

★ "SPELLBINDING . . . COMES ALIVE WITH THE DETAILS
OF TIME AND PLACE."—KIRKUS REVIEWS, STARRED REVIEW

BROOKLYN BRIDGE

Hesse

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BRIDGE

A NOVEL BY NEWBERY MEDALIST
KAREN HESSE



THE BOY WITH THE VIOLIN

No one could say why the police didn't round them up, the children under the bridge, why the police didn't carry them off to the station, put them in prisons, orphanages, asylums. But they never patrolled under that part of the bridge, not at night.

Daylight brought footsteps and curious eyes. People walked there, or rode past. But the place was so dark, so grim, so rank, so filled with the broken and unwanted that people went right past without looking too close. It had become a place of garbage, and wounded animals, and bad dreams. The children arranged it to appear that way. They abandoned it during the hours when someone might be looking, even for them. They came back to reclaim it only after nightfall.

In their short lives, if they'd ever gone to school, or the theater, or sat in a restaurant and had food brought to them, that was their old world. Their life before the bridge.

But one night a boy arrived under the bridge and from the first sight of him the others knew he was different.

This new boy's fingers were long, clean, elegant. He wore a fine suit and hat, a tie and a gleaming white shirt. His face was scrubbed, fed, soft.

But his eyes held secrets. He arrived with a black leather valise in one hand, a violin case in the other, and

neither of these would he let go. He kept one hand always on that violin case as jealously as Dickie kept his eyes on *The Bride*. The boy with the violin seemed frightened at first, particularly of the tough boys like Dickie, whose bruises had faded, but whose broken face had healed wrong.

The boy with the violin first appeared in the middle of the night. He'd have liked to come to rest near *The Bride*, but Dickie's head lifted and growled, and so the boy approached instead Helen and Nina.

The girls woke when the boy neared their sleepy nest of newspapers and moth-eaten blankets. They began to protest but the boy sat down anyway. He placed the violin case on his lap. Lovingly, he opened the lid and, lifting the instrument out, nestled it under his jaw. He began to play, softly. So softly. Afraid the sound would travel and give him away, but still needing to play, needing, needing to play.

The bow moved like a butterfly, up and down, over and back. It was the only way the boy knew to speak to them, explain to them that he had a right to be there, too.

The violin told a long story and the children sighed to hear it. Willie, who would sometimes pace at night like a caged wolf, settled down, unknotted his scarf, stroked his face with the filthy cloth, remembering his mother.

Those who woke stared into the darkness under the bridge and saw something beautiful there, over their heads, something born out of the notes the boy with the violin

played. And the ones who slept, well, they dreamed. Such dreams. Such rich dreams. Dreams that lingered into the next day, filling them with a sense of the majesty to be found even under a bridge with the dirty East River rolling past.

The boy with the violin made his quiet confession to the children. The music told that the boy was a thief. That he had stolen this violin, this instrument made by the son of Stradivarius, worth more than a long block of tenement houses. The violin meant so much to the boy that he would rather be lost to the world than surrender it to its legal owner. The song told the children how the violin could come alive only if the boy played it. It had chosen him as much as he had chosen it. And the children knew that if they took that violin from him and tried to sell it, the children knew the violin would turn to dust in their hands.

And besides, if they left the boy and the violin alone, if they made him feel at home under the bridge, he would stay. And play for them. And they would have music there, such music they'd never dreamed of. And so Helen and Nina crept off their nest of rags, and plumped it up, and patted it as if preparing the finest feather mattress. Helen, her mouth so wide it stretched nearly across her entire face, ending on either side in dimples, and Nina, whose ragged dress came down long enough to cover her scabbled legs, the two surrendered their space.

And the boy nodded, placed the violin lovingly back in its case, curled around his instrument, and motioned for the girls to return so he might share their warmth, so he might sleep without the guilt of having stolen something as important as someone's bed, so the music inside him could spill over a little and sweeten their dreams, too.