

LOIS LOWRY



Number the Stars

With an introduction by the author

Number the Stars

LOIS LOWRY



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For my friend Annelise Platt
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Introduction

It's hard to believe that I wrote *Number the Stars* more than twenty years ago. It seems like yesterday that I answered the phone on a snowy January morning and received the news that it had been awarded the 1990 Newbery Medal.

Most books published that long ago have faded into a pleasant, undisturbed retirement on dusty library shelves, or become an occasional topic for a research paper. But *Number the Stars* seems to have acquired its own long and vibrant life; not a day goes by that I don't hear from a passionate reader of the book—some of them parents who remember it from their childhood and are now reading it with their own children.

I think readers of every age match themselves against the protagonists of books they love. *Would I have done that?* they ask themselves as they follow a fictional character through a novel. *What choice would I have made?*

And ten—the age of Annemarie in *Number the Stars*, and the approximate age of most of the book's readers—is an age when young people are beginning to develop a strong set of personal ethics. They want to be honorable people. They want to do the right thing. And they are beginning to realize that the world they live in is a place where the right thing is often hard, sometimes dangerous, and frequently unpopular.

So they follow a story about a girl their age, caught in a frightening situation, who must make decisions. She could take the easy way out. She could turn her back on her friend. (As the readers of *Number the Stars* grow older and read other Holocaust literature, they'll find that many people in other countries, not Denmark, did just that). Young readers rejoice when Annemarie takes a deep breath, enters

the woods, faces the danger, stands up to the enemy, and triumphs.

When the book was newly published, it found its way into the hands and hearts of children who had read about but never experienced war. Now, sadly, I have heard from young readers who have lost a parent or an older brother in Iraq or Afghanistan. We all know how easy it is, and how futile, to blame and to hate.

I think the history of Denmark has much to teach us all.

The book has been published in many countries now, translated into countless different languages from Hungarian to Hebrew. Everywhere children are still reading about the integrity that a small Scandinavian population showed almost seventy years ago. Books do change lives, I know; and many readers have told me that *Number the Stars* changed theirs when they were young, that it made them think about both cruelty and courage. "It was something that shaped my idea of how people should be treated," wrote a young woman recently, recalling her own fourth grade experience with the book.

The Danish friend who originally told me the story of her childhood in Copenhagen in 1943, and who became the prototype for the fictional Annemarie, is an old woman now. So am I. We both love thinking of the children reading the story today, coming to it for the first time and realizing that once, for a brief time and in a small place, a group of prejudice-free people honored the humanity of others.

Lois Lowry

1. Why Are You Running?

"I'll race you to the corner, Ellen!" Annemarie adjusted the thick leather pack on her back so that her schoolbooks balanced evenly. "Ready?" She looked at her best friend.

Ellen made a face. "No," she said, laughing. "You know I can't beat you —my legs aren't as long. Can't we just walk, like civilized people?" She was a stocky ten-year-old, unlike lanky Annemarie.

"We have to practice for the athletic meet on Friday—I *know* I'm going to win the girls' race this week. I was second last week, but I've been practicing every day. Come on, Ellen," Annemarie pleaded, eyeing the distance to the next corner of the Copenhagen street. "Please?"

Ellen hesitated, then nodded and shifted her own rucksack of books against her shoulders. "Oh, all right. Ready," she said.

"Go!" shouted Annemarie, and the two girls were off, racing along the residential sidewalk. Annemarie's silvery blond hair flew behind her, and Ellen's dark pigtails bounced against her shoulders.

"Wait for me!" wailed little Kirsti, left behind, but the two older girls weren't listening.

Annemarie outdistanced her friend quickly, even though one of her shoes came untied as she sped along the street called Østerbrogade, past the small shops and cafés of her neighborhood here in northeast Copenhagen. Laughing, she skirted an elderly lady in black who carried a shopping bag made of string. A young woman pushing a baby in a carriage moved aside to make way. The corner was just ahead.

Annemarie looked up, panting, just as she reached the corner. Her laughter stopped. Her heart seemed to skip a