

AVI

"A KNOCKOUT STORY!"

Chicago Tribune

**AN ALA
NOTABLE
BOOK**

THE BARN



I

"Your father has met with an accident."
Schoolmaster Dortmeister, his wife by his side, spoke gravely to me in the best parlor of their house in Portland, where I was boarding at school. The only other time I had seen that room was when my father had left me there, seven months before. That was also the last time I had seen Father.

Mrs. Dortmeister put the back of her small hand to my cheek and said, "Benjamin, I understand it's not so very bad."

"But you're needed at home," the schoolmaster said. "Your sister has come to take you."

Father had brought me to Portland for Mother's sake. To soothe my upset over leaving our farm, he told two tales for every mile the mule trod on the journey. He recited his best jokes, too—taking on voices, making sounds and gesturing as if he had ten tongues and fifteen hands. We were so full of our usual private mischief that I was much comforted. He promised to fetch me for a holiday in four months' time. He never came.

So of course I wanted to rush off and find Nettie; yet I would not leave the parlor without permission. They were fair in that place but strict.

"Benjamin," the schoolmaster went on, "you are the finest student I have ever had." He always called me *Benjamin*, though I preferred what my father called me: *Ben*. But that name, *Ben*, Mr. Dortmeister told me, was not dignified. He said I must put it aside since—as far as he was concerned—I was destined for higher things. "You may be only nine years old, but you're fit for more than farming. You

know your letters, sums, and geometry better and are wiser than all the rest of my students combined."

Mr. Dortmeister had round gray eyes and a nose too big for his face. Tufts of hair grew out of his ears. I had always thought him comical. But when I looked up at him that time, in his best parlor, I thought he seemed about to cry.

As for me, my head was crowded with worry about Father and thoughts of Nettie, who was outside, waiting—impatiently, no doubt. At the best of times, Nettie was not a patient soul. Nothing happened fast enough for her.

Mrs. Dortmeister said, "Your sister suggests that you'll be home only a short time. So we shall look for your early return."

I replied, "I am sure I'll return," though I said it mostly because I thought that's what the schoolmaster wanted to hear.

"Do," he said. "You'll always be welcome."

I made a move to go, but Mr. Dortmeister held me by speaking again. "Benjamin,"

**"A vivid picture of time and place...
a thought-provoking and engaging piece
of historical fiction"**
School Library Journal

The schoolmaster says nine-year-old Benjamin is the finest student he's ever seen—fit for more than farming; destined for great things someday. But his father's grave illness brings Ben home from school and compels him to strive for something great *right now*—to do the one thing that will please Father so much he'll want to live. But first Ben must convince his older sister and brother to work with him. And together, they succeed in ways they never dreamed possible.

**"Avi is one of our most versatile and
prolific children's writers...and this novel is
the best thing he's done."**
Booklist (*Starred Review*)

Booklist Editors' Choice

ALA Notable Book

American Bookseller Pick of the Lists

Chicago Tribune Best Book for Young Readers

Teachers' Choice 1995

