

## A GUIDE TO Number the Stars

Lois Lowry

*“Papa, do you remember what you heard the boy say to the soldier? That all of Denmark would be the king’s bodyguard? . . . Well, now I think that all of Denmark must be bodyguard for the Jews, as well.”*

### THE NOVEL AT A GLANCE

*Number the Stars* is a Newbery Award–winning historical novel addressing the issues of racism, courage, and altruism.

**Setting:** Copenhagen, Denmark, in 1943, during the darkest days of the Nazi occupation.

**Protagonist:** Annemarie Johansen, an ordinary ten-year-old student who finds extraordinary reserves of courage and self-sacrifice in the struggle to save the lives of the Rosen family.

**Conflicts:** The chief conflict is that between the Danish people and their Nazi occupiers. The efforts of the Johansen family to rescue the Rosens are a microcosm of the Danes’ brave and unyielding resistance to the Germans, especially their feat of ushering nearly all of Denmark’s seven thousand Jews safely out of the country.

**Resolution:** Despite several close calls, the Rosens are transported safely to Sweden, but both Lise Johansen and her fiance, Peter, sacrifice their lives while serving in the anti-Nazi Resistance.

**Themes:** In the face of seemingly overwhelming evil, ordinary people—even a ten-year-old like Annemarie—can still embody the virtues of decency, bravery, and self-sacrifice and uphold the possibility of a better world.

**Of Special Note:** The historical **setting** has been meticulously researched. In an Afterword, Lowry explains that much of Annemarie’s story is true and discusses the sources and inspirations for her novel.

Peter in their risky plan to rescue potential victims of the Holocaust.

### BACKGROUND

**Nazism.** In 1933, Germany was taken over by Adolf Hitler, the head of the National Socialist German Workers’ (Nazi) party, a totalitarian, racist, and chauvinist movement whose core tenet was the racial superiority of the Aryan, or Nordic, people. The Nazis’ goals included territorial expansion and, ultimately, the elimination of European Jewry. These policies led to the catastrophe of World War II and the Holocaust—the rounding up and mass execution of some six million Jews in concentration camps throughout Central and Eastern Europe.

**Resistance.** During World War II many Danes—and citizens of other countries conquered by the Nazis—formed an underground network to resist and sabotage the German occupation forces and help Jews escape or hide. Among the vanquished Europeans, the Danish people were especially unified and courageous in their resistance to Nazi terror.

**Star of David.** A six-pointed star made of two interlaced equilateral triangles that is a symbol of Judaism and of the State of Israel.

**Sweden.** A neutral country during the Second World War.

**Jewish New Year.** According to the Hebrew calendar, *Rosh Hashana* (literally “first of the year” in Hebrew), the Jewish New Year, begins on the first day of the month of Tishri, which usually falls sometime in September or October in the Gregorian calendar used in Western countries.

**King Christian X.** Although Denmark was a democracy long before 1943, the monarchy persisted, and still does, as part of the nation’s cultural tradition without any real political authority. Denmark became a constitutional monarchy in 1849, and in 1915 Christian X signed a new constitution that adopted a system of parliamentary democracy with universal suffrage.

### SPECIAL CONSIDERATIONS

The novel should pose no problems to students reading at the middle school level. Although the terrors of the Nazi occupation lurk in the background, there are no explicit depictions of violence; the novel’s main concerns are the decency and bravery of the Johansens and

## MAIN CHARACTERS (IN ORDER OF APPEARANCE)

**Annemarie Johansen**, a ten-year-old Danish girl whose ordinary, happy childhood is transformed by the German occupation of Denmark and the struggle to save Danish Jews from the concentration camps.

**Ellen Rosen**, also ten years old, Annemarie's best friend; her family faces arrest and deportation by the Nazis.

**Kirsti Johansen**, Annemarie's five-year-old sister.

**Inge Johansen (Mama)**, Annemarie's mother, whose love and unwavering sense of duty help give her daughter the courage to act decisively in the face of mortal danger.

**Mr. Johansen (Papa)**, Annemarie's father, a kind and patient parent who helps to instill the virtue of self-sacrifice in his children.

**Sophy Rosen**, Ellen's mother.

**Peter Neilsen**, a friend of the Johansens who was engaged to Annemarie's deceased older sister, Lise; a leader of the Resistance who sacrifices his life in the underground battle against the Nazi occupiers.

**Henrik**, Mama's brother, Annemarie's uncle, a fisherman and member of the Resistance; he uses his boat to ferry Jews to safety in Sweden.

**Mr. Rosen**, Ellen's father, a teacher.

**Lise Johansen**, Annemarie's older sister, a Resistance activist who was killed at age eighteen by the Nazis three years before the action of the book begins; their memory of her is an inspiration to the Johansens.

## PLOT

**Chapter 1.** We meet the **characters** and their **setting** as Annemarie Johansen and her best friend, Ellen Rosen, are gleefully racing home from school through the streets of Copenhagen, Denmark, trailed by Annemarie's little sister, Kirsti. It is 1943, and the girls are abruptly stopped by two German occupation soldiers who ask them why they are running and tell them to slow down. Frightened, the girls walk cautiously back to the apartment building where they live. Finding Mrs. Rosen having coffee with her mother at home, Annemarie relates the details of their encounter. Mrs. Johansen speculates that the soldiers are edgy about recent Resistance activities. Here the central **conflict** of the novel is identified: the struggle of the ordinary Danish citizens against the evils of Nazism. Mrs. Rosen entreats Annemarie to follow a different path home the next day.

**Chapter 2.** That night in bed, Kirsti asks Annemarie to tell her a fairy tale. Annemarie makes up a story about a king and a queen. She lets her thoughts drift to the real king of Denmark, Christian X, who is much beloved by the Danes. She used to see him on the street when she walked with her older sister, Lise. Three years earlier, Lise died in an accident at age eighteen, just two weeks before her wedding date. Annemarie thinks back

to a talk she had with her father, when she asked him why Denmark had surrendered so easily to the Nazis whereas Norway had resisted so fiercely. Father explained that with so few soldiers and without Norway's mountains, any attempt to fight would have been futile—and that Norway, like Denmark, Holland, Belgium, and France, had ultimately fallen to the Third Reich. She reflects sadly on how the war has made Father seem tired, old, and defeated.

**Chapter 3.** Stopping at Mrs. Hirsch's button shop one day, Annemarie sees a sign written in German and a padlock on the door. When Mrs. Johansen hears the news, she hastens to see Mrs. Rosen. Later that night Annemarie is awakened by Mama, who ushers her into the living room to greet an unexpected visitor—Peter. Peter, an activist in the Resistance, was to marry her late sister, Lise. He tells them that the Germans have ordered the closing of many Jewish-run stores. The Johansens agree that they and their neighbors must help affected Jewish families like the Hirsches. The concern of Peter and the Johansens for the Jews' plight underscores the central **theme** of the novel: the persistence of human decency and courage in the face of monstrous evil. Annemarie wonders if she will be called upon to do something courageous, like a hero in a fairy tale, to help the Jews of Denmark.

**Chapter 4.** Upon returning from New Year's services at the synagogue, Mrs. Rosen has an urgent, hushed conversation with Mrs. Johansen, after which they announce that Ellen will be staying with the Johansens for a few days while her parents go off to visit relatives. At dinner that night, Papa reveals the truth to Annemarie: At that morning's service the rabbi announced that the Nazis had seized the synagogues' lists of members because they plan to arrest all the Jews. Since they cannot discreetly accommodate three people, the Johansens have taken in Ellen, and Peter has arranged for Mr. and Mrs. Rosen to find refuge elsewhere. If the Nazis come to the apartment, Ellen and Annemarie will pretend to be sisters.

**Chapter 5.** That night Annemarie and Ellen reminisce about Lise. Several hours later, Annemarie is awakened by a pounding on the apartment door. Peering into the living room, she sees German officers asking her parents where the Rosens are. As the soldiers approach the girls' room, Annemarie yanks off Ellen's gold chain, which holds a Star of David. Ellen identifies herself as Lise Johansen. Shining a flashlight, the officer suspiciously notices the difference between Ellen's brown hair and the blond hair of Annemarie and Kirsti. In a moment filled with **suspense**, Papa shows him a baby photograph of Lise, who had brown hair as an infant. The officers then depart.

**Chapter 6.** The Johansens decide to keep the girls out of school the next day to protect Ellen. Later that day Mama accompanies the girls on a train ride to the house of her bachelor brother, Henrik, a fisherman on the coast.

**Chapter 7.** The beautiful **setting** of Henrik's house, in a meadow by the sea, greatly impresses the girls. Across the sea, the girls can see the coast of neutral Sweden, a **foreshadowing** of the Rosens' escape route. Annemarie assures Ellen that she has hidden her necklace in a safe, secret place.

**Chapter 8.** The girls revel in the natural beauty surrounding them, playing in the meadow and collecting wildflowers while Mama gives Henrik's bachelor house a thorough cleaning. Eavesdropping on a conversation between her mother and uncle, Annemarie hears Henrik utter the cryptic phrase "Tomorrow will be a day for fishing," which strikes her as odd since Henrik fishes every day. Then Mama tells her of the death of her great-aunt Birte, whose body will lie in the living room in its casket before being taken for burial. Annemarie has never heard of this relative before and suspects that there is no such person.

**Chapter 9.** Annemarie confronts Henrik with her suspicion that he and Mama are lying to her about the death of "Aunt Birte." Henrik asks her to be brave. He tells her that neither he nor Mama knows exactly what is going on and it is best that they do not. Then the hearse arrives with Aunt Birte, and they prepare to begin their night of "mourning." Ellen, oblivious of the ruse, conveys her condolences to Mama. During the evening several people come to make condolence calls, including an old man and a couple with an infant who sit silently before the casket in the living room. Then Henrik takes Ellen out to his boat, where she is reunited with her parents. They all return to the house, accompanied by Peter.

**Chapter 10.** While the "mourners" sit silently in the living room, a tense **complication** develops when a German officer appears suddenly and voices suspicion about the large gathering. Told that it is occasioned by a death, the officer demands that the casket be opened. Thinking quickly, Mama announces that the casket is closed because Aunt Birte died of typhus. As she moves to open the casket, the German slaps her aside and walks out, ordering the mourners to close their curtains.

**Chapter 11.** Peter opens the casket, removes folded blankets and sweaters, and hands them to the people in the room. Mama gives them some food and fetches Kirsti's red sweater to cover the infant girl. Peter administers a few drops of a sedative to ensure that the baby will not awaken and cry. He then hands a packet to Mr. Rosen and asks him to deliver it to Henrik. Peter leads the old man and the couple out first, instructing Mama to bring the Rosens to Henrik twenty minutes later. As Annemarie beholds the anxious Rosens and reflects back on happier times, she realizes that her best friend will soon board Henrik's boat for the trip to Sweden.

**Chapter 12.** As the Rosens depart, Ellen embraces Annemarie and promises to return. Mama accompanies them on the half-hour walk to the point of rendezvous

with Henrik's boat. Annemarie falls asleep, and upon awakening several hours later, she is alarmed to see that Mama has not returned. She looks outside and sees her mother lying on the ground.

**Chapter 13.** Annemarie rushes to Mama's side and finds that she is conscious. Mama tells her that she guided the Rosens and the others safely aboard Henrik's boat but that on the way back she slipped, probably broke her ankle, and had to drag herself part of the way home. On the ground Annemarie discovers the packet that Mr. Rosen was supposed to deliver to Henrik but apparently dropped. Mama groans in dismay and instructs Annemarie to prepare a basket with bread, cheese, and an apple, hiding the packet at the bottom, and to deliver the crucial package to Henrik at the boat. Mama says that if any soldiers stop her, she should pretend to be a silly little girl delivering lunch to her forgetful uncle.

**Chapter 14.** The story reaches its **climax** when Annemarie, about to approach the harbor, is confronted by four armed German soldiers with two large dogs straining at their leashes.

**Chapter 15.** A soldier begins to interrogate Annemarie. Trying to act like a "silly little girl" to hide her anxiety, she explains that she is delivering lunch to her Uncle Henrik. The soldier removes the bread from the basket and feeds it to the dogs. Then he removes the cheese, tosses the apple to the ground, and begins to inspect the bottom of the basket. Annemarie begins to cry, protesting that the soldier is making her late. The soldier finds the packet and begins to open it. Finding only a handkerchief, he flings the cheese back into the basket and contemptuously dismisses Annemarie. She finds Uncle Henrik on his boat but does not see the Rosens or the others inside. He assures her that all is well and is greatly relieved to see the packet inside the basket.

**Chapter 16.** In this chapter we learn of the **resolution** of the story's major **conflicts**. Henrik explains to Annemarie that the Rosens and the others were not visible on the boat because they were hidden in a secret compartment he had built in order to transport the refugees that Peter has been regularly delivering to him. When Annemarie asks about the handkerchief hidden in the packet, he explains that the Germans, frustrated at their inability to thwart the escape of so many Jews, started to use dogs to sniff out passengers hidden on the boats. In response several scientists devised a drug that blunts the canine sense of smell. The handkerchief had been doused in this drug as a precaution. Had Annemarie not delivered it, the refugees would no doubt have been discovered by the German guard dogs that were sniffing around the boat only minutes after Annemarie's arrival.

**Chapter 17.** Two years later in May, when Annemarie is twelve, the war ends. Church bells ring and people celebrate all over Denmark. The Johansens' joy is muted as they recall Peter's capture and execution by

the Germans. The **theme** of courage and self-sacrifice in the face of evil is emphasized when Mama and Papa finally tell Annemarie that Lise, too, was killed by the Nazis because of her Resistance activities. Annemarie goes to her bedroom to find Ellen's necklace with the Star of David. She vows to wear it until Ellen's return.

## APPROACHES FOR POST-READING ACTIVITIES

The outstanding element of this novel is its historical **setting**. The major conflict of the story is directly connected with that setting. (Its focus on a very specific time and place makes the novel an excellent adjunct to social studies courses focusing on world or European history.) Discussion groups or students doing individual research projects might focus on the following activities.

### 1. Investigating the Historical Background

One of the first things young readers might want to talk about in regard to this novel is "Did things like this really happen?" That question could lead to an investigation of several features of the novel's **setting**:

- the nature and evolution of Nazism in Germany
- the history and meaning of the Holocaust; the fate of Jews in other European countries during World War II
- the varying degrees of resistance and collaboration in the countries occupied by Germany during World War II
- the role of the monarchy in modern Danish history

### 2. Extending the Novel

Discussion groups might extend ideas in the novel:

- Can students think of other examples of genocide from history or current events? (Discussion might center on American Indians, Cambodia, East Timor, Rwanda, or Bosnia and Herzegovina.)
- Is racism still a source of conflict and war in today's world? Ask students to list examples.
- What is totalitarianism? Does it still exist anywhere?
- When laws are unjust, is it right to disobey those laws in the name of conscience and justice? (Discussion might center on the examples of Henry David Thoreau, Mohandas Gandhi, and Martin Luther King, Jr.)

## MEET THE WRITER

**Lois Lowry** (1937– ) has written a number of young adult novels, including *The One Hundredth Thing About Caroline*; *Switcharound*; *Taking Care of Terrific*; *Autumn Street*; *Us and Uncle Fraud*; *Rabble Starkey*; *Anastasia Again!*; *Anastasia, Ask Your Analyst*; *Anastasia on Her Own*; *Anastasia Has the Answers*; *Anastasia's Chosen Career*; and *All About Sam*. She lives in Boston and New Hampshire.

## READ ON

**Anne Frank: *The Diary of a Young Girl***. Perhaps the best-known victim of the Holocaust, Anne Frank was forced into hiding with her family for nearly two years in a cramped apartment in Amsterdam, the Netherlands. During that confinement, Anne kept a diary of her innermost thoughts and feelings. The Franks were discovered by the Nazis and sent to concentration camps; only Anne's father survived. Mr. Frank recovered her diary after the war.

**Of Special Note:** The 1996 winner of the Academy Award for Best Documentary, *Anne Frank Remembered*, directed by Jon Blair, is the first eyewitness account of Anne Frank's life.

**Renee Roth-Hano, *Touch Wood: A Girlhood in Occupied France***. A fictionalized rendering of the author's childhood during the German occupation of France.

**Christina Laird, *Shadow of the Wall***. Hoping to shield her son and two daughters from the Nazis, a dying Jewish woman sends them to the Orphans Home in Warsaw. The boy, Misha, ushers one of his sisters to safety; when he sees the other deported to Treblinka, he decides to join the Resistance.

**Anne Petry, "A Glory over Everything" from *Harriet Tubman: Conductor on the Underground Railroad***. A biography of a woman who escapes from slavery and later courageously helps more than three hundred men, women, and children along the perilous road to freedom.

**Mildred Taylor, "Song of the Trees."** An award-winning story in which a brave young girl saves the beautiful and beloved trees that grow on her family's property from a greedy logger.

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