Number the Stars

Theme And Analysis

*Number the Stars*is a historical novel set in Denmark during World War II. Lowry has written the novel in third person ("He says," as opposed to, "I said," which is first person), using a limited omniscient viewpoint (only Annemarie's thoughts and feelings are revealed). Ten-year-old Annemarie Johansen and her family live in Copenhagen, Denmark. Their lives have changed drastically because the Nazis now occupy Denmark (1943). Through Annemarie, we learn that the Danes must abide by curfews and use blackout curtains on their windows. They have no fuel for heat, and electricity has been rationed. The Danes must use candles to light their homes. They have sadly become accustomed to Nazi soldiers standing on every street corner and have learned to be "just another face in the crowd," going about their business, trying not to be noticed by the Nazis. The adults are fearful and sad because they understand the dangers of the Nazis occupation of Denmark and they have experienced loss resulting from the actions of the Nazis. Annemarie's older sister, Lise, was killed because she was an active member of the Danish Resistance, a group of people opposed to the Nazi occupation of Denmark and supportive of the Danish Jews. Annemarie, her five-year-old sister, Kirsti, and her best friend, Ellen Rosen, are unaware of the danger that surrounds them. They are only aware of obvious changes that have affected their lives. They are aware of the food shortages (sugar is no longer available, they eat bread without butter, and their mothers drink "coffee," which is really just herb-flavored water); they can't get rubber tires so bicycles have wooden wheels; they are unable to get leather shoes — just shoes made from fish scales; and they play with paper dolls cut from old magazines. Some things, however, continue as usual. Annemarie still plays with Ellen, and all of the children attend school. Annemarie's father and Ellen's father go to work the same as always.

*Number the Stars*begins with a foreboding tone. Annemarie, her sister, Kirsti, and Ellen are running home from school and are questioned by the Nazi soldiers. Mrs. Hirsch, the button store owner, and her son are taken away by the Nazis. When the Rosens, upstairs neighbors and good friends of the Johansens, go to their synagogue to celebrate the Jewish New Year, their rabbi warns them that they are in extreme danger of being taken and "relocated" by the Nazis. When the Johansens find out, they offer to help them because, "that's what friends do."

The Rosens must go into hiding or risk being relocated by the Nazis. Peter Neilsen, Lise's fiancé and a member of the Resistance, takes Ellen's parents with him on the eve of the Jewish New Year. Ellen stays with Annemarie and her family pretending to be Annemarie's sister. The tone is suspenseful as Nazi soldiers demand entrance to the Johansens' apartment in the middle of the night, searching for the Rosens. Terrified, Annemarie notices that Ellen has on her Star of David necklace. Annemarie yanks the necklace from Ellen's neck and hides it in her hand. Because Ellen has dark hair and Annemarie and Kirsti have blonde hair, the soldiers question Annemarie's father about Ellen's identity. He corroborates Ellen's story, telling the soldiers that she is Lise. Mr. Johansen produces a picture of his dead daughter, Lise, who had dark hair as an infant. The soldiers reluctantly accept the picture as proof and before they leave the apartment, they spitefully destroy the pictures.

The next day, Mrs. Johansen takes Annemarie, Kirsti, and Ellen to her brother's farmhouse which is in Gilleleje, near the coast. Annemarie knows the trip is not a vacation, but she doesn't understand what is going on. The night before, when her parents telephoned her uncle, they seemed to be talking in code. They talked about "good days for fishing" and transporting cigarettes. Although Annemarie knows her Uncle Henrik, is a fisherman, she doesn't know that he has been transporting Danish Jews to neutral Sweden by hiding them in a secret hollowed out area in the bottom of his boat.

The trip to Uncle Henrik's is extremely dangerous. On the train, the Nazis question Mrs. Johansen and when Kirsti starts to talk to the soldiers, they fear she will innocently reveal that Ellen is Jewish. At Uncle Henrik's, Annemarie is told that her Great-aunt Birte has died and that people are going to gather at the house to pay their final respects. Annemarie is confused because she doesn't have a Great-aunt Birte. A casket arrives at the farmhouse and soon after, strangers gather at the house and sit near the casket. Peter Neilsen arrives with Ellen's parents. Annemarie realizes that all of the people are Jews. Nazi soldiers arrive and question Annemarie about the contents of the casket. She bravely tells them that her Great-aunt Birte has died. She understands how dangerous the situation is and soon learns that her Uncle Henrik is going to smuggle the Jews across the sea to Sweden. The casket is full of blankets and warm clothing for the Jews to take on their journey.

The Jews make it safely to the boat; however, Mr. Rosen has dropped an important envelope that was from Peter to Uncle Henrik. The situation becomes complicated when Mrs. Johansen, who led half of the Jews to Uncle Henrik's boat, breaks her ankle on her way back to the farmhouse. The only person left to take the envelope to Uncle Henrik is Annemarie. Instructed by her mother, she puts the envelope in the bottom of a basket, puts food on top of it, and then rushes off to catch the boat before it leaves the dock. On her way to the boat, she has to take a path through the woods. She thinks about the story of "Little Red Riding Hood," in an attempt to maintain her courage. Annemarie encounters Nazi soldiers with dogs. She is scared, but remembers how her little sister, Kirsti, acted one day when Nazi soldiers stopped them. She acted impatient and angry. Determined to get the envelope to Uncle Henrik, Annemarie acts the same way. The soldiers let her go, and Annemarie makes it to the boat. She is able to give Uncle Henrik the envelope that contains a handkerchief. The handkerchief has a chemical on it that causes the Nazis' dogs to lose their sense of smell temporarily. After sniffing the handkerchief, the dogs are unable to smell Uncle Henrik's hidden "cargo" — the Jewish people who he is smuggling to safety.

The Rosens and the other Jews make it safely to Sweden. Two years later, when the war is over, Annemarie asks her father to repair Ellen's Star of David Necklace that she has kept hidden. She puts it on and intends to wear it herself until the Rosens return home and she can give it back to her friend, Ellen.

**Characters**

**Annemarie Johansen**

Annemarie Johansen is a ten-year-old girl trying to understand the increasingly complex world around her. Her young life in Denmark had been filled with the normal preoccupations of peacetime until three years ago, when German soldiers arrived and her sister, Lise, was killed. There is much Annemarie is not told by her family at this time. She was seven when Lise was killed and is twelve before learning that Lise was killed at a meeting of the Danish Resistance, to which both Lise and her fiancy, Peter, belonged. As the book opens, Annemarie knows none of this, because her parents try to preserve the normalcy of her childhood during these troubled times.

However, Annemarie has begun to grow up, forced by circumstances to receive a crash course on the ways of war. She is old enough to feel a need to take part in her own destiny, no longer content to leave everything in her parents' hands. She attempts to piece together the puzzle of what's really going on in her family. The mystery would tempt any young girl, as she becomes part of the secret plan that the Danish Resistance movement intends to use to spirit her Jewish friend out of the country.

The plot involves secrecy, and Annemarie is initially irritated that her family withholds the truth from her. However, by the end of the book, she's learned the value of discretion as she herself begins taking on more adult roles. Though she perhaps overdoes it, she begins to protect both Ellen, her Jewish friend, and Kirsti, Annemarie's little sister, from learning more about the dangers they face. She also becomes directly involved in the rescue effort when her mother is incapacitated. By standing in for her mother during a rescue operation, she earns herself a place at the adult's table with her brave contribution to the war effort. World War II, left many young people with no choice other than to grow up too soon and face the harsh realities their parents would have loved to protect them from. As this little girl finds within herself the courage to help her friend survive, she exchanges innocence for wisdom, and facts for truth.

**Kirsti Johansen**

Kirsti is a charming and vivacious child of five when the story begins. Her innocence and sense of right and wrong are so intact that she has the napve courage of youth to confront the German soldiers when they mistreat her or others. She lacks the specific knowledge that the adults in the story are privy to--that the Nazis are not interested in right and wrong or in showing compassion. But her innocence shines brilliantly against the backdrop of the German occupation, and Kirsti's character is a poignant symbol of that which the Danish Resistance is trying to protect. By protecting her from the more unpleasant truths of the war, her parents have given her the gift of peace of mind. The fact that they are successful throughout most of the book in protecting their daughter's innocence is surely a gift to her parents as well, and a hopeful sign that normal life is still possible, even under the threats present during the Nazi occupation.

In the final chapter of the book, Kirsti is seven years old. Her sister describes her as having become more serious over the intervening years. Her parents likely found it impossible to shelter Kirsti from all of the hardships inherent with war. The loss of her youthful vivaciousness can be tallied up with all the other losses sustained by Denmark, and by the Johansen family as a result of the occupation of Hitler's army.

**Mrs. Inge Johansen (Mama)**

Inge is a character who would fit into any era, time or place. She represents some of the basic goodness in the world: motherhood, friendship, loyalty, courage - a kind woman who enjoys taking care of her children, having "coffee" with her girlfriend, and, when Lise was alive, planning Lise's wedding with her daughter. Inge's character seems simple, but she has great depth. When her life doesn't turn out in the cozy manner she'd might hope for, and when she's called upon to show great courage to resist the Germans, even after they've killed her daughter, she rises to the occasion gloriously.

Annemarie sees into her mother's eyes and knows that she is plagued with fear, but this fear never stops Inge from doing what she must to help her friends. Her extreme courage is a deeper manifestation of her belief in motherhood, friendship, and loyalty. Inge finds her bravery in the act of preserving the Rosens' family unit and helping her good friend remain a mother, instead of losing her only daughter as Inge lost Lise.

**Mr. Johansen (Papa)**

From what little we know about Papa, he is a brave and a good man - a family man. As the novel is told from Annemarie's perspective, we see only his actions. He doesn't share his thought process or his worries with his ten-year-old daughter, but she does get a glimpse of what he must be going through when she waits up for her mother to return from her dangerous mission. Papa plays his part in the rescue scheme by staying at home and continuing with his normal activities to deflect suspicion.

Annemarie can imagine how hard it must have been for him to allow his wife and daughters to enter the teeth of danger without him. But he has not abandoned them nor is he cowardly; he, like all the other brave Danes, has to grit his teeth and do what must be done in order to save his Jewish neighbors. He defers to his wife's wisdom that it would increase their chances of success if he remains at home. Her logic was correct, and it was brave of him to accept the necessity of his staying behind.

**Lise Johansen**

Lise dies three years before the start of the book. Her parents are too grief-stricken to even mention her name, so we know her only through her little sister Annemarie's memories. Kirsti never speaks of Lise because she was only two when Lise died. All we know of Lise for most of the book is from Annemarie, who treasures the gorgeous yellow dress Lise wore at her engagement party. Lise had looked so beautiful and happy as she danced that night; that's the way Annemarie will remember Lise always. The power this image evokes - of a smiling Lise dancing in the arms of her beloved Peter, with her yellow dress flying all around - comes back to haunt the reader at the end of the book, when Lise's parents finally speak of her death to Annemarie. Her mother's words about how young and full of optimism Peter and Lise had been brings back that image and colors it with the knowledge of her involvement in the Resistance. The Resistance, for Lise, was a symbol of her hopes to bring about a better future for the children she and Peter would have. The death of that optimistic spirit is felt most keenly at the end. Neither she nor Peter lived to see the day the war ended, and yet their memory was celebrated on that day.

**Peter Neilsen**

Peter is a brave young Resistance fighter, whose life and dreams of the future are cut short by Hitler's war. Had he been born in another time, he might have gone on to become a loving husband and father and an integral member of his community. However, life did not present him such an easy option, and Peter devoted his energies, instead, to making his country safe for others to enjoy that kind of life in the future. His character is based on the historical figure of Kim Malthe-Bruun. Like Peter, Kim was not a famous war hero. He was one of many young men in his generation, who rose to the challenge and became heroes in the face of German encroachment. He risked his life to help save thousands, and although he is mourned in death, the Resistance could not have succeeded without men like him.

**Uncle Henrik**

Uncle Henrik is Inge's older brother. Their relationship is a close one, and Henrik even names his boat after his sister. The siblings represent the bonds of family and community that helped Denmark survive the German occupation with its spirit intact. He also represents the countless boat captains of Denmark - simple fishermen - who put themselves on the line to save the lives of their fellow countrymen. Henrik is the type of person people refer to as "salt of the earth." He knows what is right and what is wrong, and does the right thing instinctively and nonviolently. That is the most impressive part of the Resistance's plan: they saved the lives of the nearly 7,000 Jews living in Denmark without taking up arms against the Germans.

When Henrik speaks to Annemarie about the necessity of sometimes withholding the truth, he is trying to tell her that there are greater truths, such as a human being's right to live in peace, which override the necessity of being honest in certain situations. As a salt-of-the-earth guy, Henrik won't spare a moment of moral agony on the decision to look a German in the eye and lie if it will save the life of a friend. He keeps his priorities in line, and helps Annemarie understand what the true priorities are.

**Ellen Rosen**

Ellen's character is not well established in the story. Her friendship with Annemarie developed in the days prior to the German crackdown against Jews in Denmark. We are not privy to her girlish likes, dislikes, hopes or dreams. By the time we meet Ellen, circumstances have dictated that her primary focus in life is mere survival. However, her friendship with Annemarie provides the motive for Annemarie to get involved with the Resistance, and Ellen puts a face on the tragedy of Hitler's Holocaust for the reader.

**Mr. Rosen**

Mr. Rosen is Ellen's father. An educated man who has built a good and comfortable life for his family, he is stripped of all of his accomplishments and material goods by the Nazis, who drive him and his family from their homes. For most of the book, the Rosen family is on a desperate quest to save their own lives.

**Mrs. Rosen**

Ellen's mother is Inge Johansen's best friend. The two ladies take coffee together everyday, and although the details of their past friendship is not given, the author paints the picture of them being very close. We can imagine Mrs. Rosen was there for her friend when Lise died, and we know that Inge is there for the Rosen family when their lives are threatened by the occupying soldiers.

**Objects/Places**

**Copenhagen**

A gorgeous, historic city in Denmark, during World War II, Copenhagen stood as one of the last remaining centers of culture where people could travel to and enjoy, assuming they were able to obtain the requisite travel papers from the German government. The city's spirit of freedom was such that, even under German occupation, life remained much closer to normal than in other German-occupied countries. Certainly the king's voluntary surrender prevented much death and destruction, but the country never really surrendered in spirit. Despite public appearances, Copenhagen remained a place friendly to freedom and freedom fighters.

**Uncle Henrik's House**

The house on the coast of Denmark where the Johansen's take Ellen to hide her from the German soldiers, this house had once belonged to Annemarie's maternal grandparents. Both her mother and Uncle Henrik were born and raised there.

**Ellen's Necklace**

The Jewish Star of David necklace that was a gift to Ellen from her father. Ellen seldom removed the necklace, until she was forced to do so, in order to conceal her Jewish heritage from the Nazi soldiers. Annemarie hides it for her in the trunk containing Lise's belongings.

The most potent symbol found within the pages of Lois Lowry’s *Number the Stars*is [**Ellen Rosen**](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/number-the-stars/characters/ellen-rosen)’s Star of David necklace, a dainty gold chain from which dangles the universal symbol of Judaism. The necklace is a symbol of the sisterhood and shared identity between Ellen and Annemarie. Though they are not sisters by blood, the mutual respect, devotion, and sacrifice they show one another makes them sisters, perhaps, in an even more profound way. Ellen is never seen without her necklace—and indeed, when [**Annemarie Johansen**](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/number-the-stars/characters/annemarie-johansen) urges her to hurriedly take it off after Nazi soldiers arrive at the Johansen’s apartment to search for Ellen and her parents, Ellen confesses that she hasn’t taken the necklace off in so long that she “can’t even remember how to open” its clasp. As the Nazi soldiers approach the bedroom where Annemarie and Ellen are sleeping together in bed, pretending to be sisters so that Ellen won’t be “relocated,” Annemarie reaches over and forcefully yanks the necklace from Ellen’s neck. She holds the necklace tightly in her palm all throughout the confrontation with and interrogation by the soldiers, and by the time they leave, the Star of David symbol has been imprinted onto Annemarie’s palm—signaling her deep connection to her friend, for whom she has already taken a dangerous risk. Annemarie hides the necklace away, promising Ellen that she’ll keep it for her until it’s safe for Ellen to wear the necklace again.

The necklace is not mentioned again until the closing pages of the novel. As Annemarie and her family stand on their apartment’s balcony, celebrating the news that the war is over, Annemarie slips away to her bedroom to retrieve the necklace from where she’s hidden it—in the folds of her dead older sister [**Lise**](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/number-the-stars/characters/mrs-johansen-mama)’s wedding dress, deep inside a large blue trunk which houses all of Lise’s things. Annemarie brings the necklace out to [**Papa**](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/number-the-stars/characters) and asks if he’ll repair it. He agrees, and Annemarie states that she’ll proudly wear the necklace until Ellen and her family, smuggled to Sweden just as the Nazis began rounding up Copenhagen’s Jews, return to the city. The repair of the necklace signals not only Ellen’s eventual return to her home, but that of other Jews forced to flee during the war.

Beyond representing the bond between Annemarie and Ellen, then, the necklace also symbolizes the sameness between all people, regardless of class, color, or creed. When Annemarie decides to wear Ellen’s necklace as if it’s her own, she’s showing that she—like a true sister—is willing to shoulder the burdens Ellen has had to bear, and to align herself with her at any cost. Annemarie knows the inherent worth of all life, and even in the face of fear, destruction, and rampant anti-Semitism throughout Europe, she has risked and sacrificed for Ellen and for her Jewish neighbors.

*De Frie Danske* (*The Free Danes*)

The illegal newspaper from which the Johansens obtain news about the Danish Resistance.

**The Handkerchief**

Soaked in rabbit's blood and cocaine, the chemical mixture was designed by scientists to attract search dogs and ruin their sense of smell. Putting this mixture onto an ordinary handkerchief was a stroke of genius by the Danish Resistance, as possession of a handkerchief is not likely to arouse suspicion. It is an historical fact that many Danish boat captains carried such handkerchiefs to prevent search dogs from sniffing out their human cargo. In the story, the handkerchief is critical to the success of the escape plan. If Annemarie had not risked her life to deliver the handkerchief to Uncle Henrik, the German soldiers would have surely found the Jewish fugitives hiding in the secret compartment on board his ship.

**Lise's Yellow Dress**

The dress Lise wore to her engagement party. Annemarie remembers how beautifully it twirled around as she danced with her fiancy Peter.

**Tivoli**

The amusement park Annemarie remembers visiting in better days. Since the occupation, the Johansens, like most Danish families, have not been able to enjoy such simple pleasures. Little Kirsti has never in her young life had a chance to visit the park.

**The Deer Park in Klampenborg**

A park filled with tame and free deer, which Annemarie had visited before the occupation. On the day her mother takes her and Ellen by train to Uncle Henrik's, they pass Klampenborg Station, and Mama tells Ellen that someday she will have the chance to visit the park, too.

**Kronborg Castle in Helsingshr**

One of the sights the girls see from the train. Once upon a time, kings and queens had lived in the historical castle, which sits beside the sea in Denmark. Little Kirsti is much charmed by it.

**Trofast**

Inge's childhood dog. The name, in English, means "Faithful."

**Blossom**

Uncle Henrik's cow, which provides milk, butter, cream, and cheese - otherwise unobtainable luxuries since the German soldiers arrived and began confiscating Denmark's food supply for their own troops.

**The God of Thunder**

The whimsical name that little Kirsti gives to the kitten Ellen brings home.

**The Ingeborg**

Uncle Henrik's fishing boat. Like many other Danish boats, it has a secret compartment in which the fugitive Jews can hide during the trip to Sweden.

The Seashell:

**The seashell**

The seashell that Peter Neilsen gives Annemarie represents several different things. Because it comes from the se,a it is a clue to the work that Peter had been doing and the adventure that Annemarie will take part in. A shell is also protection for a sea creature. The characters of *Number the Stars* must each find a way protecting themselves. Visually, the shell is also representative of the hidden appearances that come up through out the novel. A shell conceals something, but one cannot be sure just by looking at it what it might conceal. A shell is often full of surprises, just as the characters and events of the novel are.

### The Star of David

The Star of David appears in several places during the course of *Number the Stars.* The Star of David is a central symbol in the Jewish tradition. In the novel, it represents the necessity for Ellen and all the Jews to hide their religion. Until the end of the war, Annemarie keeps the Star of David necklace that Ellen wears. The necklace symbolizes Annemarie's devotion to her friend and her stance against the Germans. Stars also appear in the psalm that Peter reads before the voyage to Sweden. In this case, the stars represent Annemarie's tainted view of the world. To her the stars demonstrate the vastness and hopelessness of existence.

**The Woods**

The woods symbolize a right of passage for Annemarie. They operate as part of the theme of voyage and transformation. When Annemarie passes through the woods on her way to the boat, she is undergoing a transformation. She is discovering her own ability to do the job of an adult. For the Rosens, the woods are part of the passage from danger to safety.

## Star of David

Within the novel the Star of David (Magen David) is a symbol both of Judaism and of keeping faith. The Magen David, a double triangle in shape, represents the connection between the internal and external dimensions of God, Torah, and Israel. Jews connect to God by studying the Torah. The Torah is sometimes used to refer to the five books of Moses, Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. It can also refer to all the books included in the part of the Christian Bible, the Old Testament, which Jews call the Tanakh, the Written Torah. The Magen David is symbolic of faith for Jews much as the cross is for Christians.

In Number the Stars Ellen wears her Star of David necklace, which marks her as a Jew. When the soldiers appear in the early hours of the morning seeking the Rosens, Annemarie rips the necklace from Ellen's throat to hide it. If she had not done so, Ellen would likely have been deported and separated from her parents. The soldiers were taking and "relocating" Jews. The modern reader will understand this means those taken were sent to camps to be worked as slaves or murdered. Annemarie's bravery is apparent in this act. The Magen David represents the Jewishness that had to be hidden in order for Ellen to survive.

Ellen also misses the symbol of her faith and the special gift her father had given her. When she is with Annemarie at [Uncle Henrik](https://www.coursehero.com/lit/Number-the-Stars/character-analysis/#Uncle_Henrik)'s house, Ellen touches her neck and asks, "Where is my necklace?" and "What did you do with it?" Annemarie assures her that she had hidden it to keep it safe—much as the reader will realize the Resistance is doing with the Jews themselves. At the end of the book, after the war has ended, Annemarie retrieves the hidden necklace and asks her father to fix the broken clasp. When he says he can, he adds, "When the Rosens come home, you can give it back to Ellen." Annemarie says, "Until then, I will wear it myself." Wearing a symbol of Judaism was less dangerous after the war, and Annemarie's affection for Ellen is evident not only in the way she kept the necklace safe but in her willingness to wear it. Annemarie kept the necklace and her friend safe, as many of the Danes did for the Danish Jews.

## Handkerchief

The drug-laden handkerchief, a historically accurate item, looks harmless. In the novel, it is a simple white cloth treated with a mixture of chemicals—including cocaine—to both attract and also temporarily numb the dogs' noses. It looks innocent and harmless and can be hidden in plain sight. However, it was a weapon used to save thousands of Jews.

Symbolically, the handkerchief is also a representative of the cleverness of the Resistance. They hid the Jews in plain sight (as with Ellen), and they resisted the Nazi regime and ideology nonviolently. Their regent, King Christian X, ordered the destruction of Danish navy ships in the Copenhagen harbor. No one was injured, but neither were the Nazis able to commandeer the weapons on those ships.

## Swastika

Today, the swastika is seen as a symbol of racism, anti-Semitism, and hate due to its use by the Nazis before and during World War II. Prior to its association with Adolf Hitler and the Nazis, it was used as a symbol meaning good fortune. It originated from the Sanskrit word svastika, and is still seen on temples in India and Indonesia. The symbol was also used in both Christian and Byzantine art. Its appropriation by the Nazis was sparked by the archaeological discovery of the symbol at the site of Troy (in modern Turkey) by German archaeologist Heinrich Schliemann. He suggested it was a "religious symbol of our [Aryan] remote ancestors." In 1920 the Nazi party, with its belief that Germans were the descendants of an Aryan "master race," chose the swastika as their party's symbol.

In Number the Stars the swastika is referenced when the Hirsch family disappears. Annemarie tells her mother the sign on the Hirsch shop is in German, and when she is questioned further, she says, "Mama, it had a swastika on it." While it is not referenced repeatedly in the novel, it was such a part of the history of the novel's setting, the symbolism is important for the reader to note.

**Setting**

Number the Stars is set in 1943 in Copenhagen. King Christian X of Denmark surrendered his land to the German invaders in 1940 because Denmark's army was small and any attempt to match military might with the Nazis would have resulted in destruction and suffering. Even after Copenhagen is occupied by the Nazis, the king continues his habit of riding his horse through the streets of the city every morning, without benefit of a bodyguard. When a Nazi soldier asks a young boy where the king's bodyguards are, the boy replies that all of Denmark is the king's bodyguard. Later, when it becomes apparent that the Nazis plan to relocate the country's Jews, Annemarie says, "Now I think that all of Denmark must be the bodyguard for the Jews, as well."

Across a narrow straight from Denmark is Sweden, which has not yet been invaded by the Nazis. The Johansens' efforts to smuggle Ellen and her family to Sweden in Number the Stars accurately reflect the actions of countless Danes who helped their Jewish neighbors escape the country during World War II.

**Social Sensitivity**

Number the Stars is a story that honestly approaches the tragedy of the Holocaust and uses the events of the war to show humanity's potential for courage and decency. In the weeks following the Jewish High Holidays in 1943, nearly seven thousand of Denmark's Jews were smuggled across the sea to Sweden. Lowry does not talk about the Nazi concentration camps or the Jews' struggles elsewhere in Europe.

Instead, she chooses to focus on one country—and one particular set of characters—in order to emphasize that ordinary people were involved in the Resistance movement. The Johansens are willing to let Annemarie risk her life to carry the handkerchief to Uncle Henrik. Mother and daughter learn the importance of acting on their beliefs rather than waiting for others to act for them.

**Literary Qualities**

In Number the Stars Lowry uses small details to illuminate larger events. A scene as mundane as Mrs. Johansen and Mrs. Rosen sitting and sipping from cups together is transformed when the reader realizes that the two mothers are actually drinking hot water flavored with herbs. There is no coffee, tea, or sugar in wartime Copenhagen, and this shortage is just one of many revealed matter-of-factly through Lowry's prose.

The children play with paper dolls cut from old magazines; the men who work with Mr. Johansen roll dried weeds in paper in order to smoke; Mr. Rosen corrects school papers at night by candlelight, because there is no electricity; Kirsti gets new shoes, but they are ugly ones, made out of fish skin rather than leather.

Told in the third person, Number the Stars reflects a child's view of the Nazi occupation of Denmark. To Annemarie, the Nazis are impersonal and inscrutable figures. The first time the reader sees the soldiers it is through Annemarie's eyes: 'There were two of them. That meant two helmets, two sets of cold eyes glaring at her, and four tall shiny boots planted firmly on the sidewalk, blocking her path to home."

The image of these "shiny boots" runs throughout the book; the Nazis themselves have no identities of their own.

Annemarie realizes that the best defense against the Nazis is the preservation of her own identity and ideals. By remaining true to an innate sense of justice, Annemarie and the other members ofthe Resistance are able to save the lives of many of Denmark's Jews.

**Themes**

**Truth**

Truth is a common value stressed in children's literature. As a society, we generally agree that we want to teach our young people the value of honesty. Lois Lowry's approach to teaching about truth is quite different from the typical kids' book, and in some ways, more mature. She speaks to the grey areas in life, where the truth may best be served by lying. The most clear-cut example of this is the Danish Resistance members' interactions with the German soldiers. Peter, Mama, and Uncle Henrik all lie to the soldiers and take pride in their courage for having lied so well. In this way, the adult characters in *Number the Stars* teach young Annemarie that truth is about integrity and standing up for what one knows is right, even if it involves lying. If it is necessary to lie to the German soldiers in order to save Ellen's life, Annemarie must not worry about having lied because with this lie, she maintains her integrity as a human being.

There is another grey area between truth and lies that the novel addresses less satisfactorily. This is the area of withholding truth from children. Society is divided on this issue. Many families routinely withhold information about serious illnesses or financial concerns from their children. This is done in the spirit of wanting to protect the child from unnecessary stress, but children are extremely perceptive, and often sense when they are being lied to by trusted adults. This breach of trust may actually cause a child to worry more than is warranted by the worrisome news being withheld. Parents struggle to find an appropriate balance, such as admitting to the children that there *is* a financial problem, and it *is* a worry, but it is an *adult* worry, and the children should know their parents are doing everything possible to heal the situation.

Finding the right level of truth to reveal is an ongoing balancing act, one which Lois Lowry struggles with in deciding how much information she would share with readers about the Holocaust. In Chapter nine, Uncle Henrik has a long discussion with Annemarie about why it's sometimes necessary to withhold frightening truths, but his reasoning, although well-intentioned, does not ring true; to the contrary, the most satisfying part of that chapter is actually the fact that he finally does share a greater amount of truth with Annemarie.

Perhaps Lois Lowry is right. Perhaps children shouldn't hear the gorier details of Hitler's Holocaust until they're older, perhaps in high school. Yet aren't characters strongly formed by that age? What do we teach them with a lie of omission? Lois Lowry's use of euphemisms such as "relocation" in her book may be intended to protect the children, but it also falls into line with the Nazi's use of such euphemisms. The Nazis used terms such as "deportation" or "special treatment" when they meant to say "starve, torture, and kill." It made it easier for them to overcome their qualms about mass murder to think of it as "relocation." As Hermione Granger says in the third Harry Potter installment, *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*, "Fear of a name only increases fear of the thing itself." Darkness can only be obliterated when it's brought to the light of truth and knowledge. By using the Nazis' euphemisms, we assist them in masking their crimes so that they will not be viewed by future generations.

**The Holocaust**

Of all the wars in human history, rarely do we achieve global consensus as to which side was "right." World War II is a notable exception. It is often portrayed as a titanic struggle between good and evil, and its most prolific author of evil, Adolf Hitler, has become an international icon for malevolence. The industrialization of mass murder, which he nearly perfected is so horrifying to the average person that history has vindicated those who fought against him, however, the courageous souls who opposed Hitler often get overlooked by the success of his genocidal plans. It's hard to feel that we "won" the war when millions of people were tortured and killed.

Yet there exist innumerable stories of courage and even triumph in the face of such societal evil. There is Oscar Schindler, a German businessman who risked his life and spent his entire fortune to preserve the lives of as many Jews as he could by pretending they were in his employ. There is Swedish diplomat Raoul Wallenberg, who bulled his way through diplomatic channels to save a hundred thousand Jews in Budapest, and ultimately paid for it with his life. He was never seen again after the war; he may have been killed, or the then-young man may have lived out the rest of his years in a Russian prison. Then there is Werner Heisenberg, the brilliant German nuclear physicist who stayed in Germany, risking his reputation, his life, and the lives of his family in order to ensure that Hitler never got his hands on a nuclear bomb that worked. He, too, paid a price, as history has written him off as an incompetent Nazi who wanted to make Hitler a bomb. History is only now beginning to question the validity of that assumption.

All these men are famous and have had movies, books, and plays written about them. Lois Lowry has added another important dimension to the literature about the Holocaust. She celebrates the lives of the countless, ordinary citizens around the globe who rose to heroism in the fight against the Nazis. The characters in her book are heroes of the Danish Resistance, a highly successful movement, which protected its people from the occupying Nazi force. The Resistance was only successful thanks to the efforts of Denmark's everyday citizens. The same can be said of America. It was our fathers, brothers, sons, grandfathers, and great-grandfathers who fought in World War II and kept our country safe for its people. On the warfront and on the home front, we, like Annemarie, could only look to ourselves to find the courage to fight the good fight. *Number the Stars* teaches children that heroes come in many shapes and sizes and tells a tale of heroism worthy of the telling.

**Coming of Age**

Like many children during World War II, Annemarie is put in a position where she virtually has to grow up overnight. Had it not been for the war, she wouldn't have needed to acquire so much additional maturity in such a short time. Annemarie was already on pace with a healthy level of development for a ten-year-old. She was full of life and quite mature. She knew it was kinder to include her sister, Kirsti, in her games with Ellen, and she practiced for her weekly track meets with initiative and self-discipline. When the German soldiers become a more menacing presence in her life, she must find within herself the courage to defy them secretly, even though it means risking discovery and putting herself in danger.

Annemarie is actually fortunate she was born in Denmark and thus avoided the greatest perils of those countries touched more directly by the war. Had she lived elsewhere, she might have been denied the opportunity to live through the life lessons that guided her into maturity. The fact that her parents had the option of shielding her from more frightening matters was a luxury in those days. For the Jewish and Gypsy children deported to concentration camps or killed where they stood, there was no such luxury. They didn't have a chance to come of age in the short life spans they were allowed.

Even all these years later, the world has not come to terms with such violence, and genocide continues to be perpetrated on children and adults alike in various parts of the globe. Coming of age stories like this one remind us that each human life is valuable, and that it is worthwhile as a society to provide our children with peaceful, sustainable lives, so that they can follow the often slow and arduous path to maturity.

Coming of age is not restricted to childhood. People continue to come of age in various ways throughout their lives, whether it's becoming a better parent, accepting a promotion, or dealing with a business failure. Human beings need time to live these life lessons, which allow us to develop and to come of age. In the story, the Johansens fight for their daughters' and Ellen's right to grow up and to lead a good life. The sacrifices they make to ensure the girls' futures are what the author wishes us to remember as we lead our lives. We are an interdependent society, and, without each other's help, none of us would have the luxury of growing into better people. The sacrifices made by so many during World War II, can be honored by any of us when we take the extra time to invest in a human being's development--be they our children or our employees, they are worthy of our time.

**Themes/Characters**

Ten-year-old Annemarie Johansen is the protagonist of Number the Stars; all the action of the book is seen through her eyes. Annemarie can remember a time when Nazis in shiny boots were not standing on every street corner; she remembers "the music and the brightly colored lights, the carousel and ice cream" at the Tivoli Gardens. Throughout the book, Annemarie worries that she will not have the courage to stand up to the Nazis. When she is tested, however, she instinctively acts bravely.

The Johansens are a close-knit, loving family. Mr. and Mrs. Johansen have lost one daughter to the Nazis, yet they continue to fight for the Resistance. Like the parents in many of Lowry's books, they are loving and wise, and the reader can see their influence on Annemarie's actions. Annemarie's five-year-old sister Kirsti is too young to comprehend the political situation, and is capable of innocently blurting out secrets, a danger that serves to heighten the tension of the book.

Ellen Rosen's father is a schoolteacher and her mother is one of Mrs. Johansen's best friends. When the Nazis announce their plans to relocate Copenhagen's Jews, Inge's fiance Peter Neilson—himself wounded in the raid that killed Inge—leads Ellen's parents into hiding, while Ellen moves in with the Johansens, pretending that she is their daughter.

The Nazis—infuriated that the Rosens have disappeared—arrive at the Johansens' house one morning at 4 a.m., looking for missing Jews. When the Johansens try to pass off Ellen as their third daughter, the soldiers point out that Ellen has dark hair while Annemarie and Kirsti are blondes. In response, Mr. Johansen produces baby pictures of his three daughters, showing them that Inge was dark-haired as an infant. The Nazis reluctantly accept this as proof but spitefully mutilate the pictures before leaving.

The next day Mrs. Johansen takes Annemarie, Kirsti, and Ellen into the countryside to her brother Henrik's farmhouse. Uncle Henrik is a fisherman who has been transporting Jews to Sweden, hiding them in a secret hollow at the bottom of his boat. At the farm Ellen is reunited with her parents, and that night Mrs. Johansen leads the Rosens down a dark trail to the waterfront.

The Rosens reach the boat safely, but have forgotten to deliver an important sealed packet sent from Peter to Uncle Henrik. To complicate matters, Mrs. Johansen breaks her ankle and is unable to carry the packet herself. Because she is familiar with the path to the boat, Annemarie offers to take the packet to Uncle Henrik. When she encounters a party of Nazis with dogs, Annemarie feigns innocence and models her little sister's behavior. Even though she is frightened, she acts impatient—Just as she knows Kirsti would. As Peter planned, the Nazi dogs sniff the packet, which contains a scented handkerchief, and are thrown off the Rosens' scent.

Only later does Annemarie discover the significance of the scented handkerchief. When she finds out that the Rosens have made it safely to Sweden, she realizes that all of her family have been courageous. 'That's all that brave means—not thinking about the dangers. Just thinking about what you must do," she says. Annemarie, Uncle Henrik, Peter, and the entire Johansen family are memorable examples of ordinary people willing to risk their lives for what they know is right.

**Style**

**Point of View**

The point of view is strictly Annemarie Johansen's, but it is not told in the first person. The story is told through a third-person narrative, but the narrator is not omniscient and at no time intrudes into the story. We learn what Annemarie learns as she learns it. Since the adults in her life try to protect her from finding out too much about the gravity of their situation, the reader, like Annemarie, can only watch and pay attention for clues in the hopes of figuring it all out. Fortunately the author is aware of how perceptive children can be, and so, despite the fact that the adults are less than forthcoming with the little girl, both Annemarie and the reader see enough to grasp the truth of her friend Ellen's peril, and are able to figure out how the Resistance intends to help Ellen and her family escape.

Annemarie's point of view matures as the story progresses, as she changes from a napve child to a more mature young lady because of the difficult situations she encounters in German-occupied Denmark. Not only does her perceptiveness increase with her added wisdom, but the adults, responding to her obvious maturity and courage, begin to share more information with her about the events of the plot. Thus by the end of the story, all the pertinent details have been revealed in an age-appropriate manner. All in all, Lois Lowry has done a tremendous job of imagining how tragedy might look through the eyes of a child.

**Setting**

*Number the Stars* is set in 1943, during the German occupation of Denmark. The protagonist, Annemarie, lives in the scenic town of Copenhagen. The setting is critical to the story, as the plot derives from the struggles the Danish people faced in secretly defying the German army. The author, Lois Lowry, brings many historical facts into play, creating a fictional, but realistic, story of what life might have been like for a ten-year-old girl living in an occupied country. Lowry uses real historical leaders such as King Christian X, of Denmark, who surrendered his country peacefully to the Nazis in order to avoid bloodshed. The Danish Resistance was born at this critical juncture in history to carry out the true will of the king and his people, which was to defy the Nazis' plans to take over the world and destroy the Jewish race.

The Resistance was made up of everyday, average Danes such as the Johansen family and Peter Neilsen. By placing her storyline in the center of this secret conflict, Lowry proves that these everyday, average Resistance fighters were anything but average. The stark historical backdrop that makes up the setting provides the novel's characters with the opportunity to transcend their normal lives in order to fight for what they believe is right.

**Language and Meaning**

Because *Number the Stars* is a children's book with a ten-year-old protagonist, the language used by the author is necessarily targeted towards a younger audience. Lois Lowry does not condescend to her readers with overly-simplistic subject matter, but her choice of words is consistently simple, designed to be easily understood by children of various ages. Since the point of view is Annemarie's, the author's goal is to utilize the type of language which a ten-year-old girl might actually use. Lowry consistently achieves that goal throughout the book. Annemarie always sounds like a ten-year-old, and, to Lowry's credit, she avoids using modern slang that would not have sounded appropriate coming from a Danish child back in 1943. In fact, she avoids the use of any childish slang at all, possibly because the author has a formal writing style, but more likely because childhood slang is a product of peacetime and leisure. Annemarie and the other children of Denmark had neither the peace nor the leisure to develop childhood word games or coded language.

However, the members of the Resistance movement do use coded language, which the author includes in the interest of conveying the necessity for secrecy when conspiring against the Germans. In the interest of historical accuracy, Lois Lowry includes a few words in German, spoken by the occupying soldiers, as well as culturally specific names of people and places in Denmark, to convey to the reader a sense of the Danish way of life.

**Structure**

*Number the Stars* is divided into seventeen chapters, with a historical Afterword from the author at the end. The story is linear and takes place over a period of a few months in the life of ten-year-old Annemarie Johansen during the Nazi occupation of Denmark. The story opens three years into the occupation, but the war has yet to touch young Annemarie's life other than through the growing privation caused by the Germans' strict food and energy rationing. The plot builds gradually, as the author lays the groundwork, showing how the menace of war creeps into Annemarie's life.

The incidents which take place near the beginning are relatively minor and spaced out over a period of months. However, the Jewish New Year in October marks a climactic turning point, after which the rest of the events unfold in the short space of two days; thus, Chapters 4 through 16 are dedicated to the events of a forty-eight hour period. Chapter 17 jumps ahead two years to the end of the war, allowing the author to provide closure in her denouement. Finally, Lois Lowry includes a detailed Afterword in which she explains to the reader what events were real, and how she pieced these historical facts together to create a solid underpinning for her fictional story.