

Meet Lois Lowry



I would be a terrible newspaper reporter because I can't write well about huge events . . . As a writer, I find that I can only cover the small and the ordinary—the mittens on a shivering child—and hope that they evoke the larger events.

—Lois Lowry, in her acceptance speech for the Newbery Medal she received for *Number the Stars*

Lois Lowry was born in 1937 in Hawaii. When she was just four years old, she says she knew she wanted to be a writer. Her year-book prediction read “future novelist.” That prediction came true.

Lowry attended Brown University, where she studied writing. She later had four children but never lost sight of her original ambition. She explains that when her children were young “there was a well-worn path between the typewriter and the washing machine.”

Today, Lowry is a successful writer and the winner of Newbery medals for her novels *Number the Stars* and *The Giver*. The Newbery is presented to authors of outstanding books for young people.

Lowry's novels are sometimes humorous, but they also delve into serious topics such as war and death. She draws from her own

experiences or the experiences of people she knows. She says that all of her books deal with one general theme—“the importance of human connections.”

Lowry's first novel, *A Summer to Die*, was published in 1977 and was partly autobiographical. It tells the story of a thirteen-year-old girl's efforts to deal with the death of an older sister. Lowry, whose beloved older sister had died, drew on her own emotions and sense of loss to create her character in this novel.

Lowry wrote *Number the Stars* in 1988. She was inspired by a friend who had grown up in Denmark during World War II, when the country was occupied by Nazi Germany. At that time, Jewish people all over Europe were being arrested and then killed by Germans. In Denmark the Danish people banded together to save their Jewish population. According to Lowry:

The Danish people were the only entire nation of people in the world who heard the splash and the cry and did not . . . turn away from the disaster.

Lowry's novel is based on hours of conversations with her friend and others who experienced the hardships of World War II. She says these conversations helped her to realize “for the first time . . . that historic events and day-to-day life are not separate things.”

In much of her writing, Lowry tries to tell the big story by relating small details. Lowry uses this technique in *Number the Stars*. She tells the large story of life in Denmark during World War II through the everyday lives of two young girls. Lowry says if she has a goal in her writing, it is to focus on:

the vital need for humans to be aware of their interdependence, not only with each other, but with the world and its environment.

Introducing the Novel

Lowry creates suspense and tension without wavering from the viewpoint of Annemarie, a child who shows the true meaning of courage.

—Newbery Committee Chair Caroline Ward

Annemarie is the main character in *Number the Stars*, a novel set in Denmark during World War II (1939–1945). In its simplest form, this historical novel is the story of two ten-year-old girls and the hardships they face while their country is occupied by German Nazis. In a much broader sense, it is a story of the entire Danish nation and its people.

Annemarie Johansen lives with her younger sister Kirsti and their parents in an apartment in Copenhagen. Annemarie's best friend Ellen Rosen, who is Jewish, lives with her parents in the same apartment building. As the novel unfolds, both families are learning to adapt to the German soldiers who have taken control of their country. Both Annemarie and Ellen try to ignore the soldiers on the streets as they walk home from school.

In an effort to adjust to the stress brought on by the Germans, Annemarie often loses herself in the fairy tales she creates for her sister. But the danger heightens, and fairy tales can no longer mask the horrible reality, as German soldiers begin arresting Danish Jews.

Lowry's inspiration for *Number the Stars* was her friend Annelise. The two women were friends for many years, and Lowry heard many stories about Annelise's childhood in Denmark. However, it was not until they were on a vacation together in 1988 that her friend shared with her some of the things she had experienced as a child during the war. Annelise remembered being so cold that she had to wear mittens to bed. She even remembered the high, shiny boots of the German soldiers who occupied her homeland.

Lowry makes many references to the soldier's boots in *Number the Stars*. When Lowry submit-

ted her finished manuscript, her editor thought there were too many references to the boots. Lowry might have removed some of those references if, soon afterward, she hadn't met a Dutch woman whose Jewish mother had been killed by the Nazis. The woman, just a toddler at the time of the Holocaust, remembered only one detail about the soldiers who took her mother away—their boots. Lowry told her editor to keep the references. She said she decided that:

if any reviewer should call attention to the overuse of that image—none ever has—I would simply tell them that those high shiny boots had trampled on several million childhoods and I was sorry I hadn't had several million more pages on which to mention that.

THE TIME AND PLACE

Number the Stars is set mainly in Copenhagen, Denmark, in 1943. It is a time when war is raging through Europe and parts of Asia. German forces, commanded by Adolf Hitler, have invaded the lands around Germany, and Japan is attacking nations in the Pacific. Great Britain, France—and later the United States—join forces to stop the aggression.

Adolf Hitler was the leader of the German aggression and was obsessed by the concept of "racial purity." He believed that the German people were members of a master race and destined to take over the world. The German Nazis believed that peoples such as Slavs and those of African descent were members of inferior races. Nazis also believed that Jews were members of the lowest and most dangerous race of all.

Immediately after his rise to power, Hitler embarked on a slow and steady campaign to rid Germany of Jews. In 1935 German Jews lost their citizenship, and marriage between Jews and "citizens of German . . . blood" was forbidden. In 1938 more than 1,000 synagogues were burned, thousands of Jewish businesses were looted, and 30,000 Jews were arrested. Jews began fleeing Germany, but many nations

refused to take them in as refugees. As a result of Germany's expansion, soon not only German Jews but Jews throughout Europe were at risk. It was in Eastern Europe that the Germans began the final and most horrific stage of their anti-Jew campaign. They moved Jews out of their homes and into special sections of the city called ghettos. They established death camps and embarked on a campaign of mass murder.

In early 1942, senior officials of the German government met to devise a "Final Solution" to the "Jewish Question." These men decided that Jews would be transported to concentration camps. There they would either be worked to death or murdered. As a result of this decision, millions of Jews were killed in gas chambers.

In 1940 the country of Denmark, knowing it was too small to defend itself against the large Nazi forces, surrendered to Germany. At the time when *Number the Stars* takes place, there were about 8,000 Jews living in Denmark. Most were the descendants of Jews who had immigrated to Denmark hundreds of years earlier from Spain, Portugal, Germany, and Russia. There were also about 1,500 Jewish refugees who had fled to Denmark in the early 1930s.

In Denmark laws protected Jews from anti-Semitism. This tradition went back to 1690, when a Danish police chief was fired for suggesting that Denmark should imitate other European countries and establish a ghetto where Jews would be forced to live. In 1814 the Danish Parliament passed a bill making racial or religious discrimination a crime.

When the Germans first occupied Denmark in 1940, the former German ambassador to Denmark warned his superiors back in Berlin that it would be dangerous to limit the civil rights of Danish Jews in any way. Later, a Gestapo colonel visited Denmark and complained that the Danes' tolerant attitude toward Jews was beginning to influence the German soldiers stationed in Denmark. He feared that if a crackdown against Jews was ordered, some of these soldiers might not be willing to enforce it.

In 1943 when the Danish people heard that the Germans had decided to arrest their Jewish citizens, they banded together to form the Danish Resistance. Members of the resistance helped nearly 7,000 people—almost the entire population of Danish Jews—cross the sea to freedom in Sweden.

Did You Know?

Jews were not the only victims of Adolf Hitler's desire to create a master race. The Nazis also killed

- Gypsies
- elderly people
- mentally handicapped and physically challenged adults, children, and babies

- people with epilepsy
- people with a history of mental illness
- people too ill to work
- Jehovah's Witnesses
- people of Slavic nationality, including Russian prisoners of war

Before You Read

Number the Stars Chapters 1–5

FOCUS ACTIVITY

Would you ever be willing to risk your life for another person? Under what circumstances might you take this risk?

Journal Writing

While few people will ever be called to risk their lives for a friend or neighbor, many of us run into situations that require courage to stand up for someone else. Try to remember such a situation in your own life and in your journal describe what happened.

Setting a Purpose

Read to find out how and why the members of the Johansen family take a risk for friends.

BACKGROUND

Did You Know?

Throughout their long history, followers of the Jewish faith have faced prejudice and persecution. The Romans banned Jews from the holy city of Jerusalem during the days of the Roman Empire. A thousand years later, Crusaders massacred German Jews. In 1492 the Jewish population was driven from Spain. By the end of the nineteenth century, most of the world's Jews lived in Russia and Poland. A substantial number also lived in Germany, and about one million had emigrated to the United States.

In the late 1870s, some people began to think of Jews as belonging to a different “race,” and some writers and politicians of the time began to criticize Jews for their religious beliefs. Adolf Hitler's ideas about German “racial purity” were an extension of myths about race. He used these myths to generate hatred toward the Jews.

Rosh Hashana

Rosh Hashana is the Jewish New Year. It occurs on the first day of the seventh month of the Jewish calendar, which is based on lunar months. The seventh month of the moon calendar usually falls in September. Rosh Hashana, which means “Head of the Year” in Hebrew, is one of the holiest days of the Jewish year. It commemorates the creation of the world and is a time for quietly reflecting on one's actions during the previous year and for repenting of one's sins. On Rosh Hashana, an ancient musical instrument called a *shofar* is played. The shofar is a ram's horn. When it is blown, it creates a high-pitched blast. The notes of the shofar call Jews to experience a spiritual reawakening.

VOCABULARY PREVIEW

contempt [kən tempt'] *n.* feeling of scorn toward a person or thing

exasperated [ig zas'pə rāt'əd] *adj.* extremely annoyed

imperious [im pēr'ē əs] *adj.* bossy or bullying in an arrogant way

intricate [in'tri kit] *adj.* very detailed

sabotage [sab'ə təzh'] *n.* destruction of property or interference with activities as a part of an effort against an enemy

Before You Read

Number the Stars Chapters 6–11

FOCUS ACTIVITY

Do you think of yourself as a brave person? Why or why not? What is your definition of bravery?



Define It

Think of different kinds of bravery. Define them and give an example for each. (Examples: physical bravery—getting a shot at the doctor’s; performance bravery—performing in public)

Setting a Purpose

Read to find out how Annemarie’s Uncle Henrik defines bravery.

BACKGROUND

Did You Know?

Many of the world’s religions share beliefs about the importance of treating other people well. One of these shared beliefs is the golden rule. In the collection of Jewish teaching called the Talmud, this rule is stated as “The things you hate should not be done to others.” Christianity’s Book of Luke in the New Testament states, “Do to others what you would wish them to do to you.” Islam teaches, “You are not a real Muslim until you want for other people what you want for yourself.” The Hindu Mahabharata states, “Do nothing to others that would cause you pain if they did it to you.”

The Resistance

Most of Denmark’s Jews were saved because of prompt and sometimes very imaginative action by ordinary citizens. For example, when Jorgen Knudsen heard that the Germans were starting to round up Jews for deportation, the Danish ambulance driver looked through telephone directories for individuals whose family names were “Jewish-sounding.” He drove his ambulance to the home of one family after another, warning the family to escape. A few of the people he contacted were frantic because they couldn’t think of any place to seek refuge. Knudsen drove these individuals to a hospital where one of the physicians was active in the Resistance. The doctor disguised these new arrivals as hospital patients. A week later, hundreds of Jewish refugees were still hiding in this hospital when news came that the Gestapo planned a search of the facility. Hospital officials pretended that a funeral was being held in the hospital chapel. A procession of about twenty taxis came to take the “mourners” away.

VOCABULARY PREVIEW

deftly [deft’ly] *adv.* in a quick and skillful way

distorted [dis tōrt’əd] *adj.* twisted out of shape

protrude [prō trōōd’] *v.* to stick out

ruefully [rōō’fəl ly] *adv.* in a regretful or mournful way

tentatively [ten’tə tiv ly] *adv.* with uncertainty

Before You Read

Number the Stars Chapters 12–17

FOCUS ACTIVITY

How do you prepare yourself when you have something difficult to face or to accomplish? Do you think about something else or give yourself advice?

Make a List

Make a list of some tactics you have used in the past to prepare for and deal with difficult situations.

Setting a Purpose

Read to find out how Annemarie copes with an important and frightening mission.

BACKGROUND

Did You Know?

In 1953 the Israeli Parliament created Yad Vashem, a memorial to the Holocaust and a center for Holocaust-related research. The center was authorized to honor Gentiles (non-Jews) who had risked their lives to save Jews during the Holocaust. To be considered, a person must have helped to save the life of at least one Jew from Nazi persecution and taken action in spite of danger or difficulty. As of mid-1997, Yad Vashem had recognized over 13,000 such individuals. Each received a medal inscribed with the words, “Whoever saves a single life, saves the entire world.”

Sweden as a Refuge

Sweden was neutral during World War II: It did not take sides with either Germany or Germany’s enemies. Throughout the 1930s, Sweden issued very few entry permits to Jewish refugees. However, in 1943 Sweden could see that the tide of the war was turning against Germany. Germany was retreating in North Africa and in Stalingrad, Russia. It seemed just a matter of time before Germany was defeated. Therefore, the Swedish government dared to offer official sanctuary to Danish Jews even though this action would infuriate Germany.

Because the two countries are separated only by a narrow strait, many Jews could be quickly transported from Denmark to Sweden. When faced with the problem of how to move thousands of refugees to Sweden, Resistance leaders immediately started contacting the captains of many of the fishing boats that worked the waters off the nation’s eastern coast. Many captains accepted the dangerous assignment. In the early days of the operation, fees ranged from about \$150 to \$1,500 per person. Resistance workers got involved to make sure that none of the captains made an unfair profit from the refugees’ desperation. They bargained with the sailors and brought the price down to as low as \$65 per person.

VOCABULARY PREVIEW

brusque [brusk] *adj.* rough or abrupt in speech

devastating [dev’əs tāt’ing] *adj.* overwhelmingly terrible

quaver [kwā’ver] *v.* to tremble (said of a voice)

taut [tôt] *adj.* tightly stretched