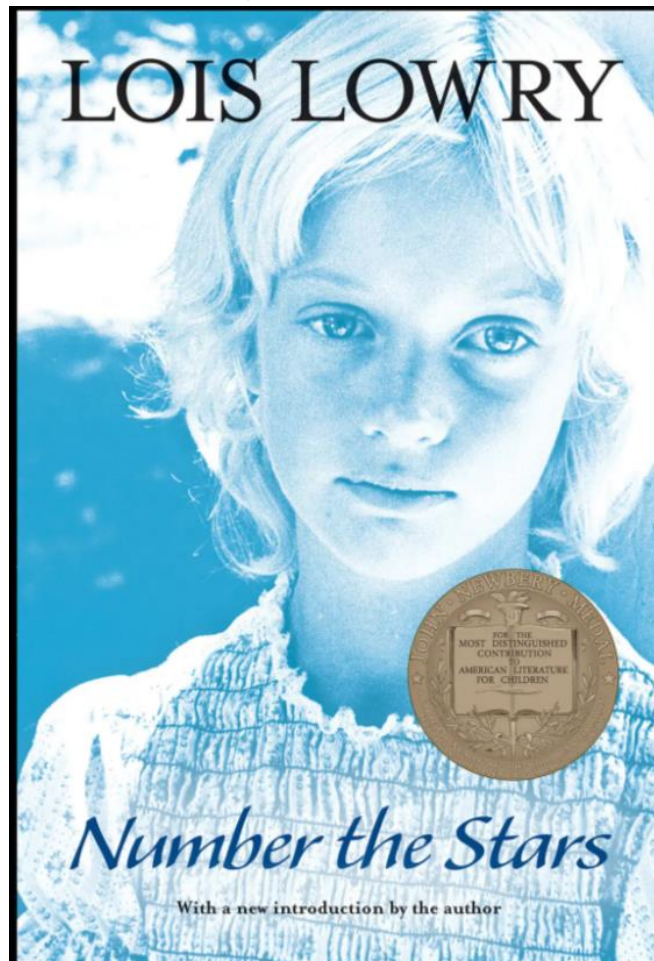


OPINION

# This Perfect Mother-Daughter Read Holds a Powerful Lesson for Fighting Antisemitism

Nov. 5, 2022 Jessica Grose



Like many book nerds, when I became a mother I fantasized about a future in which my daughters and I could lounge side by side, reading in comfortable silence. I was

overjoyed when this started happening with my older daughter — we started reading together and she'd chatter about the characters in the books that she was tearing through, like the telepathic elves in the "Keeper of the Lost Cities" series.

Her enthusiasm for reading is infectious and I suggested that maybe we should read something together and have a mini book club. But I can't get into the fantasy genre, so we cast around for a book we could both agree on. I tried pressing "From the Mixed-up Files of Mrs. Basil E. Frankweiler" on her, but she rejected it. She kept trying to sell me on elves, but I demurred. Finally, she told me she had started "Number the Stars" in school, and I was overjoyed: I remembered really liking Lois Lowry's historical fiction when I was a girl, so it seemed like the perfect mother-daughter read.

"Number the Stars" is told from the perspective of a 10-year-old Danish girl named Annemarie Johansen in 1943. Her best friend, Ellen Rosen, is Jewish, and Annemarie's family helps Ellen's family escape to Sweden during the German occupation of Denmark in World War II. Part of the plan to deceive the Nazis involves Ellen posing as Annemarie's older sister, Lise, who died a few years before the action of the book begins. Annemarie also has a younger sister, Kirsti, and the Johansens and the Rosens live in the same apartment building. The book's title refers to Ellen's Star of David necklace, which at one point Annemarie yanks from her neck, breaking the chain, to hide Ellen's real identity.

"Number the Stars" is particularly relevant to our family, and to this moment. My grandparents were [Holocaust survivors](#), and in case you hadn't noticed, there have been [some very high-profile instances of antisemitism](#) in [the news of late](#). On Thursday, for example, [the F.B.I. announced](#) that it had "received credible information of a broad threat to synagogues" in New Jersey.

Lowry's book was not my older daughter's introduction to the Holocaust. I don't remember when we first told her about it, just as I don't remember first learning about it myself. Religious and ethnic persecution is the reason all of my ancestors came to America — the Holocaust on one side, pogroms on the other — so those stories are baked into our family history. But when she was younger, I did have to explain that she can't just bring up the Holocaust in any conversation, after she once casually told a neighborhood dad that her relatives were "executed" by Nazis. That's pretty heavy for 10 a.m. on a Saturday at the playground.

The historical aspects of "Number the Stars" that were new to my daughter were about the way Danish Christians worked to protect their Jewish friends and neighbors. Lowry makes a point to tell the reader in lovely but simple prose that the Rosens and the Johansens were "ordinary" people, and that the collective bravery of regular Danes saved many Jews who otherwise would have perished. When we read together, I told my daughter that one of the things my oma said was very painful to her about living through the 1930s in Vienna was that her Christian friends abandoned her.

Surprisingly to me, the part of the story that resonated most with my daughter was the death of Annemarie's older sister, Lise. You find out at the end of the book that Lise died because she had been part of the Danish resistance. Annemarie and Kirsti had been told Lise died in an accident. But it turns out she was in a secret meeting that was broken up by the Nazis. "They saw her running, and simply ran her down," Annemarie's father tells her at the end of the war.

My daughter couldn't fathom losing a sister. The book is told from Annemarie's perspective, and so you hear from her about how much she misses Lise. But my daughter asked me: Wasn't Kirsti, the younger sister, really sad, too? Why didn't we hear more about her feelings?

Her big heart made me smile. I could see she was thinking of her own little sister; the age difference between my girls is about the same as between Annemarie and Kirsti. I didn't have it in me to try to give her another [Very Important Maternal Lecture](#) about antisemitism, because I don't think she needed it in that moment. She was able to reflect on friendship, family, sacrifice and the Holocaust, all at once, without my forcing some kind of overly tidy message on her.

And for what it's worth, I agree with Marjorie Ingall, who [wrote](#) for The Times last year that there are probably too many "righteous-gentile" books, and "none will improve on Lois Lowry's flawless 'Number the Stars,' anyway." We don't just need books for Jewish kids that focus on our victimhood, as Ingall argues, we need children's books showing us as full humans, with "lively, luscious writing and low-stakes conflict."

Besides, my daughter is already aware that hatred toward Jews exists in this world. But she's also 9 — she barely knows who Ye is and she certainly doesn't care what some middle-aged guy thinks. She internalized the story enough to empathize deeply with the "ordinary" families at the center of "Number the Stars," and to understand how prejudice tears apart a society and touches everyone in it.

That's enough of a lesson for today.