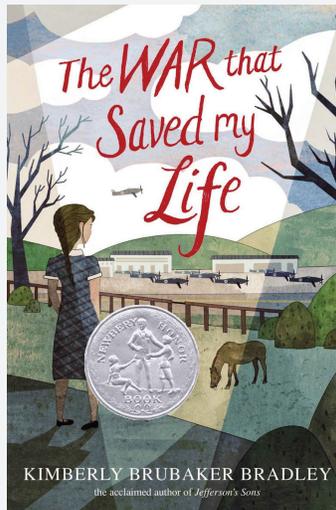


Second Reaction: Bridging the Difference: Pathways to Acceptance, Healing, and Hope

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

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The *War That Saved My Life* renders a moving account of life in England at the dawn of World War II. The story is set in 1939 when nine-year-old Ada, who was born with a clubfoot, lived in a one-room London flat with Mam and her younger brother Jamie. As Hitler began waging war in Europe, Ada engaged in a personal war of will to claim her identity and sense of self. Mam allowed Jamie freedom to come and go, but Ada was forced to remain inside, denied contact with the outside world. Mam associated Ada's physical disability with limited intellectual capacity. Abused and treated as an object of shame, Ada fended for herself, fighting off panic and loneliness, until the war intruded in a real and visceral way. Ada employs the metaphor of war to set the stage for her subsequent narration, claiming, "There are all kinds of wars" (3).

Determined not to let her disability and Mam's abuse define her existence, Ada initiated a painful regimen of gradually teaching herself to walk. Soon thereafter, Jamie relayed news of children being evacuated to the countryside to ensure their safety. Although Mam was ambivalent about sending Jamie, she refused to let Ada go—but Ada had other ideas. Leaving became her chance to experience a less oppressive, limiting life, and she promised Jamie they would go and stay together. The children sneaked out while Mam was sleeping, wearing the clothes on their backs and carrying a small bag of bread and sugar. They boarded a train for Kent, and upon their arrival, Ada and Jamie were assigned to live with a single woman named

Susan who was herself enmeshed in grief and loss. Ada held Susan at arm's length, never letting herself get too close.

I read and discussed the book with Aubrey (pseudonym), an avid reader a couple of years older than Ada. In our discussion, Aubrey problematized Ada's struggles to accept Susan, which produced tension for her, as she compared Susan and Mam. Aubrey never encountered anyone as bitter and mean as Mam. She observed that "Susan was more of a mother figure than Mam ever was." When I asked her to elaborate, she explained that "Ada was very guarded. She didn't seem to feel like she had any self-worth. She didn't feel like she was deserving of what she had been given by Susan." The story encouraged Aubrey to put herself in Ada's place and consider the many challenges of forming relationships:

When you think about their lives [Ada's and Jamie's], you have to think, could you have ended up like them? Mostly when I think about Susan, if I think about who I am right now, I don't think I would have been pushing Susan away that much, but when I think about all of Ada's experiences, I'm not sure how I would have reacted.

Despite holding Susan at arm's length, Ada made friends with Butter, Susan's neglected pony. Ada recognized a kindred spirit in Butter, and their friendship engendered mutual trust. Aubrey affirmed that Ada's relationship with Butter was healing. She commented, "It was so nice to see Ada warming up to Butter. She was having panic attacks, and Butter helped calm her. Butter also helped with the whole moving around thing [mobility], and she just learned a lot from riding him." Aubrey's comments highlight the interdependence of characters and how everyday acts of caring exemplify Bradley's intent to demonstrate extended notions of family and the "healing power of love" (qtd. in *Penguin Middle School*).

Ada, Jamie, and Susan were a family united by circumstances of a world in flux. Susan taught Ada that her foot was a "long way from her brain" (42), and Ada came to trust in her abilities and newfound competence. Ada taught herself to ride and care for Butter, but she also made friends with Lady Thornton's daughter and worked in the Thornton's stables. She learned to sew, knit, and read. When a ship transporting wounded soldiers docked in the village, Aubrey pointed out that "Ada tended to all the soldiers and didn't think about her clubfoot. She focused on trying to keep the men alive." Aubrey concluded that the war gave Ada "a bigger picture of the world." When I asked what came to mind when Aubrey thought of Ada, she answered, "determination and life building because she [Ada] built on her life experiences and everything that happened to her. She grew stronger each time she overcame one of her hardships."

Bradley's rich characterization offers unique insights into multitextured identities and lived realities that unite past and present, juxtaposing notions of family, acceptance versus otherness, and ability versus disability. Aubrey and I encourage teachers and parents not to be put off by Ada's and Jamie's experiences with Mam. Instead, let us draw on their example to actively bridge differences, foster acceptance, and build hope in our homes and classrooms. As

we reach the end of and the last chapter, we are left with an unfinished story, an incomplete ending that begs for more from this author.

Works Cited

"Kimberly Brubaker Bradley talks about her new novel, *The War that Saved My Life*." YouTube, uploaded by Penguin Middle School, 7 Jan. 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xAmfyTzSyX0&t=3s>

About the Author

Heidi R. Bacon began her teaching career working with adolescent and adult readers. She is an assistant professor of language, literacies, and culture at Southern Illinois University Carbondale. Her research focuses on resource pedagogies that foster culturally responsive classroom and community spaces.