

Historical Horrors viewed through the eyes of a child in John Boyne's *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas*

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Abstract

John Boyne was born in Dublin, Ireland, in 1971, and studied English Literature at Trinity College, Dublin, and creative writing at the University of East Anglia, Norwich, where he was awarded the Curtis Brown prize. He now offer a scholarship to Irish students undertaking the MA programme at UEA. He has published 10 novels for adults and five for younger readers, including *The Boy In The Striped Pyjamas* which was a New York Times no.1 Bestseller and was made into a Miramax feature film. It has sold more than 9 million copies worldwide. He is also the author of the short story collection *Beneath The Earth*.

The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas is set during World War II, primarily right next to Auschwitz, one of the biggest concentration camps in the Holocaust. Though the subject is hardly talked about in *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas*, race is everywhere in this book since it was a major player in the Holocaust—though there were many others, Jewish people were a primary target for the Nazis. In our story, the defining difference between Bruno and Shmuel is that Shmuel is Jewish. On the title page of the book *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* is described as a fable, and one may legitimately suggest that any critique of the story must recognise this. While there is some validity to this argument, it does not detract from the fact that *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* is a Holocaust representation and must thus judged accordingly. A fable by definition intends to convey a moral message and as suggested above, the morality implied within this narrative is highly problematic. While the sympathy is arguably drawn towards the perpetrators rather than the victims, one could suggest other ways in which the moral message is skewedness were to imagine a so-called ‘happier’ ending for example, it would presumably be one where the commandant Bruno before he is gassed and takes him back to his home in Berlin

where he lives happily ever after. Yet one can be left in no doubt what would have happened to Shmuel and the other Jews at Auschwitz.

Keywords: Holocaust, World War 2, anti-Semitism, Concentration camp, Family, Loss of identity, Racism and autocracy.

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Boyne is a regular book reviewer for *The Irish Times* and have been a judge for the Hennessy Literary Awards for his body of work. He has also won 3 Irish Book Awards, for Children's Book of the Year, People's Choice Book of the Year and Short Story of the Year. He has won a number of international literary awards, including the Que Leer Award for Novel of the Year in Spain and the Gustav Heinemann Peace Prize in Germany. In 2015, He was awarded an Honorary Doctorate of Letters from the University of East Anglia. His novels are published in 51 languages. A new novel, *The Heart's Invisible Furies*, was published in the UK in February 2017, and will be published in the US in August 2017 and in various translated editions throughout '17/'18

The novel begins in Germany in the 1940s. Bruno comes home from school to find the maid, Maria, packing his things because the family is moving away from Berlin. Bruno's not happy about this and whines to his mom, dad, Gretel, the maid, and her dog. But Bruno's out of luck; his father just got a promotion and they're moving on up, whether he wants to or not. Adding to Bruno's troubles, the family's new house is weak with a capital W—it's smaller than their old house, super isolated, and there's a huge wire fence near the property. Ugh. While Bruno unpacks his things, he spots a sketchy looking blond soldier and takes an immediate disliking to him. He notices a window, looks through it, and sees something that makes him feel "cold and unsafe"... Bruno tells Gretel that the other children look unfriendly. Bruno's window

has a lovely view of the Auschwitz death camp. Bruno thinks it's weird that there are tons of kids and adults on the other side of the fence and even weirder that they all wear the same striped pyjamas and striped cap.

His father shows some but not much sympathy for Bruno. As befits a military man, he is a strict disciplinarian, and the boy tries his best to honour his father's wishes, even though it sometimes involves saying and doing things he doesn't understand. So Bruno says goodbye to his comfortable life and moves far away from the city. His destination isn't a house in the country though at least not like any he's ever imagined. It's a bleak, forbidding place, and instead of a five-story mansion, he lives in a smaller, less comfortable house. He is surrounded by his father's soldiers, including one particularly menacing lieutenant named Kotler, and there's a cook who also appears to be a doctor, much to Bruno's puzzlement. Strangest of all is the barbed-wire fence outside his bedroom window, and the huddled groups of men and boys beyond. Along that fence he'll meet the boy of the book's title.

After a few weeks, Bruno decides that he needs to find some sort of entertainment or he'll go mad. His grand idea is to make a swing. Lieutenant Kotler helps him out and orders Pavel, a Jew, to get a tire from the storage shed. Pavel sets Bruno up and soon the kid's happily swinging—well, until he falls. Luckily, Pavel comes to Bruno's rescue; while he cleans him up, he tells Bruno he's a doctor. But this doesn't make any sense to Bruno—after all, the guy works in the kitchen peeling potatoes. Soon after, Bruno's mother comes home and discovers what happened. She tells Pavel that if the Commandant asks, she cleaned Bruno's wounds.

Bruno has a flashback to the last Christmas with his family and his grandparents. Here's what went down: Grandma told Bruno's father that she's ashamed of what he's become and can't believe what he and other Nazis are doing, then she stormed out. It's the last Bruno's seen of her. Back in the present, months pass and Bruno decides to go exploring, which basically involves walking along the length of the wire fence that separates his family from the concentration camp. Some adventure.

During his exploration session, Bruno comes upon a boy sitting on the ground in pyjamas and an armband (featuring the Star of David). Bruno is kind of shocked by how small and sad looking the boy is. And Bruno could really use some company. Schmoozing ensues, and it turns out that the boy's name is Shmuel and he and Bruno share a birthday. Shmuel is from Poland and informs the oblivious Bruno that they're in Poland and not in Germany like Bruno's been thinking. When they part ways, they plan to meet again tomorrow. Time for another flashback, this time to when Hitler came to dinner. He brought his girlfriend, Eva, and Bruno and Gretel were not allowed to have dinner with the adults. Afterward, Bruno heard his parents arguing about the move, which his mother was totally against. Back in the present, it's the next day, so Bruno returns to the fence. Shmuel explains what happened to him and his family before coming to the camp.

Soon after, Bruno walks into his kitchen and is shocked to see Shmuel cleaning crystal glasses—turns out his pal's been brought to the house by Kotler to clean glasses for Father's birthday celebration. What should be a cool catch up turns disastrous when Bruno offers Shmuel chicken he eats it, and Kotler catches him and gets mad. Shmuel says Bruno gave it to him and that they're friends but like a punk, Bruno says he's never seen him before in his life. After more than a year, Bruno's mother wants to move back to Berlin with the kids. Bruno's not as happy as he thought he'd be about this idea, though, and dreads breaking the news to Shmuel. However, as it turns out, Shmuel has bigger fish to fry: His dad's gone missing. The boys hatch a plan for Bruno to dress up in pyjamas and help Shmuel find his dad before he leaves Auschwitz on Saturday. The next day, Friday, Bruno goes to the fence.

He changes into his striped pyjamas, leaves his things on his side and crawls under the fence. The two boys walk toward the camp and Bruno realizes that things are very bad on Shmuel's side. Bruno wants to go home, but he's promised Shmuel he'll help, and as a loyal friend, he stays. Unfortunately, though, they don't find Shmuel's father. Just as Bruno is about to head home, the boys are surrounded by soldiers and forced to march. They're led to a gas chamber neither boy realizes this, and once inside, they hold hands. The lights go off, chaos ensues. The last chapter shows how the family deals with Bruno's disappearance: His mother and

Gretel eventually go back to Berlin, but his father stays in Auschwitz. One day he has an epiphany, retraces Bruno's steps, and realizes with horror what happened to his son. The novel ends with "other soldiers" (a.k.a. the Allies) coming to Auschwitz and ordering him to go with them

In general, violence in *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* is like the elephant in the room—we know it's there, but it's never talked about. We think this is because the book is seen through the eyes of Bruno, a young kid who can't quite comprehend what's going on around him. There are a few instances of public displays of violence and evidence of abuse by Nazis against Jews—specifically against Shmuel and Pavel—but if you know just a bit about the Holocaust, then you know that what isn't shown is way worse. For such a young boy, Bruno has an impressively strong and sound sense of morality and ethics in *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas*. We don't think it comes from his father (a Nazi), so we can only assume he gets it from the female figures in his life (his mother and grandmother). Bruno, unlike many Nazis, does not view anyone else in his life as less or subhuman.

That includes the help—Maria and Pavel—and of course Shmuel, who is Jewish. Bruno is more interested in bonds than differences, and looks for loyalty, trust, and kindness in people—qualities found in any good human being, no matter their race or class. When Bruno is forced to leave Berlin in *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas*, one of his main complaints is that he also has to leave his three best friends. To make matters worse, when he gets to the new house in Auschwitz, there are no other families or children around. When he meets Shmuel, though, a kid on the other side of the fence, it's the beginning of a beautiful—albeit short-lived—friendship. Despite their many differences, these two form a bond that transcends race, and even fences—so much so, that when asked if he still wants to go back to Berlin, Bruno confidently says no. In a world governed by hatred, Bruno and Shmuel show that friendship can thrive even in darkness.

Perhaps surprisingly, in *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas*, freedom and confinement apply to Shmuel and Bruno. Both are in places they were forced to go to, and both can't leave. Of course the gigantic difference is that Shmuel is in a concentration camp and Bruno is in a house. Shmuel is drastically confined—first to his house, then to a shared room, then a train, and

eventually in Auschwitz. Bruno, however, has the freedom to walk out of his house when he wants and does not fear for his life. In their confinement, though, both boys struggle with loneliness. And in the unlikely friendship they form, they both find a bit of freedom from their isolation.

Drawing upon an empirical study conducted on 298 students' preconceptions of the Holocaust, it suggests that the book and the film have had a large influence on existing ideas and have helped to establish problematic misconceptions. By highlighting its historical inaccuracies and skewed moral messages, this essay suggests that *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* is principally a curse for Holocaust education. It concludes by considering practical responses to the story's popularity and how its negative impact can be reduced. Since its publication in 2006 and subsequent film adaptation two years later, *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* has become uninfluential and important representation of the Holocaust.

Western Holocaust consciousness has indubitably been connected to its development in popular culture and certain events have been of particular importance. The most important of these is the sheer implausibility of the story in the first place. If Bruno and Shmuel, born on 15 April 1934, are 9 years old, then the story is set around 1943. In the book, Shmuel informs Bruno that he and his family were moved to the Cracow Ghetto until, 'one day the soldiers all came with huge trucks ... and everyone was told to leave the houses ... and the trucks took us to a train'.³¹ Most deportations from Cracow went to Belzec, although there were some that did go from Cracow to Auschwitz.

Nevertheless, if Shmuel was going to be kept alive to work, then it is much more plausible that he would have been sent to the labour camp at Plaszów rather than Auschwitz, the latter of which, by June 1943, had all four of its 'new crematoria' operational.³² Yet Shmuel states that 'there are a lot of us – boys our age, I mean – on this side of the fence'.³³ This is impossible. While exceptional cases existed, Jewish children were gassed on arrival at extermination centres like Auschwitz.

Not only does the survival of Shmuel for such a long time seem problematic, but his relationship with Bruno also appears untenable. Shmuel would not have had the opportunity afforded to him to leisurely come each day to the perimeter of the fence, which in the film is void of any guards and appears not to be electrified. It also seems that a 9-year-old son of a senior Nazi, educated in Berlin and no doubt a member of the Hitler, would surely not have such an accommodating and open-minded attitude towards a Jew. His exposure to constant state anti-Semitism in his schooling would undoubtedly have shaped his world view and prevented the innocence and naivety which Boyne creates in the character of Bruno.

The innocence and ignorance of Bruno is also evident in his mother Elsa, the commandant's wife. In fact the story supports the idea that the systematic mass murder of Europe's Jews was so well hidden that only the key perpetrators really knew what was going on. In reality, an operation of the size and scale of the Holocaust involved hundreds of thousands of people, such as administrators and bureaucrats, train drivers and station masters, industrial suppliers and business enterprisers. Countless people knew what was going on; they had to have known, and if they didn't know, it was because they actively chose to remain in ignorance. Despite the euphemistic language and the Nazi deception, the fate of Europe's Jews was ignored to a far greater extent than it was unknown. The story of *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* suggests that the opposite was the case.

Its important to ask whether the implausibility of the story and historical inaccuracy really matter. After all, we are dealing with literature and not a textbook; a film and not a documentary. Yet for this very reason its influence is likely to be all the greater and its impact the more telling as it will be accessed by a wider range and larger number of people. Thus the Holocaust ought not to be a chapter of human history which is exploited for financial ends, trivialised for the sake of literary goals or universalised for social Advocating the cardinality of historical accuracy is not implying that moral education ought to be marginalised. Clearly there is an important role for this within a child's schooling.

Nevertheless, if moral education discusses the Holocaust, which no doubt it could, it must ensure that it avoids generalisations or simplifications, which undermine the complexities of the

past. This is one of the problems with *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas*. By focusing on amoral message about childhood, innocence, family and friendship, the Holocaust as a historical phenomenon is undermined at best and jettisoned at worst. Yet even if one were to adopt the questionable belief that Holocaust education is exclusively about teaching contemporary moral and social ‘lessons’, then *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* would still not be a blessing for such practitioners. John Boyne’s novel and its subsequent adaptation into a film are ethically flawed and inadvertently give out contentious and skewed moral messages.

It is the way in which the story ends that is particularly contentious. Throughout both the book and film, the readers’ and viewers’ sympathies and affections are principally attached to Bruno. His character is developed to a far greater extent than Shmuel, who does not even appear in the book until Chapter 10. Ultimately therefore, the sadness which the reader and viewer feel at the end of the story is principally for Bruno. This is especially highlighted in the film, where the grief and distress of Bruno’s family is shown so vividly. There is a sense that the audience ought to share in their sorrow, for they too have grown attached to this young, naive and innocent German boy.

It seems incomprehensible that a Holocaust film encourages the viewer to Works one of the key perpetrators of the Nazi regime and to feel upset over a German death rather than a Jewish death. It seems inconceivable that a book which is set in the Holocaust turns the murderers into the victims. While it might be argued that this is a story about innocence and childhood, rather than a Holocaust story per se, any author or film maker who chooses to use the Holocaust as their context, especially one who sets the film around a commandant and Auschwitz, is, whether they recognise it or not, producing a Holocaust story.

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