all day.

As the book's title suggests, Hitler's bombs prove Ada's salvation: when London evacuates its youth, Ada and Jamie find a means of escaping not only their ignorant, abusive mother, but also the limited opportunities available to London's poorest children. In this sense, the novel makes a larger argument about the transformative nature of World War II in Britain. Women took on jobs vacated by men and rigid class structures eroded, at least to a degree. New opportunities emerged for working-class girls and boys alike.

Once Ada and Jamie escape London, they are taken in by an Oxford-educated woman whose experience as a social outcast endows her with empathy. Context cues suggest that Miss Susan Smith is a lesbian who has been disowned by her clergyman father. Her lover, Becky, recently died, leaving her a house, a horse, and, in some ways, a social status among the community's elite. But Susan is visibly depressed, mourning all that she has been denied—her

lover, a legal marriage, children, a career. The scene is set for the personal transformation of children and adults.

The War That Saved My Life is clearly a work of historical fiction, an interpretation of the 1940s from a vantage point of the early twenty-first century. At the same time, in some respects it feels less specifically historical than intertextual, a recapitulation of many great works of children's literature. And herein lies much of the charm.

Kimberly Brubaker Bradley invites readers to think intertextually by having Susan teach both Jamie and Ada to read (a frequently employed device; for example, in Elizabeth George Speare's Newbery and Newbery Honor books *The Witch of Blackbird Pond* and *The Sign of the Beaver*). Jamie is captivated by *The Swiss Family Robinson*, where the titular characters are, in Ada's words "all the time making and finding things. It was like magic" (Bradley 121). Their adventure mirrors that of London-born Jamie and Ada's in the countryside, while the family's ingenuity parallels Susan's ability to find and make just what the children need—even with wartime rationing. But Ada is unimpressed by the novel, preferring Susan's gift to her, *Alice in Wonderland*. Its metaphor works for Ada: "Jamie and me. We had fallen down a rabbit hole . . . and nothing made sense, not at all, not anymore" (223).

Like Eliza Doolittle in *Pygmalion*, the children must master an entirely new way of being in the world: new language, diet, clothing, etiquette, and, most of all, life prospects. The experience is particularly daunting for Ada, who had never known parental love. The opening frame for *The War That Saved My Life* gives a nod to *Harry Potter*. While Harry is made to live in a closet under the stairs, Ada is punished by being forced into a roach-filled cabinet under the kitchen sink.

Ada's past trauma makes it difficult for her to trust Susan, but equine therapy opens a path to wholeness. Prior to leaving London, Ada had painfully taught herself to walk (delightful echoes of *The Secret Garden* here). Yet it is astride Butter that Ada begins to feel powerful. Ironically, an old-fashioned sidesaddle makes the disability of her clubfoot disappear, and the horse makes her a hero. While riding Butter, Ada catches sight of a Nazi spy; when authorities dismiss her report, Ada proves that she has finally internalized Susan's message: "my bad foot's a long way from my brain" (277). For Ada, there's no turning back—not even when her mother reappears.

The War That Saved My Life is a story about the many dimensions of healing. While Ada and Jamie's pain might be most visible to child readers, Susan's is equally poignant. This makes the family of the three characters weave together particularly beautifully.

Newbery selection committees are unique, but in recognizing the year's "most distinguished contribution to American literature for children," they sometimes hone in on particular issues, concerns, or themes, selecting Medal and Honor books that harmonize. This is the case for 2016. Like *The War That Saved My Life*, Matt de la Peña's Medal-winning *Last Stop on Market Street* draws reader attention to social class, as does Pam Muñoz Ryan's Honor book, *Echo*. (Moreover, the first of the three-part narrative in *Echo* is set during World War II and features

a gifted protagonist who is deemed “a monster” because of physical disfigurement.) Victoria Jamieson’s graphic novel Honor book, *Roller Girl*, tackles the more traditional theme of friendship, but its protagonist is the daughter of a loving, single Puerto Rican mother. Collectively, the 2016 Newbery committee heeded the call of #weneeddiversebooks, selecting titles well worth the attention of both child readers and critics.

Works Cited

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About the Author

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