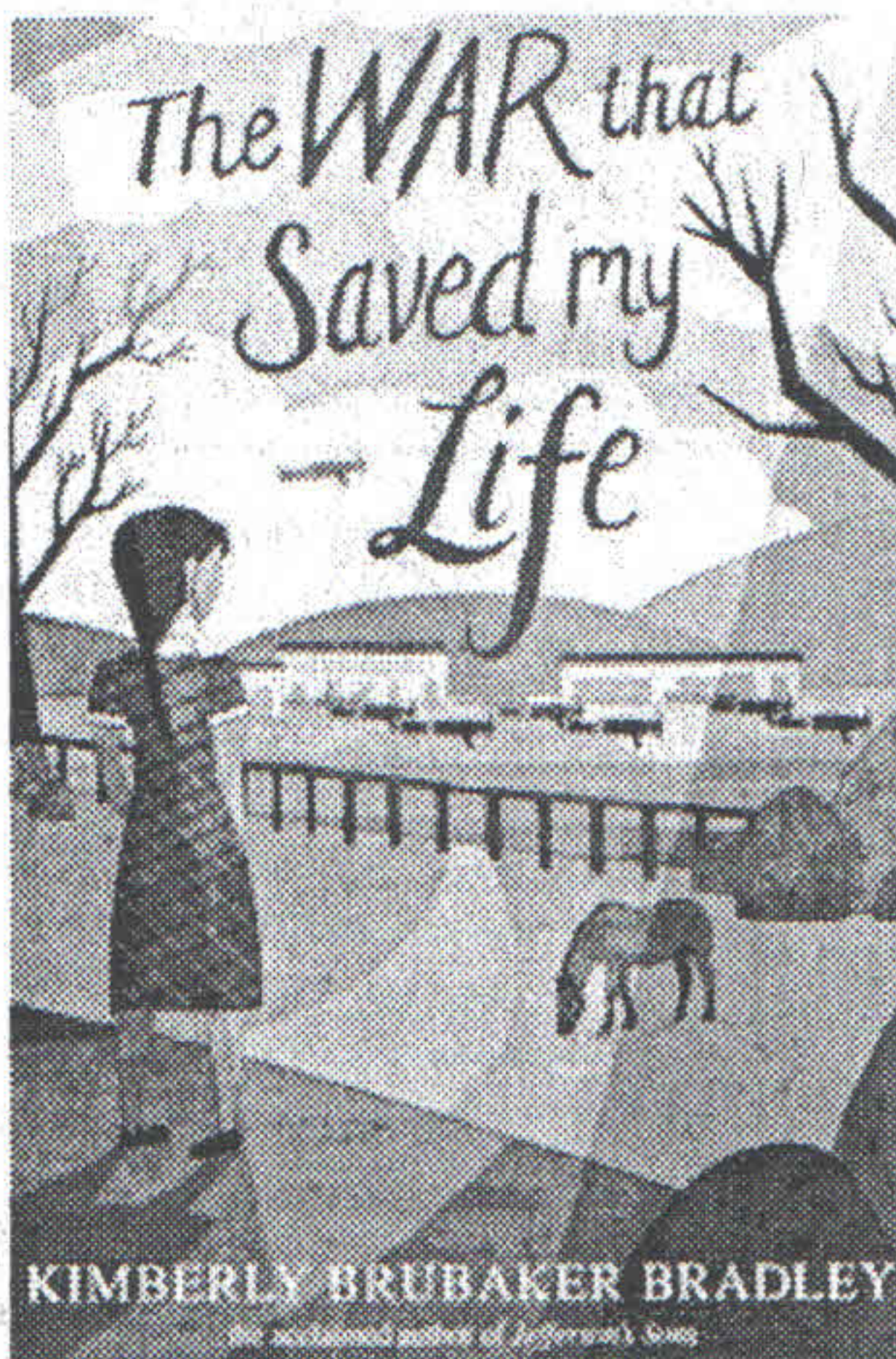




The Village School's Children's Book of the Month



Book reviewed by
George Bennett,
4th-6th grade teacher

'The War that Saved my Life' by Kimberley Brubaker Bradley

"The War that Saved my Life" was an instant hit with the Village School's 4th through 6th grade class. As a read-aloud it had the class spellbound, and several children also read it on their own. The book begins in the impoverished East End of London, at the outset of World War II, and is told through the voice of 10-year-old Ada. She has been born with a clubfoot, and her abusive mother is so ashamed of the deformity that she keeps Ada confined in her one-room apartment, and regularly punishes her by locking her in a small cupboard beneath the kitchen sink.

With the war imminent, Ada's little brother Jamie is due to be evacuated to the country to avoid the expected air-raids but their mother intends to keep Ada in London, since she doesn't think her worth preserving. Ada, however, secretly learns to walk — albeit in severe pain — and manages to hide herself and Jamie in a large group of children leaving London. After being rejected by all the other potential foster parents in a small seaside town, the children find themselves billeted with a reluctant Susan Smith, a young woman who is still mourning the death of her friend and partner Becky, and wants nothing to do with a couple of ragged evacuees.

Ada's life has been so restricted that she doesn't even recognize grass when she first sees it, but Susan allows her to roam freely around her country cottage, and Ada immediately befriends the pony that lives in the neighboring field. Better still, the local doctor doesn't treat her as the freak she's been taught to think she is, and gives her a pair of crutches, enabling her to move freely at last.

As Ada and Jamie get used to their new, healthy life, and the absence of their nasty parent, Ada is still haunted both by her mother's rejection and by the thought that she may have to leave her new surroundings. Her inner tension continues even as she is accepted by the local villagers, and the aristocratic Lady Thorton and her daughter.

The story arc of *The War that Saved my Life* is very similar to that of the perennial favorite "Goodnight Mr. Tom," which also featured an abused evacuee from the slums of East London, but it manages to be even better, not least because the first-person narrative gives us a constant insight into Ada's feelings. Ada and Jamie are also more aware of the war than is the boy Will in *Goodnight Mr. Tom*, and there are regular references to the wider struggle, which forms the background to Ada's further adventures.

Gradually Ada and Jamie become part of the local scene, and they grow in both health and height under the care of Miss Smith, who feeds them properly for the first time in their lives and, despite herself, acts like a proper mother. Inevitably, however, just as they are finally settling down, the children's real mother comes to reclaim them and take them back to London and the abusive life from which they have escaped. But now Ada is not the same girl as left London, and has learned how to fight her own wars.

The War that Saved my Life is fast-paced and emotionally engaging. Ada is a complex heroine that you can't help cheering for, and the final resolution of the story is satisfying, if slightly abrupt. The book appeals to both boys and girls from 5th grade onwards, but also to adults. Add the book to your gift list, and make sure you read it too.