

Jella Lepman and Her Library of Dreams: The Woman Who Rescued a Generation of Children and Founded the World's Largest Children's Library

Katherine Paterson

Sally Deng, Illustrator

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A beautiful love letter to the power of reading, Katherine Paterson's biography of Jella Lepman covers how she built a massive literary collection for the children of post–World War II Germany.

Lepman endured the death of her World War I veteran husband and a period of poverty before finding work in journalism. A young widow with two teenage children, Lepman fled Nazi Germany shortly after losing her job when the newspaper where she worked was taken over by Adolf Hitler's party. It was at the suggestion of the US military that she returned on a mission to help make the next generation of Germany better. In her words, "The most important thing is to give the children of Germany a chance." To do that, she collected and translated the kinds of quality children's books that the Nazis had banned for more than a decade. The library started as a traveling collection that visited major cities while Lepman tried to convert it into a permanent place for children.

The colorful illustrations include both realistic drawings of Lepman at work and whimsical depictions of the kinds of stories the library helped children access. Photographs—including of children enjoying the library and of Lepman both in her library-building role and after her retirement—sometimes appear alongside the artwork to complement the tale.

Told with beautiful illustrations and prose, *Jella Lepman* is an uplifting true story about the power of art. Its central messages of using literature to build bridges and of libraries as a place of safety and learning are as relevant as ever. The book delivers them in engaging prose that lays out how challenging Lepman's mission was and how her force of personality and clever problem-solving helped to achieve her goals.

JEFF FLEISCHER (January / February 2025)

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