



One Great Book: Volume IV, Episode 4
The War That Saved My Life by Kimberly Brubaker
Bradley

[00:00]

One Great Book Volume IV, Book 4: *The War That Saved My Life*

[UPBEAT INTRO MUSIC]

Hey readers, I'm Anne Bogel, and you're listening to *One Great Book*, the short-form podcast from the team behind *What Should I Read Next?*, where each week I pull one stand-out selection off my personal bookshelves and tell you all about it in ten minutes or less.

[MUSIC]

Readers, in these episodes of *One Great Book*, I get to tell you all about a book I love in ten minutes or less. This is my opportunity to metaphorically press a book into your hands you that might not have known about otherwise—or perhaps, knowing about the book, you might think it's not for you. Maybe that's because of its genre, maybe you don't like the cover, maybe the book is in a corner of the bookstore that you never venture to. Today I'm sharing a book that I've pressed into the hands of scores of readers—sometimes literally, sometimes metaphorically—and what I've heard over and over again, “I never would have picked that for myself but I LOVED IT.” And that thrill of discovery, coupled with that near-miss experience—well, it's a highlight of the reading life.

So, why might readers miss out on this book? It's not because it's sci fi, like *Sleeping Giants*, it's not because of the horrible cover, like *The Ballad of the Whiskey Robber*. It's because it's a middle grade novel, but don't let that stop you reader, because this novel has been a hit with readers of all ages. C. S. Lewis has my back on this one; he once said “a children's story which is enjoyed only by children is a bad children's story.” This book is nothing of the sort: in *The War*



That Saved My Life, Kimberly Brubaker Bradley flips the script on your typical wartime story to tell a tale of pain and hardship, yes, but that pain comes from unexpected quarters—as does the love and redemption her characters ultimately find, and it is One. Great. Book.

[02:06]

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Bradley's story begins in the little moments. She knew she wanted to write not about the marquis events of history, but about the small stories. The battles, the laws, the natural



disasters—sure, they’re important, but they don’t interest as a writer her nearly as much as how ordinary people lived their lives in different eras. *That* is why she writes historical fiction.

[03:35]

For this story, she thought she wanted to write about WWII. Specifically, she wanted to write about the British children who were evacuated to rural areas during World War II. For many children, being forced to leave their home for an unfamiliar area, while their parents stayed behind, possibly to get bombed—it was horrible. But Bradley began to wonder: what if there was a child for whom the evacuation wasn’t traumatic? What if she could write a character for whom being taken away from her family and plopped in the countryside with strangers was an “unmitigated good.”

That’s exactly what she did. Readers, meet Ada. She’s nine years old, and she’s never been allowed to leave her family’s small London apartment. Ada was born with a club foot, you see, and her mother is too ashamed of Ada’s twisted foot to even let her out in public.

Then the war arrives in London, and Ada’s mother prepares to put her little brother Jamie on a train to safety. Ada doesn’t leave the house, so no one has any intention of *evacuating* her. If the bombs were the only thing she feared, that might be okay. But when Ada sees a chance to escape the prison that is her terrible home life, she takes it and makes a daring escape to join Jamie when he departs for the countryside.

Soon Ada and Jamie reach a small unnamed town, one that Bradley actually modeled after the English town of Kent. A woman named Susan begrudgingly takes them in; she has to, everyone has to do their bit for the war effort. And while Ada expected to hate her new life almost as much as her old with her mother, her new circumstances surprise her. She learns to read, and ride a horse, and finally be useful.

But the change of location doesn’t fix everything for Ada; she may have escaped her awful home life but things are still pretty hard in the country of a nation at war. British students are taught extensively about this period of history in school, but what many don’t know—especially those who didn’t grow up in Britain learning their national history—is that all those children were



evacuated from the cities because everyone *expected* the cities to be bombed. But that’s not what happened, not at first, and let me say that all these historical details about how the lives of ordinary citizens were turned upside down by the evacuations are completely fascinating to me an American who didn’t learn these things in school. At the beginning of the war, the rural areas were attacked. That means that instead of being sent to safety, Ada and Jamie were sent to the most dangerous part of England. And while Ada may have escaped her mother—or thought she did, at least—she still has plenty of challenging trials ahead of her. As a reader, it’s both pain and joy to root for Ada as she meets them head-on.

[MUSIC]

[06:10]

Readers, this is a book about hard things. It’s about one little girl, unloved and unwanted, plunged into extraordinarily dangerous circumstances. But Ada learns she’s not entirely powerless, and she finds reserves of hidden strength to fight back with everything she has. She also begins to realize she’s not the only one who needs saving here.

This story is also about Susan: an older woman facing plenty of her own hardship and pain, who is grieving in a way she’s barely allowed to admit. And it’s about a community facing unspeakable circumstances with all the courage they can muster. Adults and children will read this story in different ways, and they’ll empathize with different characters; that’s okay, perhaps that’s even how it should be.

I just loved this and have been thrilled to see so many readers of all ages enjoy it. It’s a Newbery Honor Book, if you care about such things, as well as a #1 New York Times bestseller, and a Modern Mrs Darcy Book Club selection, it’s beloved by children and adults alike. If you love this, you cannot miss the sequel, *The War I Finally Won*.

When asked about her hopes for the book, Bradley says “I really hope that when readers read this they get a sense of how love can change the world and how it develops among people even when they don’t expect it.” You won’t be surprised to hear that *The War That Saved My Life* is a hopeful book, and such a satisfying read. Readers will be cheering Ada on as she begins to



wiggle her way into Susan’s heart, as well as riveted by the danger, daring, and risks that both Ada and Susan take to discover true belonging and a place to call home.

[07:38]

In short, if you’re looking for an action-packed, emotionally resonant story about history, family, and the healing power of love—though not necessarily in that order—*The War That Saved My Life* may be the next great book you’re looking for.

[MUSIC]

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Thanks to Kellen Pechacek for his sound design on today's episode.

And readers, that's it for this episode, thanks so much for listening.

As Rainer Maria Rilke said, "ah, how good it is to be among people who are reading."

Happy reading, everyone.