



Book Review: *The War that Saved My Life*  
Written by Kimberly Brubaker Bradley  
Dial Book, 2015, 316 pp.  
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This powerful historical novel has taken up residence in my heart. It is a story of ten-year-old Ada whose courage helps her overcome heartbreaking circumstances. The novel unfolds in England during World War II where Ada lives in London with her younger brother, Jamie. She has never left their tiny one-room apartment because her mother is ashamed of Ada's twisted, club foot. Her Mam terribly abuses Ada, locking her in a cupboard, withholding food, beating her, and calling her a cripple and worse. Ada is forced to crawl in the apartment—Mam won't even supply her with crutches. From the time he was in diapers, six-year-old Jamie has had Ada as his caretaker. Ada dreams of leaving the room and suddenly gets her chance when children in London are evacuated in 1939 to protect them from the coming German bombing. Mam doesn't intend that Ada will be evacuated. But, while Mam sleeps, Ada with the help of Jamie steals away and boards a train with other evacuees. On the train Ada watches the sights and learns about things she has never known like grass, trees, and churches. Everything she sees is new to her. When the train reaches its destination, the children are placed with Susan Smith, a single woman living on the outskirts of town, who is mourning the death of her housemate and dearest friend. She tells the children that she doesn't know a thing about taking care of children, but she gradually becomes their fiercest protector. It takes some time for Miss Smith, Jamie and Ada to come together as a family but they do. Ada's journey into a new life, demonstrates her perseverance, grit, resourcefulness and intelligence. Along the way Ada learns to read and write, ride a pony, makes friends and proves herself useful in the community. The ending is a cliffhanger. Don't read this one late at night, or you'll wind up not sleeping.

Kimberly Brubaker Bradley, the author of another outstanding book, *Jefferson's Sons* (2011), is a gifted storyteller. She creates realistic characters that stick in the memory. In the midst of telling about the difficulties that the British lived through during the War, she explores the themes of what it means to be a family and how a person can survive a terrible beginning in life and yet eventually thrive. Bradley shows us that love can make such a difference. Even though the story is about difficult subjects it is hopeful. It is a story that invites discussion and contemplation. After finishing the book, I reread inspiring parts to savor them again. Read this aloud to fifth and sixth graders to open a window that will make a difference in their understanding of what it means to survive under difficult circumstances. In 2015, *The War that Saved My Life* received the Newbery Honor Award and the Schneider Family Book Award, which is given for a book about a disability experience.

A good pairing for comparison is *Good Night, Mr. Tom* (1981) by Michelle Magorian, which tells the story of a boy, Willie, who was been badly abused by his mother and is evacuated from London to the English countryside. There he also discovers a new world he didn't know about. Mr. Tom, a kind old man, takes him in and gives him a new life and family.

Marilyn Carpenter, Professor Emeritus Eastern Washington University, Spokane, WA