

BENEATH THE CANOPY

Educator Companion Guide

Grades 5-8

Historical Context | Guided Discussion | Classroom Connections

Not about the war, but about the children who lived through it.

LYNDA RIGGERS

A companion resource for classroom, library, book-club,
and intergenerational reading.

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Before You Read: When History Interrupts Childhood

About the Novel

In September 1944, twelve-year-old Johanna lives with her family in Arnhem, Netherlands, while twelve-year-old Rein is largely on his own in nearby Apeldoorn. Both have spent much of their childhood under Nazi occupation.

When Operation Market Garden brings Allied troops into the Netherlands, the two children experience the same war in remarkably different ways. Johanna's family is displaced from Arnhem and struggles to remain together. Rein scavenges for food, navigates friendship and danger, and develops a complicated relationship with Heinrich, a Nazi officer who helps feed him while remaining part of the regime responsible for the suffering around him.

As the occupation stretches into the devastating Hunger Winter, ordinary childhood concerns - birthdays, school, friendship, family, books, food, warmth, and home - take on extraordinary importance.

Historical Context at a Glance

May 1940	German occupation begins. Germany invades the Netherlands. Dutch families live under occupation for the next five years.
September 1944	Operation Market Garden. Allied forces attempt to secure a route through the Netherlands into Germany. Arnhem becomes a major battlefield.
Autumn 1944	Displacement and increasing shortages. Fighting forces civilians from their homes while food, fuel, and transportation become increasingly scarce.
Winter 1944-45	The Hunger Winter. Severe food and fuel shortages bring starvation and extreme cold.
Spring 1945	Liberation and food relief. Allied food drops bring desperately needed relief, including Operation Manna.

BEFORE READING, ASK:

What makes a childhood feel "normal"?

Have students name ordinary things they expect to be there tomorrow: food, school, friends, family, heat, clothing, a bedroom, transportation, celebrations, books, pets.

Which would be hardest to lose - and why?

Two Children. One War. Two Very Different Experiences.

One of the central ideas in *Beneath the Canopy* is that people can live through the same historical event and experience it very differently.

JOHANNA - ARNHEM

At the beginning of the novel, Johanna is thinking about her twelfth birthday and secretly hoping for a sweet treat. Within hours, she is responsible for getting three-year-old Henny to safety while Allied paratroopers descend and gunfire surrounds them.

Johanna counts when she is frightened. She knows the number of steps to safe places and uses numbers to make an uncontrollable world feel smaller and more manageable.

As you read, watch for:

Johanna's counting; her changing responsibilities; her relationship with Henny; what happens to the idea of home; the things she misses from ordinary childhood; the ways hunger changes her physically and emotionally.

REIN - APELDOORN

Rein has already learned how to survive without the adults who once structured his life. He scavenges, steals food, jokes with his friends, and takes risks that would have been unimaginable before the occupation.

His relationship with Heinrich eventually forces Rein - and the reader - to confront a much harder question than simply identifying "good guys" and "bad guys." Heinrich feeds Rein and helps others survive the famine, but kindness toward Rein cannot erase Heinrich's participation in the Nazi system or the suffering caused by his choices.

As you read, watch for:

Rein's hunger; his need for friendship and belonging; the choices he makes to survive; his relationships with Wigman and Olderkotte; his changing view of Heinrich; the difference between understanding someone's choices and excusing them.

KEEP A "NORMAL" LIST

While reading, have students record moments when Johanna or Rein mentions something that once felt ordinary.

FOOD | SCHOOL | HOME | FAMILY | FRIENDSHIP | SAFETY | WARMTH | PLAY

At the end of the novel, return to the list: **Which losses seem small at first but become important as the story continues?**

Talk About It

Use these questions for whole-class discussion, small groups, journals, or book clubs.

1. What does courage look like in this novel? Choose one moment that involves no battle, weapon, or soldier. Why might an ordinary act still require courage?
2. Johanna uses counting to cope with fear. Rein often uses humor. What do these behaviors tell us about each child? Why might two people respond differently to similar trauma?
3. Both children are twelve, but the adults around them increasingly expect them to behave like adults. When does responsibility become too much responsibility for a child?
4. Hunger changes more than what Johanna and Rein eat. How does it affect their decisions, relationships, bodies, and understanding of right and wrong?
5. Rein steals and breaks rules in order to survive. Do circumstances change how we judge an action? Are there choices Rein makes that you agree with? Choices you don't?

TEACHING NOTE: MORAL COMPLEXITY

The novel asks students to hold two truths at once: Heinrich sometimes helps Rein and others survive, and Heinrich also serves a brutal occupying regime. Understanding why a person made a choice is not the same as excusing the choice.

A useful discussion frame:

What happened? Who was harmed? What choices existed? Who was responsible? What does kindness change - and what can it not erase?

Talk About It - Continued

6. Heinrich is one of the novel's most morally complicated characters. He helps keep Rein and others from starving, but he also serves and benefits from the Nazi regime. Can someone perform acts of kindness and still be responsible for serious wrongdoing?
7. Rein wonders whether Heinrich would have helped Olderkotte in the same way he helped him. Why is that question important? What does it reveal about Rein's growing understanding of Heinrich?
8. Johanna and Rein talk about whether life can ever return to "normal." What do you think normal means after someone has experienced war?
9. Liberation does not erase loss. Why do you think the novel allows happiness and grief to exist at the same time?
10. Near the end, Vader tells Johanna that even if their house is gone, their family can build another because home is something they carry with them. How has Johanna's definition of home changed since the beginning of the book?

OPTIONAL QUICK-WRITE

Complete one sentence:

"Before reading this book, I thought war was mainly about _____. Now I also think about _____."

Students may share only if they choose.

Take It Beyond the Book

ACTIVITY 1 - Two Children, Two Wars

Compare Johanna's and Rein's experiences. Use evidence from the novel.

COMPARE	JOHANNA	REIN
Home / family situation		
Greatest danger		
Food and hunger		
Friendship		
Coping with fear		
Relationship with adults		
What "home" means		

Then answer: How can two children living relatively close to one another experience the same war so differently?

ACTIVITY 2 - History + Story

Choose one subject: **Operation Market Garden; Battle of Arnhem; Hunger Winter; Dutch resistance; Nazi occupation of the Netherlands; Operation Manna; liberation of the Netherlands.**

Using credible historical sources, identify **three facts** from your research and **one moment in the novel** that helped you understand what those facts might have meant to an ordinary child.

Discuss: What can historical fiction help us understand that a timeline cannot? What can a historical source tell us that fiction cannot? Why do we need both?

ACTIVITY 3 - A Choice Without an Easy Answer

Choose one difficult decision made by Johanna, Rein, a family member, or another character. Explain: **What did the character decide? What choices were available? What risks came with each choice? What would you have done? Did knowing the circumstances change your judgment?**

The Story Behind the Story

Rein and Joanne

Beneath the Canopy was inspired by the childhood experiences of author Lynda Riggers's former in-laws, Rein and Johanna - who later chose the more American-sounding name Joanne.

Riggers knew them for many years and heard their wartime stories repeatedly. Those memories eventually became the emotional foundation of the novel.

The book is historical fiction, not biography. Timelines and details were adjusted, some characters and scenes were invented, and Johanna was aged from seven to twelve for the novel. But many details grew from memories Rein and Joanne carried for the rest of their lives.

Their memories also demonstrate something important about trauma. Joanne remembered cold, hunger, and fear and continued counting throughout her life. Rein often told his wartime stories with humor, including stories about scrounging for food and getting into trouble, sometimes dismissing what he had endured by saying, "It wasn't so bad."

INTERGENERATIONAL ACTIVITY

ASK SOMEONE WHO WAS YOUR AGE ONCE

History doesn't live only in textbooks. Talk with a parent, grandparent, neighbor, family friend, or another older adult.

Instead of beginning with **"What historical events did you live through?"**, begin with:

"What do you remember about being my age?"

You might ask: What did you do after school? What did you worry about? What did you eat? What did you do for fun? What did your neighborhood look like? What world events do you remember adults discussing? Did anything happen that changed what "normal" meant to you?

Afterward, write down **one ordinary detail** from the conversation that you want to remember.

Why That Matters

Rein and Joanne's stories were told around a family for years before they became a book. In her Author's Note, Riggers acknowledges that she heard them so often that she eventually stopped truly listening - until she realized how easily lived history can become distant history.

Someone's ordinary memory today may become another generation's history tomorrow.