



# John Bloom and the Victory Garden

*Leigh Shearin*

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## **John Bloom and the Victory Garden Leigh Shearin**

John Bloom and the Victory Garden is the rollicking tale of 3 boys at the dawn of America's involvement in WWII. John Bloom, and his best friends Joe and Chewie live, play, and get into adventures in 1940's era Appleside, NJ. Because children are generally joyful and tend to put more importance on the goings-on of their own worlds than those of grown-ups, the events of the war are woven into the boy's daily lives. Along the way, a bitter and cynical old man is drawn into their hijinks, and contributes his own joy to the lives of these 3.

Chapter One invites the reader to join John and his friends in Appleside, NJ on the afternoon of December 6th, 1941. Through newspaper headlines and radio bulletins, the boys learn about the incredible events of the war- beginning with the attack on Hawaii by the Empire of Japan. As the story moves along, John and his friends learn that everyone- not just soldiers- can make a difference. They learn that commitment leads to ultimate success and that taking a seemingly insurmountable task one step at a time will make that task simple. John, Joe and Chewie learn about where their food comes from, and how important good food is to the Allies overseas.

John Bloom and the Victory Garden is not just a story of Homefront USA during WWII. Its about faith, endurance and sturdy values that transcend time and cultural differences. It's about accepting tough times, struggle and adversity and overcoming them anyway. It's about seeing the humor in life, and helping others to see the humor too.

But mostly, they just have a gut-busting great time!

## **John Bloom and the Victory Garden Details**

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# From Reader Review John Bloom and the Victory Garden for online ebook

## Kay LaLone says

I loved this book. The book takes place during WWII. Three young boys deal with America going to war. Humor, friendship, and faith is woven into the story making it an entertaining way to learn history. Great for boys ages 9 - 14.

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## Dawn says

John Bloom and the Victory Garden is historical fiction for children. It occurs in 1941-1942 right before and after the attack on Pearl Harbor. It explains how the United States got involved in World War II and how these events affected three 10 year old boys. Leigh Shearin also does a good job at depicting that era: listening to the radio in the evening, the typical foods people ate, most moms staying home to take care of their families, etc.

John, Joe, and Chewie are typical boys. John is the more responsible boy of the group and Joe is the most mischievous with Chewie somewhere in the middle.

John Bloom and the Victory Garden isn't action packed but it is a good story and presents history in a way that children will enjoy reading about it. It also brings up issues such as men enlisting to fight in the war, some things people at home did to support the soldiers and the war, and how Jews, Germans, and Italians were put into camps for national security.

There is a map at the beginning of the book that shows the locations talked about. At the end of the book are recipes that were mentioned in the book. What fun it would be to cook some of the recipes that you just read about!

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## Lisa Foster says

My Review: (4.5/5 Stars) Title: John Bloom and the Garden of Victory | Author: Leigh Shearin | Publication Date: October 27, 2014 | Publisher: Independent | Pages: 195 | Recommended Grades: 3-8

Author Leigh Shearin's "John Bloom and the Victory Garden," the first of her "John Bloom Series," is a sure-fire win for readers in grades 3-8, history buffs, and foodies.

The story centers around three boys (John, Joe, and Chewie), all age ten, who are friends and live in the same small farming town community of Appleside, New Jersey.

This is during the time of WWII as Pearl Harbor Day, Dec 7th 1941, is brought up almost immediately as the news hits the town and how it effects the town and people. One of the things I learned was of the Executive Order 9066; which was a United States presidential executive order signed and issued during World War II by the United States President Franklin D. Roosevelt on February 19, 1942. The story stated it affected Japanese, Germans, & Italians and the children were scared as one of them was Italian. In reality, Japanese

were the target but less Germans and even less Italians were taken and interned.

The 3 boys started a club, nicknamed the ABC club (American Boys Club) to help with the War in their own way. They weren't sure what to do but they were boys and loved to have fun anyway. They did pranks and eat food and decided to try their first project for a neighbor, 98 year old Mr. Hutchins who has been ill and unable to help himself and chop firewood. However, Mr. Hutchins wasn't too friendly and the boys decided to do a prank instead! Needless to say, when John went to check on him and the prank the next day, he found Mr. Hutchins on the floor unable to move. He felt really bad then. He went and got help right away.

The book goes on and shows how these boys actually bonded more and John started to bring food daily for Mr. Hutchins as he was unable to move and cook for himself. Later in the story, John learned about past wars and victory gardens, where people grew food to help each other and the army by growing veggies. Mr.

Hutchins had a big garden area and the boys decided to help get the garden going again when it was springtime as everyone could do this and be productive. Then an accident occurred and one of the boys got hurt. Mr. Hutchins by then was mobile--what do you know--he was there at his bedside to encourage him and talk about teaching him how to farm and grow that victory garden. A true friendship had been born!

I loved the story and felt not just kids but adults can enjoy and learn from it.

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### **Emily-Jane Orford says**

John Bloom seems to be like any other young boy. He chums around with other boys his age and he collects all kinds of treasures, things found around his home and in neighboring fields, like the Indian arrowhead that he's planning to trade with his friend, Chewie, for a rabbit skull. John's best friends are Chewie and Joe and one of his favorite pastimes, other than finding treasures, is eating. Food seems to be a very important part of the boys' growing up years.

All that they hold dear is threatened when they learn that their country has been attacked. Pearl Harbor has been bombed by the Japanese. Chewie's father is already in Europe fighting the Germans. John's father tries to enlist, but he's part deaf and that disqualifies him. When John learns that his father is planning to carry more things in his store to help the community, like lots of seeds, John and his friends decide to do their part by helping neighbors who need help, like lonely and grumpy old Mr. Hutchins. John develops a bond with Mr. Hutchins, one that promises to establish a sense of victory in the growing of a Victory Garden to feed the community.

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“But best of all, you’ll have what it takes to make it in this world. When you can grow things, adapt and overcome, you’ll never want for anything. It will be your victory!” The very words of the wise old Mr. Hutchins clearly demonstrated the truth about giving and sharing and working hard for oneself and for others. That was where the victory lay.

A delightful story for middle grade readers combining lessons in history with lessons in caring, giving and sharing.

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## **T. Clary says**

Note: I received a free copy of this book in exchange for an honest review.

### **BRIEF RECAP:**

The story centers around three boys (John, Joe, and Chewie), all age ten, who are friends and live in the same small farming town community of Appleside, New Jersey. Up until December 7, 1941, the boys’ life consists of mischievous neighborhood pranks, and basically just being rambunctious ten year old boys. However, their mindsets, and life as they know it, suddenly change when they receive news of Japan bombing Pearl Harbor. Feeling patriotic and protective of America, the boys consider joining President Roosevelt’s efforts in supporting the cause against the enemy invasion. The boys decide to form a club called the ABC Club—the Appleside Boys Club. Although not initially certain what their efforts will entail with the club, they make an attempt at being good Samaritans around the community; only their efforts as good Samaritans are challenged by the likes of their grumpy ninety year old neighbor Mr. Hutchins. Eventually, Mr. Hutchins and John form a special bond and mutual respect for one another despite their age difference.

### **PROS:**

The story took me back in time to the days when my friends and I were young, rambunctious, and looking for ways to satisfy our mischievous appetites for adventure around the neighborhood. And as much as I cringed at the thought of these boys possessing a “rabbit skull” as a souvenir, I vaguely remember the thought that I too possessed a rabbit’s foot when I was younger; for what purpose besides “luck” I don’t recall. Anyway, it was a feel good story about three young friends and their way of contributing to the wartime effort in their own special way, all the while staying true to themselves and being just simply...boys. It is also a story about an unlikely bond formed between a young boy and an old man during a time when the nation’s security was compromised by war.

The illustration map of Appleside, New Jersey shown in the beginning of the book was also a plus as it gave me a perspective of the small town and where the boys lived in relation to one another and their neighbors.

I also liked at the end of the read, the author shared recipes of dishes that were mentioned and woven throughout the story. The recipes included were: a Shepherd’s Pie, Egg Custard, Apple Crumble, a Lemon Pound Cake, and Buttered Noodles.

### **CONS:**

There were several instances where certain groups were mentioned that I felt were unnecessary to the story and could easily have been left out; such as the many references to Hitler and The Hitler Youth (also Freemasons and Eastern Star Ladies were referenced). Although I understand the historical aspect of it, I felt the repeated mentions did not adequately lend itself to the story at hand. What I also found a bit confusing

was John's loathe of Hitler and everything he stood for, yet he seemed to admire and want to emulate The Hitler Youth, so much so that that is where he got the idea to create a boys club. My apologies if that was not the author's intention, but that is how I interpreted it.

Also, the "victory garden" aspect of the story was not developed enough in my opinion. I am guessing that based on how the book ended there will be more reference to the victory garden in book two?

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Overall I liked the read and would recommend it to middle grade students; specifically geared towards young males.

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### **Pam says**

John Bloom and the Victory Garden is the story of John Bloom and his friends during World War II. The book is like a time capsule of sorts and gives us a glimpse of life back in the 1940s. As I read through the book, my mind forms wonderful images of friendship, family and food shared during those times. I am not very familiar with most American food being mentioned here (I am from the Philippines) but they all sound good and my mouth waters at the mention of dessert.

The story has a pretty slow pace, like recounting childhood stories to grandchildren, but it is quite enjoyable. There are, of course, fast-paced portions where John and his two other friends, Joe and Chewie, share great and slightly mischievous adventures. I always think that boys their age can be pretty rowdy and naughty but probably also because of the war, I love how the three decided to do good deeds around the neighborhood. I especially liked John's attitude of trying to stand up for what he believes in even if his two other friends disagree with what he has to say.

The book would have been perfect if not for the ending. I felt like it was cut short and that the story did not really focus on the Victory Garden (or maybe it did, I just didn't catch it). I kept waiting for that part and felt like I was continuously on the climax of the story at about three-quarters through the book (according to Kindle) but poof! the story ended right then and there.

It was still an enjoyable read for me though. I would recommend it not just to boys but even to girls. It teaches history, food and even agriculture (I envy that part where they grow their own food).

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### **Roberta says**

T. Clary's review is so well-thought-out that I don't know that there is anything I could add or say better.

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### **Jenny H. says**

John Bloom and the Victory Garden is an imaginative story about John Bloom and his gang of friends. Readers will enjoy the adventures the friends share in their small town during the days leading up to and

following the bombing of Pearl Harbor. I was drawn to reading this book because my grandfather fought in World War II and often spoke of Victory Gardens. It is evident from reading this book that the characters in the story reflect individuals from the author's real life by the way the character development is done with such love. Because the story begins in December though, the characters do not actually get to planting the victory garden in this first book. This fact, if I am perfectly honest, was a bit of a disappointment for me as a reader. I kept reading with the expectation the story would develop into one about growing a victory garden; however it felt as though this book was really just an introduction for future stories to come. From that perspective, the story was charming, as long as it was viewed as the first in a series of books. The dialogue reflects that of a child living in the 1940's era, and it will be entertaining to a child of today's culture to envision the simplistic nature of kids' lives back then. I look forward to reading part two of this book and hearing all about growing the victory garden.

Disclosure: \* I was given this book free-of-charge by the author in exchange for my honest opinion. All opinions expressed are my own.

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### **Alex (not a dude) Baugh says**

When John Bloom, 10, woke up on Monday, December 8, 1941, he woke up to the news that the Japanese had bombed Pearl Harbor the day before. America was now at war and John feels he needs to do something to support his country.

John thinks that forming a club with his friends Chewie and Joe so that they can do good-works projects is a good idea. His friends agree and they name it The American Boys Club, or the ABC, for short. They decide their first project should be chopping firewood for a neighbor, 98 year old Mr. Hutchins who has been ill and unable to do it himself. But when Mr. Hutchins greets them at his front door with a pitchfork, they decide to prank him instead, by filling up his outhouse with snow.

John knows it is wrong to do but goes along with Chewie and Joe to save face. The next day, looking for something to do after their club meeting, the boys decide to go back to Mr. Hutchins's place to see if the outhouse was still full of snow. But when they get there, there is no sign of Mr. Hutchins anywhere, until John notices a hand on the floor. Breaking into the house, he discovers Mr. Hutchins unconscious on the floor. Chewie runs for the doctor while John and Joe stay at the house.

It turns out that Mr. Hutchins had fallen and is now required to stay in bed until he recovers, first in the hospital and then at home. But when John goes over to see how the old man is doing, he discovers that there is no food in the house and Mr. Hutchins hasn't eaten for a while. Perhaps John has not only found the perfect good-works project for The American Boys Club, but has also made a new friend who can help him do something else good for the war effort as well.

John Bloom and the Victory Garden is a real home front novel. Not only does it address the fears that most Americans felt at the outbreak of World War II, but it shows how quickly people responded to being at war. For example, John's father immediately goes to the Army recruiting office to try to join up; John deals with concerns that his friend Joe, who is Italian, will be sent to an internment camp with his parents and grandmother; America's first demoralizing defeats are acutely felt by the residents of John's town, Appleside, NJ.

There are other nice touches like how people really depended on their radios for entertainment and news; and

that boys still wanted shiny new bikes for Christmas despite the war; and of course, there is talk about rationing, and expectations of food, rubber and metal shortages.

The characters are well realized, even the secondary characters have a feeling of depth to them. The community that John lives in is easy to picture and there is a helpful map at the front of the book to situate the reader in Appleside and the boys adventures all over the town.

There is a lot of talk about food in the novel, dishes made by John's mother and Joe's grandmother, so to satisfy the cravings that will no doubt result from the food descriptions, there are some recipes at the back of the book, including Nonna's Buttered Noodles, which I am going to make this week.

This is a book that any middle grade reader will enjoy, whether or not they are history buffs, mainly because the themes of friendship, loyalty and helpfulness are timeless.

This book is recommended for readers age 9+

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## **Wendy says**

Disclaimer: I was provided with a free copy of this ebook for purposes of review. No other compensation was received. All opinions are 100% my own.

I found John Bloom and the Victory Garden to be a very enjoyable read. My 11-yr-old daughter enjoyed it very much, as well. It offered an opening to engage in an enjoyable activity together and to talk about history. She is a very good student and spent some time looking up information about the historical events discussed in the book. She has had more questions about it, which I think is great. Out of my three children she has always been the one with the most desire to learn.

This book would be a great discussion starter for kids who have studied about WWII in school as a supplement to their course instruction.

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## **Cat Michaels says**

### **Powerful WWII story for boys - history, food, and coming of age**

Author Leigh Shearin's *John Bloom and the Victory Garden*, the first of her *John Bloom Series*, is a sure-fire win for boys in grades 3-8, history buffs, and foodies. The author stirs these incongruent ingredients into a powerful tale that comes together like a perfect three-course meal, and it leaves the reader eager for more.

### **Characters, Setting**

The story is a time capsule of life in a small, northeastern U.S. town on the eve of Pearl Harbor and its aftermath during the winter 1942 as seen through the eyes of three fourth-grade boys.

Shearin is inventive in her character descriptions. For example, protagonist John Bloom wants a shiny, blue-and-white Schwinn DX bike for Christmas and can reach his front porch from the sidewalk in just five jumps--unless his shoelace comes untied. He and friend Charles Anderson Slovisky (Chewie) share a secret



knock when visiting each other's home: three raps on the front door signals an urgent, parent-free visit. The third chum, Joe Riccio, comes from an Italian immigrant family, and they face possible internment due to Mussolini's part in the war.

John Bloom also introduces readers to a host of secondary characters who add richness and dimension to the story: the town Scrooge with a secret sweet tooth and a hoard of seed packets, a kindly farmer, a wise doctor, and more.

John's hometown of Appleside, NJ, is another pivotal character in a very real sense. Its rural backdrop underscores how the boys and townsfolk overcome adversity with optimism, humor, and resilience. An Appleside street map by artist Katie Shearin (an author/illustrator dynasty in the making) prefaces the book and provides a strong visual image of the town readers will inhabit alongside John Bloom and his friends.

### **Narrative, Plot**

The plot charts the transformation of John and his playmates. Before the war, their world revolves around such activities as trading a prized rabbit skull for a freeze-dried earthworm. After December 7, they create the American Boys' Club (the ABCs) and dedicate their time to helping Appleside support the war efforts.

Shearin serves up the right mix of energetic, kid-centric dialogue with descriptive narrative, both of which focus on the ABCs and their 1940s coming-of-age era. Readers are immersed in period details that bring history to life. Leafing through photographs in *Life* magazine. Shopping at the Five and Ten. Listening to radio broadcasts of President Roosevelt or Prime Minister Churchill deliver stirring wartime messages. Waiting for letters from loved ones fighting overseas. (Imagine that: no email or Skype!)

Yet boys will be boys, and Shearin adds plenty of mischievous plot elements, like pranking the neighbors and devising secret talisman or handshakes.

I dare anyone to read *John Bloom* and not develop a food craving. The author injects mouthwatering bites from her culinary background that are rarely encountered in middle-grade books:

*[John] burst through the kitchen door and was greeted by a wave of warm, steamy air that was scented with onions and apples, bread, and some kind of meat. His mother stood with her back to him, her left arm down on the work surface, her right elbow up in the air, doing battle with a bowl of something on the counter. There was a bowl of pickled beets and a plate of bread on the kitchen table in the center of the room, waiting to be moved to the dining room. Best of all though, was a round platter piled high with fat, golden brown sausages that glistened with fat still bubbling on the surface. They were resting gloriously on a bed of steaming sauerkraut laced with thinly sliced, caramel-colored onions.*

Several recipes of meals described in the book are printed at the end of the story, so children can actually make food that the ABCs ate.

On occasion, Shearin uses accented dialogue with some characters. While she is adept at doing so, I find this literary device distracting, so I'm glad she keeps it to a minimum. There is also a chapter that switches from John's third-person voice to that of an adult character's perspective. The change is effective, but it could confuse some readers.

### **Recommendation**

*John Bloom and the Victory Garden - Part I* is a trifecta of food, history, and boyhood. I highly recommend this story for children (especially boys) in grades 3-8. They'll hunger for Part II of this series, *Digging In*,

and be impatient for its debut in Fall 2015.

*Disclosure:*

*I was provided with a free copy of this book in exchange for an honest review.*

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## **Stephanie says**

On the eve of the attack on Pearl Harbor, John Bloom along with his best pals Chewie and Joe spend their days having fun and causing trouble in their small town of Appleside, NJ. When news of the USA entering the war is heard, the boys want to do anything they can to help out. They decide to form the American Boys' Club- ABC. John sees that one of his elderly neighbors, Mr. Hutchins could use some help around his house, his friends aren't too sure about helping the grumpy older guy who wields a pitchfork. However, when they find Mr. Hutchins hurt, the ABC's begin to bring Mr. Hutchins meals and a friendship blossoms.

John Bloom and the Victory Garden had a wonderful sense of time and place. Each of the boy's point of view brought a different feeling of young boys at the time from hijinks to fear and wanting to help. The best aspect of this book was the descriptions of the homes, school, neighborhood, toys and especially food that contributed to feeling transported to 1941. I was surprised at how well the serious issues of the War were presented in a clear way for middle grade children to understand the impact of the news of the war reaching the USA, rationing food and goods and even internment camps. I was pleased to see that this will be a series and that all of the delicious foods mentioned had recipes included at the end.

This book was received for free in return for an honest review.

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## **Barbara Ann says**

I used to live in a house that still had remnants of a World War I victory garden popping up between the flowers so I was immediately drawn to this book. So glad that I picked it up this historical fiction tale.

Shearin does an amazing job of capturing the spirit of the three main characters and best friends, ten year olds, John, Joe, and Chewie. The story opens in Appleside, NJ, a small town on December 6, 1941. These three boys and their families will suddenly find their lives turned upside down when Pearl Harbor is attacked and their country enters World War II. The author makes the setting authentic by mentioning things like sitting around the old radio and Fireside Chats of FDR, Life magazine, the 5 & 10 Cent store, and popular games like horseshoes and marbles. These boys spring to life with antics like chewing on their collar, secret door knock signals, and pranks like filling grumpy, Mr. Hutchins' outhouse with snow. Some things never change; there are the typical classroom hijinks and even incidents of bullying.

When the war breaks out, the boys decide to form a club in an effort to help the war effort. They call it the ABC Club. Recognizing the injustice of rounding up Japanese, German and Italian nationals, they fear the loss of friends in their community. A grumpy neighbor morphs into a new friend when their kindness toward him leads to an unexpected change of circumstances and a new avenue of patriotism.

Middle grade students will empathize with these boys and the difficulties they encounter in adjusting to frightening circumstances. Recommended for children ages nine and older. This is a well-written book with

developed characters and plot and is a compelling read for adults as well. Next year's sequel will continue the story as the course of the war unfolds.

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## **Stacie says**

John Bloom and the Victory Garden: Digging In is an inspiring historical fiction story that takes readers to small town America during World War II where they will experience first hand what life was like as the United States wages war on two fronts.

As John heals from his fall from the hay loft he becomes even more aware of America's struggles at home during World War II. Along with his friends, Chewie and Joe, John decides to make a difference. The boys organize a scrap drive and go from home to home collecting what they can, but their biggest undertaking is in their victory garden. With everyone pitching in John is able to plant a large garden which yields lots of crops. Hee and his family are happy to share and trade the crops with others. The government's rationing has made it difficult for people to purchase things like milk, sugar, and gasoline, but showing true patriotism the town of Appleside stands together to help their neighbors.

I thoroughly enjoyed John Bloom and the Victory Garden: Digging In. The characters are well developed and likable. I love that John has a big heart and is always ready to lend a hand. The author is knowledgeable about World War II and farming which adds to the story's believability and helps draw the reader in. The author also does a wonderful job penning her book as it will appeal to, not only young readers, but adults too. Most history lessons in school focus on the battles, but very few reveal what happened in America during World War and John Bloom and the Victory Garden: Digging In gives reader a glimpse of history on the home front.

John Bloom and the Victory Garden: Digging In is the second book in the series, but could be read as a stand alone. I, however, did read the first book and highly recommend reading both as readers, young and old, will enjoy the adventure as well as the history learned.

Merged review:

John Bloom and the Victory Garden takes readers on a historical journey back to when times were simpler and neighbors helped neighbors. It's also a time of American pride and a country is at war. The story reminds us how love for country can bring families and friends together in hopes of making a difference.

John is an average 10 year old boy living in a small town in New Jersey. It's the 1940's and the only thing on John's mind is whether or not the Indian arrowhead he has will be worthy of a trade with his friend Chewie. John, Chewie, and Joe are best friends. They do everything together from searching for treasures like animal bones and feathers to causing a little bit of ruckus with their joking around. But, the day they learn of the bombing of Pearl Harbor the boys decide to heed President Roosevelt's advice and do their part to help the war on America. Thus, the American Boy's Club is formed and on their quest to do good, the boys make mistakes, learn valuable lessons, but most of all give something back to their community.

Historical fiction is one of my favorite genres to read and John Bloom and the Victory Garden is an absolute gem. Set during World War II and filled with a myriad of genuine and unique characters the author effectively draws readers into the world she creates. I like how the boys sometimes make bad decisions, but

try to right their wrongs. I also enjoy how the story stresses the importance of having strong values and helping others. This is an all around pleasurable read.

I highly recommend picking up a copy.

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