

Authenticating *Number the Stars* Using Nonfiction Resources

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***Number the Stars* by Lois Lowry** is a popular historical novel for adolescent readers about the Nazi occupation of Copenhagen, Denmark during World War II and the efforts of Danish resisters who successfully rescued 98 percent of that nation's Jewish population.¹ While this 1998 book is considered to be a fictional account, most of the events in the story are historically accurate and based on authentic sources, people, and events. As historical fiction becomes increasingly popular regarding the integration of social studies and language arts, it is important for teachers to assume the responsibility of leading students to information that is historically accurate and valid.² The purpose of this article is to demonstrate how teachers and students can use nonfiction resources to not only validate the texts that they are reading, but also develop critical thought processes and strengthen comprehension.

The sequence of events in *Number the Stars* closely follows the actual historical account as given in *Rescue in Denmark* by Harold Flender.³ His inspiration for documenting these events was the testimony of David Melchior, a Danish Jew, at the Eichmann trial in Israel in 1961. Melchior, the son of the chief rabbi of Denmark, was one of the thousands of Jews who had been smuggled to Sweden to escape persecution. Flender was so deeply moved by Melchior's account that he went on to make a movie, *An Act of Faith* (1961), and then to publish *Rescue in Denmark* two years later, which tells the story of the major rescue groups.

Our young readers can correlate many details in Lowry's historical fiction with details given in Flender's nonfiction book and other secondary and primary historical sources. Three areas of social studies that are reflected in the novel—geography, events, and people—are highlighted in the comparisons below.

Geography

King Christian X, the ruler of Denmark during World War II, was highly respected by the citizens of his country. Throughout

Number the Stars, references were made to the fact that all of Denmark was alert to the well being of the sovereign. The press and ordinary citizens served, in a sense, as the king's "bodyguard." He, in return, took specific actions that encouraged the Danish people to quietly but persistently resist Nazi persecution of Jews during the German occupation of their country. (See **SIDEBAR** on the myth of the yellow star, page 7)

In chapter two, Annemarie (the main character in the novel) and Papa have a discussion about the battle that Norway fought against the invading German Army, and how this was very different from the way King Christian X handled the situation in Denmark. Annemarie questions why King Christian X was unable to resist the Nazis militarily in April of 1940. Her father explains the difference in the size and topography of the two countries. In his historical account, Flender also contrasts the flat and open landscape of Denmark to the mountainous and heavily wooded Norway, which was easier to defend. Lowry accurately communicates a vital piece of information with regard to King Christian X and why he conceded to Germany without a fight on April 9, 1940.

Flender goes on to explain the long-term effects of the Danish government's noncooperation with Nazi attempts to persecute Danish citizens who were Jewish. It resulted in a three-year period during which Danish Jews enjoyed personal safety and were granted more freedom than the Jews of other occupied countries. Hitler referred to Denmark during this period as a *Musterprotektorat* or "model protectorate," thus overlooking—for a while—the political and social noncooperation of the Danish government and people on this issue.⁴

Information from Flender's book can be used as a springboard for discussions of critical questions about cooperation and concession as well as lessons about geography and its significance to this story. Teachers could utilize online maps as well as traditional wall maps to engage students in studying the significance of the proximity of Copenhagen, Denmark to

Sweden as well as contrasting the topography of Denmark and Norway. Understanding the geography is crucial for understanding how the non-Jewish citizens of Copenhagen, Denmark, were successful in rescuing most of their Jewish citizens.

In *Number the Stars*, Annemarie shares the story of *The Little Mermaid* by Hans Christian Andersen. The author reveals to young readers that Andersen was one of the world's most famous storytellers and that he was Danish. The introduction of *The Complete Hans Christian Andersen Fairy Tales* refers to Andersen's native home, Odense, Denmark. It goes on to discuss that he wanted to be remembered as an author of serious works rather than the fairy tales he is renowned for today.⁵ His plays, novels, poetry, travel books, and several autobiographies are not well known outside of Denmark. In fact, children might be surprised to learn that *The Little Mermaid* is more than a Disney film and that there is even a bronze statue, *The Little Mermaid* (*Den Lille Havfrue* in Danish) in Copenhagen harbor at Langelinie outside the old Citadel, a military fortress dating back to the 17th century.

Other geographic references to Denmark mentioned in the novel include Tivoli gardens, a world-famous amusement park that opened in 1843. Annemarie's little sister Kirsti enthusiastically referred to Tivoli Gardens in chapter four. In his book, Lowry explains that part of the park had been temporarily shut down because German occupation forces burned it. She also refers to the Amalienborg Palace, which served as the home of the Danish royal family. Children could engage in any of the interactive encyclopedias to learn more about *The Little Mermaid* statue, Tivoli Gardens, and Amalienborg Palace, or engage in a WebQuest to "virtually explore" any of these landmarks and to better familiarize themselves with the setting of the novel.

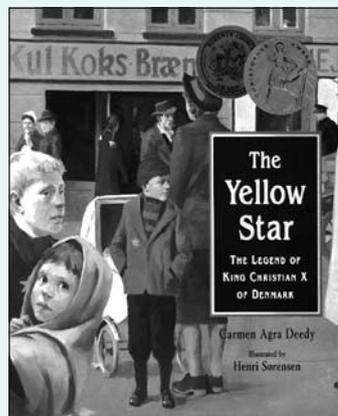
Events

The normal lifestyles of Danish Jews came to a halt when Hitler decided on August 29, 1943, that the Danish resistance could no longer be tolerated and that "The Final Solution of the Jewish Question" allowed no exceptions.

In chapter four of *Number the Stars*, the Rosens find themselves in mortal danger. On the eve of the Jewish New Year, their rabbi informs the congregation that the Nazis have obtained lists of Jews from Danish synagogues. Arrest is imminent. Ellen Rosen, one of the daughters, stays with the Johansens, a gentile family, pretending to be one of their children, while her parents go into hiding. This fictional account mirrors fact, as Rabbi Marcus Melchior of the Copenhagen Synagogue gave this warning to his congregation on the eve of Rosh Hashanah, knowing that there would be more than the usual number of worshippers.⁶

In *The Holocaust: A History of Courage and Resistance*, readers can confirm that the hysteria of young children on the fishing boats presented a problem for the refugees as well as the resistance workers.⁷ To remedy the problem, children were injected with a sedative to keep them unconscious (and thus quiet) during the voyage. This problem arises in *Number the Stars* when the Rosens and other Jews were preparing to go on Uncle Henrik's

The King's Yellow Star and Citizen Resistance: Comparing Myth and History



In 1940, Nazi Germany tried to incorporate Denmark into the Reich, potentially spelling doom for approximately 7,000 Jews living in Copenhagen. According to popular myth, King Christian X, although not Jewish, wore a yellow star of the kind that Jews were required to wear for identification by the Nazi government.

Some versions of the story state that thousands of Danes wearing Jewish stars marched in the streets in protest. The fact that neither King Christian X nor the Danes did any such thing has not tarnished the legend's popularity.*

Although not literally true, the myth represents accurately the mentality that guided the Danish people in demanding equality for Jews and, after the fall of the Danish government, helping the persecuted Jews escape to neutral Sweden. No peace hero acts alone. The most crucial peace-sustaining force in Denmark was the unity and commitment of the public, which Christian X evoked with his many real acts of compassion and self-sacrifice.

For example, in April 1933 the king was invited to visit the Copenhagen synagogue to celebrate the 100th anniversary of its construction. When Hitler came to power in Germany, the congregation suggested that the king might wish to postpone his visit, but Christian X insisted on coming. He may have been the first monarch in Scandinavia to visit a synagogue. In this real demonstration of courage (as in the myth of the yellow star), the public followed suit, insisting on life and liberty for Jews despite the Nazi threat and eventual persecution.

The myth of the yellow star has even been made into a children's book: *The Yellow Star: The Legend of King Christian X of Denmark* by Carmen Agra Deedy, in which the author responsibly explains that the story is, indeed, a myth.** Teachers may choose to provide students with meaningful myths—as well as their historical contexts. In their many forms, the myths and truths about King Christian X represent not just a single peace hero, but a citizenry uniting to create a better world.

Notes

* This text is based on "King Christian X of Denmark: A Peace Hero Representing the Concerted Efforts of Danes During the Holocaust" by Anna Bershteyn, www.wagingpeace.org.

** Carmen Agra Deedy, Henri Sorensen, illus., *The Yellow Star: The Legend of King Christian X of Denmark* (New York: Peachtree, 2000).

boat. A baby is injected with the sedative in order to prevent it from crying, which upsets the baby's mother. Lowry provides a measure of comfort to her readers by alluding to the fact that the baby started to awaken when the boat reached Sweden.

Tell Them We Remember provides pictures and information regarding the fishing boats themselves.⁸ In this book, students can find the photos of the actual fishing boats that are on display in the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, DC, and are able to get a realistic impression of the appearance and size of the vessels.

While trying to move the Jews to the fishing boats, Lowry describes a mock funeral designed to ward off the Germans. While attempting to sabotage the mock funeral, the Nazis back away after Mama reveals that "Great Aunt Birte" (the fictional deceased person supposedly in the coffin) died of typhus. Similar incidents are described in Flender's account as well as in *Women in the Resistance and in the Holocaust: The Voices of Eyewitnesses*.⁹ In each of the reported accounts, chapels served as gathering points for the mock funerals. The disguised Jews wore black, covered their faces and "sobbed" into handkerchiefs. The fake mourners were rushed in covered trucks from the chapel to the waiting fishing boats.

People

In the afterword of *Number the Stars*, Lowry reveals that the rabbi learned of the impending raids through a German official by the name of G. F. Duckwitz. *The Courage to Care* describes an actual German diplomat, Georg Ferdinand Duckwitz, as a "Righteous Gentile, a German who contributed enormously to the success of the Danish rescue operation."¹⁰ Duckwitz was an attaché for shipping affairs in the German Legation in Copenhagen in September of 1943.

The first-hand narratives of both rescuers and the rescued in Denmark can be found in *The Rescue of the Danish Jews: Moral Courage Under Stress*¹¹ as well as *Darkness over Denmark: The Danish Resistance and the Rescue of the Jews*.¹² Annemarie's Uncle Henrik worked as part of the Resistance by transporting Jews to Sweden in his fishing boat. Uncle Henrik's character may have been inspired by Flender's account of Peder Christopher Hansen, and/or Axel Olsen, who risked their lives and, unlike many other fishermen, acted out of idealism and did not charge the Jews for passage to Sweden.

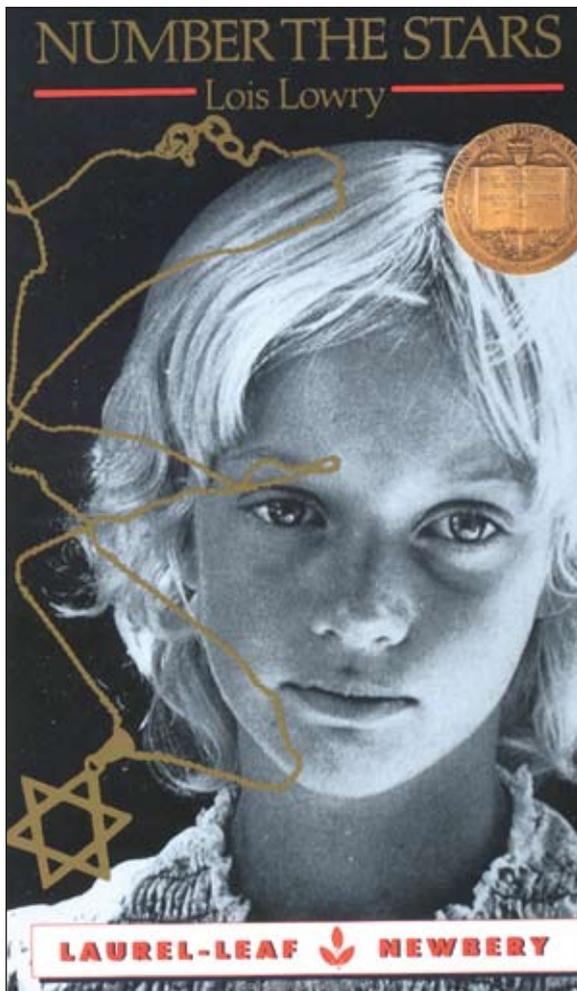
When the Germans realized that Danish Jews were escaping to Sweden by fishing boats, they used dogs in attempt to detect hidden stowaways. Students can research the Danish scientist in Malmo who concocted a powder made of cocaine and dried human blood that served to deaden Nazi police dogs' sense of smell.¹³ Danish seamen, while pretending to blow their noses, would drop the powder from their handkerchiefs onto the boat deck. In *Number the Stars*, Ellen must outrun Nazi guards to reach Uncle Henrik's boat to deliver an envelope containing a handkerchief laced with this powder. The reader is kept in suspense as she delivers this "life or death" package. The significance of the package is not revealed until the end of the novel.

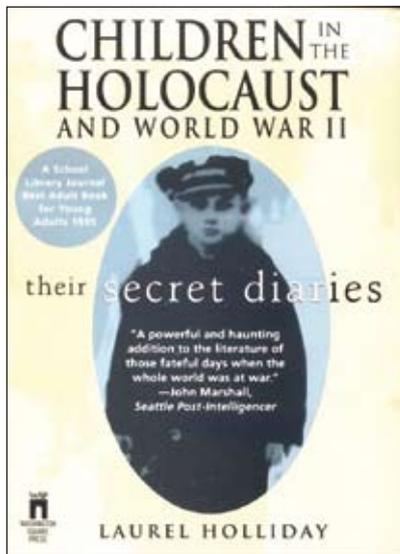
Another part of the resistance that children can learn more about through enrichment exercises and research is represented by the youthful characters of Peter and Lise, who are part of the underground Resistance effort. Many references are made to them throughout the novel. Lise had lost her life and the reader only learns of her through references in the past tense.

There are a number of books on Resistance fighters during World War II, but the one that is especially significant with regard to this novel is *Children in the Holocaust and World War II: Their Secret Diaries* by Laurel Holliday.¹⁴ This text contains excerpts from the diaries of 23 young people involved in World War II. One of these is Kim Malthe-Bruun. In the afterword, Lowry states that while researching Resistance leaders in Denmark, she came across a photograph of Kim Malthe-Bruun, "I turned the page and faced a photograph of Kim

Malthe-Bruun. He wore a turtleneck sweater, and his thick, light hair was windblown. His eyes looked out at me, unwavering on the page."¹⁵ The determination in his eyes made her determined to tell his story. The Nazis executed Kim Malthe-Bruun, a member of the Danish Resistance, at the age of 21.

Holliday's novel contains a picture of Kim Malthe-Bruun that matches the description given by Lowry. The significance of this individual and the inclusion of his picture in this book move the reader to heightened levels of personal interest, more intimately connecting the reader to the story. People and events become real to young readers as they discover important truths and are able to verify them through historical sources.





Conclusion

Including nonfiction reference materials (including primary historical sources) when reading a novel such as *Number the Stars* clearly provides students with more meaning, purpose, context, and significance regarding the texts that they encounter. The comprehension strategies that children strengthen by engaging in a multi-text set such

as the one described for this novel include summarization, critical-thinking, identifying the main idea, predicting, synthesizing, and drawing conclusions. Ultimately, these connections between social studies and language arts give students a purpose for reading and help them gain a deeper appreciation for the struggles, courage, and history of humankind. 📖

Notes

1. Lois Lowry, *Number the Stars* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 1989).
2. Eric Groce and Robin Groce, "Authenticating Historical Fiction: Rationale and Process," *Education Research and Perspectives* 32, no. 1 (2005).
3. Harold Flender, *Rescue in Denmark* (New York: Simon & Schuster, NY, 1963).
4. Flender; Gene Sharp, *The Politics of Nonviolent Action* (Boston, MA: Porter Sargent, 1973).
5. Hans C. Andersen, *The Complete Hans Christian Andersen Fairy Tales* (New York: Gramercy, 1993).
6. Flender.
7. Bea Stadler and David S. Martine, *The Holocaust: A History of Courage and Resistance*, revised ed. (New York: Behrman House, 1995).
8. Susan D. Bachrach, *Tell Them We Remember* (New York: Little, Brown, 1994).
9. Vera Laska, ed., *Women in the Resistance and in the Holocaust: The Voices of Eyewitnesses* (, CT: Greenwood Press, 1983).
10. Carol Rittner and Sondra Myers, *The Courage to Care* (New York: New York University Press, 1989).
11. L. Goldberger, ed., *The Rescue of the Danish Jews: Moral Courage Under Stress* (New York: New York University Press, NY 1987). Goldberger relates that Georg Ferdinand Duckwitz, a German naval attaché, communicated the Nazi's plans to Prime Minister Hans Hedtoft on September 28, 1943. In a first-hand account (p. 46), Jorgen Haestrup describes Duckwitz as the "sole decent person among the German leaders."
12. Ellen Levine, *Darkness over Denmark: The Danish Resistance and the Rescue of the Jews* (New York: Holiday House, 2000).
13. Flender.
14. Laurel Holliday, *Children in the Holocaust and World War II: Their Secret Diaries* (New York: Washington Square Press, 1996).
15. Lowry, 136.

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A Call for Applications: SSYL Editor

As the end of her five-year term draws closer, NCSS Member Linda Bennett has announced her intention to hand over the position of Editor of *Social Studies and the Young Learner (SSYL)* to the next editor in 2011. The duration of this unpaid, professional service position is five years. SSYL is the NCSS journal for teachers in grades K-6.

Dr. Bennett is associate professor in the College of Education, University of Missouri in Columbia, Missouri. She became Editor of SSYL in 2006, and will have served in that position for five years. Her success at promoting the journal has garnered grants from National Geographic and PBS Teachers and PBS Video, and has resulted in local news stories in the cities and towns where SSYL authors teach.

The Editor is a volunteer who is willing to assume a significant leadership position among elementary educators. The editor plans issues, solicits articles, organizes the manuscript review process, and cooperates with NCSS publications staff to produce a high-quality journal.

NCSS invites applications from NCSS members interested in succeeding Dr. Bennett in this vital leadership role for elementary teachers. The responsibilities of the position include:

- Identifying ways in which the journal can meet the professional needs of classroom teachers as they educate their students in social studies subjects;

- Organizing theme issues, soliciting manuscripts and administering the review of solicited and unsolicited manuscripts;
- Maintaining communications with authors; and
- Coordinating with NCSS editorial staff to produce an interesting, readable, and lively journal that appears on schedule.

NCSS invites applications from members who have the vision to identify the professional needs of elementary teachers of social studies, and are experienced in writing and editing materials that are teacher-friendly and reader-friendly. Applications from two persons wishing to be co-editors (e.g., a university professor and a classroom teacher) are also welcome.

If you are interested in the position, please submit a letter, a resume, and a statement describing your view of the main current professional needs of elementary teachers of social studies and how you, as editor of the journal, would meet these needs. Please also include one or two samples of your most teacher-friendly and reader-friendly writing. Send these to Steve Lapham, associate editor, via e-mail at slapham@ncss.org by **August 1, 2009**. Please place "SSYL Editor Position" on the subject line.