



# The Ark

*Margot Benary-Isbert*

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Drama of a family in post war Germany while the father, if still alive, might be in a POW camp in Russia or he might be making his way back to his family.

## The Ark Details

Date : Published 1953 by Harcourt Brace & Company

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Author : Margot Benary-Isbert

Format : Hardcover 246 pages

Genre : Historical, Historical Fiction, Childrens, Fiction, Young Adult, War, World War II, Animals

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# From Reader Review The Ark for online ebook

## Janet says

Because I always check the juvenile fiction when I go to the library, I found this unfamiliar book in Milpitas, CA, probably forty years ago. I couldn't put it down! First of all, my hobby is WWII history, including fiction. This post-war story of a family struggling to stay together in the chaos that was Germany is not cozy and sweet. It is a clear look at the problems, the losses, the struggle to remain law abiding. Margot, the heroine, has lost any chance of fulfilling her dream to be a veterinarian, but finds fulfillment in her work on Rowan Farm. A delightful book (And don't miss the sequel, ROWAN FARM!)

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## Charlotte says

I love the thick descriptions of the life of a German refugee family trying to survive after WW II, especially once they find sanctuary at a farm. But the characterization, especially of the central character, Margaret, falls just a tad short, so only four stars.

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## Mary Catelli says

This is about a family living in immediately post-World War II Germany.

It opens with Mother and three of her four (surviving) children trudging down a street, lugging down everything they own, to the house they've been billeted, to the surprise to the widow living there. The oldest one, Matthias, is arriving with the cart of the rest of their belongings -- he, like Mother, had managed to find his way back to the family from the camp. (As for Father, they know he's in Russia. And one son, the twin of the main character Margret, had been shot.)

The landlady is reluctant to accept a family of five with children, but slowly -- without quite telling them -- gets reconciled with it.

So we have their adventures. Joey, the youngest, too young to remember life before being a refugee, goes to school for the first time, and makes friends with a boy whose last name and birthday are unknown. They do housework and endlessly borrow things from their landlady; Margret does a lot of endlessly waiting in line to find they don't have any household goods. Andrea, the second youngest, manages to wangle a scholarship and get to go to the lycee. Matthias ends up stuck as a mason because he can not find another job.

They all go Christmas carolling, to find it's not a known custom, but one farm they are brought in and even given food. Matthias and Margret have to go out again to buy potatoes, too.

With further adventures of small boys in cellars, looking for work, dealing with inconsistent electric service, and a post card delivered a year late -- a sweet tale, with many charming episodes.

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## Catherine says

Read & loved this when I was a child, read it again & was pleased to see it still held up as a wonderful story with good characters

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## Stephanie A. says

A universal story about a family pulling together in tough times, unflinchingly perfect from cover to cover. While aimed at a juvenile audience, it is still full of great detail about the struggle to live in post-WWII Germany, with refugees displaced from their homes by bombings and other forced evacuations, and everyone struggling to get by on meager ration cards amidst a scarcity of supplies. There is also interesting detail about the Labor Office and how people are assigned to whatever jobs are available, with a great deal of red tape making changes difficult. The authenticity is worth noting, as it was published in Germany just a few years after the war ended (several sources say 1948, but I can't find hard evidence of this for myself).

Our family consists of a single mother, her husband still in a POW camp, and her four remaining children ranging in age from 7 to 16. Of the fifth, there are only heartbreaking references from Margaret, currently age 14, to her twin brother being shot along with the family dog by soldiers who came to seize their property in Prussia.

I love how they slowly but surely win over the elderly woman whose home they have been assigned to share, despite her grumblings that she is much too old and frail to live with *children* of all the things, as if having more than two extra people in her home wasn't bad enough. It's hard to resist such well behaved and friendly children, though, much less a hardworking mother who does her best to create a home out of essentially nothing. The way she creates a Christmas celebration is especially magical. Also, I'd be remiss not to mention the quasi-adoption of scrappy 7-year-old Hans Ulrich, a champion among plucky literary orphans.

The book really begins to shine when Mrs. Almut of Rowan Farm enters their lives, taking the two eldest children on as farm employees. Rowan Farm is like a bit of heaven, away from the overcrowded city to a place full of fresh air, well cared for animals, and a house that collects people like stray dogs to form a decidedly motley but tightly-knit community among themselves. In addition to the regular farm animals, there is a kennel for purebred Great Danes, a breed dear to Margaret's heart, and a set of driving ponies she loves almost as much. And of course, there's "The Ark" itself: an old railroad car on the property that she and her brother transform into a freestanding home.

For all the hardship they must experience, this book makes me want to crawl inside and never leave. First discovered on the shelves of my high school library, it was as magical when I read it today as it was back then. Copies are somewhat hard to find in the U.S., so if you have a good one, hold onto it!

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## Barbara says

This is one of my favorite books from childhood. The part that I remember the most is the kids turning an old train car into a haven for the Great Danes. Can't remember much more. So, I dug it out today and plan to re-read it. Why did I love it so much? I think I got it in 4th grade at the school book sale. On the cover of my copy, the price is 75 cents!

If you Laura Ingalls Wilder's books, you'll like this one. It's about a German family's ability to overcome hardship after WWII. Very sentimental.

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### **Ariel says**

Just re-read for the millionth time and I loved it just as much as ever. If only all the people who want to demonize all Germans and believe that the "national character" of Germany is evil, could be handed a copy of this book (and forced to read it)! This is the first one of BI's books about the Lechow family, refugees after WWII, and their struggles to re-establish themselves and find peace after wartime. A great comfort read for me.

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### **Angela says**

I decided to give this book a try because I love Benary-Isbert's "Blue Mystery" so much. "The Ark" is more serious, of course, since it deals with issues of the war and reconstruction, but it still embodies all the charm, comfort, and strong characters that I have come to expect from this wonderful author.

The details and descriptions she provides are full and vivid without becoming so long as to be tiresome. Although some of the subject matter may be a little over the heads of young children, I think readers of all ages would appreciate this book, from the delightful antics of the farm animals to the deep bonds of love between family members who have experienced great loss but are pulling together to make their lives - and others' - better every day.

Now I'm trying to get my hands on the sequel, "Rowan Farm." What a shame her books seem to be so hard to find!

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### **Melody says**

Immediate post-WWII Germany is the setting for this engaging book. The family consists of the mother and 4 children. One of the children lost her twin brother during the war, along with her dog. The father's last known location was a Russian camp. They've lost everything but each other, and have been foisted off by the refugee bureau on a reluctant widow who asked for a nice quiet couple. How they cope makes for a very interesting and ultimately hopeful story. Benary-Isbert is masterful at capturing bittersweet emotions in a few words. Highly recommended.

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### **Amy says**

This book took me completely by surprise. I picked it up on a lark while at Goodwill, and can't believe I paid less than its 1953 75 cents cover price for it. It was written about the aftermath of World War II. Interesting to imagine how the children of post-war American, when Nazi-ism was still fresh, and the sins of the German people were strictly black and white. This book would have opened the door to the human side and human cost of war, and would have taken images of war from soldiers and war room, to the farms, fields,

and life of children instead.

The story centers on the four Lechow children and their mother, refugees from Pomerania, who have, after nearly a year of wandering and shifting from camp to camp, been sent to the province of Hesse. Here, courtesy of the Housing office, they are sent to live in the attic of Mrs Verduz, (who wanted a quiet, childless couple and got the Lechow clan instead) at the delightful sounding Number 13 Parsley Street. Their father, who is a doctor, was drafted years before and sent to the Russian Front, where he was captured and sent off to Siberia. The children and their mother, a seamstress, settle in to life on Parsley Street. The portrayal of the children is well done; each are individuals and very real. Matthias (15 1/2) with the soul of an astronomer, finds himself working construction. Through the job he does meet another dispossessed boy, Dieter, who is a gifted musician (and has a band called the Cellar Rats, which I think is a brilliant name.) The youngest child is almost seven year old Joey, who, despite his leeriness about starting school, finds it not so bad when he meets up with orphaned refugee Hans Ulrich, who won my heart completely. The two little boys scamper the old ruins seeking treasure, and get into all sorts of little boy stuff. Andrea, (almost ten) gets a scholarship to the Lycee, befriends Lenchen, the daughter of the local sausage maker, and in general, flourishes. It is Margret, who will be fourteen in December, and who has a "gift" for animals, who is perhaps the most hardest hit by the changes of life. HEr twin brother Chirstian was killed (along with their beloved dog Costi) by Russian soldiers just before they left Pomerania. She is bereft without her other half, her best friend. Because she always had Christian and Costi she never felt the need to learn to make friends and now feels quite alone. She has also had to give up the dream of becoming a a veterinarian. Yet it's her love for animals that not only opens a crack in Mrs. Verduz's defenses but also brings the family to a new life at Mrs. Almut's farm outside the neighboring village of Hellborn.

Having recently read *The Guests of War* Trilogy, this was a fascinating follow-up. How sad that this book has fallen out of fashion. It is a valuable lesson in history.

FROM AMAZON:

This gently-paced novel is a bit of a sleeper, but charming in its homespun simplicity. The first portion of the book describes the difficult and painful existence of displaced German families--unwelcome refugees in their own country. THE ARK was written to enlighten American youth about the horrors of homelessness, separated families and unreasonable prejudice. This book contains no battle memories or war atrocities, but proves that German bureaucracy is second to none.

Before the War the German Railroad had offered old passengers cars for sale, which Mrs. Almut had purchased but not really used. Now it becomes the perfect place for the Lechow teens and is promptly christened, THE ARK. But how can it become a real home--which Margret is sure she will never have again--with half the family elsewhere--including their father, a POW in Russia? Will Margret learn to live with her personal loss, yet not be scarred for future happiness? This is an introspective gem for those who appreciate the importance of holding on to Family and learning how to release past Tragedy. So relax and savor the slower pace, the quiet humor, the cycles of the seasons for two years, and the ultimate time of harvest for the soul.

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**Gaby says**

Found this out of print book "The Ark" on a used books bookstore. I didn't know if the story would be good,

but the summary at the back plus the fact that it's a postwar YA novel grabbed my attention.

The story follows young refugee Margret Lechow and her family in postwar Germany. Written in 1953, the book is still very relevant up to now. I found myself crying and being joyful with Isbert's realistic sketch of refugee life, city life, and farm life in this era. We see how faith, love, and the human spirit triumphs over poverty and hopelessness. I love the book's tension on life and death, and the theme of how, when everything seems hopeless, life must still go on.

The characters are very human and the writing is sincere and compassionate. Death and life in a coming of age novel is a hard topic to write about, but I think Isbert has done it excellently, maybe because she herself has experienced much of what she had written.

This is one of my best rare book finds to date. My favorite YA novel written in the same vein was "The Book Thief", but the Ark has now definitely taken the top spot. I just wish I could also find its sequel Rowan Farm soon.

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### **Clara Ellen says**

This is one of my favorite books of all time! I love the rich descriptions, whether of the natural beauty of the countryside or of the little rooms the refugee family stays in after the war, and the characters are so well-portrayed that I feel I truly know them and have grown to love them so much. This is a story of a family who has been displaced by war and is now trying to find a new place of belonging in West Germany. Eventually each of the family members finds new joy and hope and the family eventually finds the home they are longing for as part of a working farm in the country. Animals, Christmas caroling, rambunctious boys digging for treasure, and getting to live in an old boxcar - such wonderful scenes have been imprinted in my mind from this wonderful book! Margot Benary-Isbert is one of my favorite writers. I love how she makes her characters come to life and how she fills her books with so much hope and joy and healing, even in the midst of difficult times. I read this book at a time when I myself was finding healing from past hurts, and that makes me love it even more. A book that can deal with past pain and yet leave you feeling uplifted, joyful and at peace is a rare book, and The Ark is just that kind of book!

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### **Audrey Hacker says**

excellent characters I had already met in Rowan Farm

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### **Anna says**

it was okay. Nothing really happened much in the beginning of the book, so I almost quit reading it.

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### **Kristi (foxtail\_too) says**

I do wish The Ark and Rowan Farm (and other associated books) were available on Kindle. I've loved these

books for years, and reread my dtb copies regularly.

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### **Krista the Krazy Kataloguer says**

I read this as a kid and was fascinated with the idea of living in an old train car. This German family, some of whose members were, as I recall, killed in World War II, try to re-establish themselves as a family after the war.

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### **Gale says**

“Carrying them over the Rough Seas of Life”

This gently-paced novel is a bit of a sleeper, but charming in its homespun simplicity. The first portion of the book describes the difficult and painful existence of displaced German families who find themselves unwelcome refugees in their own county. *THE ARK* was written to enlighten American youth about the horrors of homelessness, separated families and unreasonable prejudice. Not to worry--this modest book contains no battle memories or war atrocities, but proves that German bureaucracy was second to none.

Mrs. Lechow, a small seamstress, has four children to house and feed, so we are not sure for the first 100 pages which of them is the actual protagonist, as in most YA novels. Gradually the activities focus on the older teens, Matthias and Margret, as they are weaned from their two upper rooms in Parsley Street, to a farm with real animals and crops. The story particularly chronicles Margret’s transformation from gawky teenager (privately mourning the death of her twin brother) into a capable farm woman like her mentor.

Before the War the German Railroad had offered old passenger cars for sale, which Mrs. Almut had purchased but not really used. Now it becomes the perfect place for the Lechow teens and is promptly Christened, *THE ARK*. But how can they ever consider it a real home—which Margret is sure she will never have again—with half the family living elsewhere, including their father, a POW in Russia? Will Margret learn to live with her personal loss, yet not be scarred for future happiness? This is an introspective gem for those who appreciate the value of holding onto Family and learning how to release past Tragedy. So, just relax and savor the slower pace, the quiet humor, the cycle of the seasons for two years, and the ultimate time of harvest for the soul.

(April 17, 2012. I welcome feedback from teachers.)

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### **Barbara Mader says**

Three and a half stars. I found this to be engaging and well-written (particularly impressive, I think, when translated). Started it about nine o'clock last night, and finished it before I went to sleep. Quality juvenile set

in post WW II Germany and published there in 1948 (fast work for the conditions at the time. I wonder what publishing looked like at the time--who owned it, who operated it, etc.).

Story line concerns a family split up during the war and early aftermath, but in the main reunited afterward--one sibling has been killed, and the father, a doctor-soldier, has not been heard from for some years. The worst of the hardships, alluded to in the first chapter, seem to be past, since the war is now over, and family is largely intact and in good health; but poverty, food rationing, and hard work lie ahead, coupled with limited choices for the future.

Some of it does seem a bit too sunny, but this is a juvenile, and it is fiction. My view is colored by the non-fiction reading I've been doing about the British home front during WW II. My own German heritage notwithstanding, I have perhaps less sympathy than the author would like me to have. At one point in the book one of the characters says, "At home we never cared much for all the heiling and hurrahing." My contention is that a damn lot of people did.

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### **Kathleen says**

This is mostly a young reader's book (not early, but young), but I still think my MS students would probably like it a lot. It was one of my favorite books growing up, mostly because it was similar to books like The Boxcar Children, My Side of the Mountain, The Hideaway Summer and other of those children-being-self-sufficient books. I love the real and sensitive way The Ark deals with the hardships and struggles of post-WWII life in Germany; even though I read it so many years ago, I can remember the family so clearly. I loved that family, and I was so pleased when things turned out for the better. I don't say that things turned out great, but that they all began healing. This book is a good look at a different side of WWII: the other survivors, the mothers and children of Germany, and how they began to dig themselves out of the rubble. It does not deal with the atrocious actions of the government; it is about the average, impoverished and homeless citizen.

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### **Jess says**

Set in Germany in the late 1940s, this story had something of the feel of *The Good Master* or *Understood Betsy*, where there's something wholesome and sweet and redemptive about the story, but not cloying or didactic. The refugee characters value all of the things - a warm place to sleep, a good meal - that we take for granted. It's also a compelling introduction for children to life in post-war Germany, with extreme rations and refugees everywhere. It doesn't make light of the war, but it doesn't deal explicitly with the horrors of war, either. The father has not come back from the Russian front, and one of the children was killed during bombings, but the book is positive in a way that doesn't diminish the sufferings of the characters. Animal lovers might particularly enjoy Margret's life on the farm.

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