

## Author Profile:



## John Boyne

## BIO

John Boyne is a full-time writer living in Dublin. He was writer-in-residence at the University of East Anglia in Creative Writing and spent many years working as a bookseller. This is his first book for young readers. The author lives in Dublin, Ireland.

## INTERVIEW

September 16, 2006

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## Author Bibliography

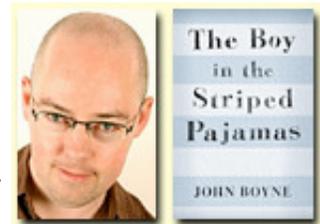
One to Watch Author  
Feature on  
Bookreporter.com

Books by  
John Boyne

THE BOY IN THE STRIPED  
PAJAMAS

## Reading Group Guides

THE BOY IN THE STRIPED  
PAJAMAS



**John Boyne's** [THE BOY IN THE STRIPED PAJAMAS](#) is a profound and thought-provoking novel set during the Holocaust and told from the perspective of a young child who befriends a boy "on the other side of the fence." In this interview with Teenreads.com's contributing writer Alexis Burling, Boyne discusses the parallels between the two children and explains why he chose to leave certain pertinent details deliberately ambiguous. He also elaborates on his main character's naïveté and its implications of society on a larger scale, examines the varying strengths of his female characters, and shares his enthusiasm for historical fiction.

**Teenreads.com: On the title page, THE BOY IN THE STRIPED PAJAMAS is described as a fable. Why a fable?**

**John Boyne:** Considering the serious subject matter of this novel and the fact that I would be taking certain aspects of concentration camp history and changing them slightly in order to serve the story, I felt it was important not to pretend that a story like this was fully based in reality (which was also the reason why I chose never to use the word "Auschwitz" in the novel). My understanding of the term "fable" is a piece of fiction that contains a moral. I hope that the moral at the center of THE BOY IN THE STRIPED PAJAMAS is self-evident to readers.

**TRC: In the Author's Note, you write "fences such as the one at the heart of THE BOY IN THE STRIPED PAJAMAS still exist; it is unlikely that they will ever fully disappear." Would you like to elaborate on this?**

**JB:** As an Irishman growing up in the 1970s and 1980s, I was only too aware of the divides --- the fences --- that existed in my

own country, and that caused violence and killing for families throughout Northern Ireland for too many years. And while those problems have for the most part been solved, it is easy to identify situations around the world throughout my own lifetime, in places such as South Africa, Kosovo, Srebrenica, Rwanda, where the metaphorical fences that I talk about have existed/still exist. The genocide of the 1940s was perhaps the worst case of inhumanity that the world has ever seen, but we do not live in a peaceful world even now, 60 years later. I suppose I hoped that younger readers who might be moved by the story of Bruno & Shmuel would grow up with the intention of pulling those fences down wherever they existed, whenever they could.

**TRC: Shmuel and Bruno are both nine years old and were born on the same day. This is quite a coincidence and a poignant detail, considering their varying circumstances. Would you care to explain its significance in your eyes and why you chose to have this detail included?**

**JB:** It was important for me that Bruno & Shmuel shared certain characteristics. They are both small for their age, they are both basically goodhearted and kind boys, they have both been brought to a dreadful place against their will (although Shmuel's circumstances are, of course, far worse than Bruno's) and as you say, they are exactly the same age. They are reflections of each other and as they sit, cross-legged in the dust, the fence that separates them acts as a kind of mirror image of the boy the other might have been. The specific date I chose for the boys' birth --- April 15, 1934 --- was important to me for two reasons: firstly, it allowed the boys to be young enough to retain a certain innocence at the time the story is being told (particularly important in Bruno's case), and secondly, the date and year are the date and year of my own father's birth. By using his birthday and knowing how the story would inevitably end, I was able to personalise the story a little more for myself, imagining the lives and families that either Bruno or Shmuel might have had, the age they would be today, the experiences their lives would have brought to them.

**TRC: One unique aspect of this book that stands out is the way you deal with language. Two prominent examples are Bruno's mispronunciation of the name of the camp ("Out-With") and the name of Hitler ("the Fury"). What was the inspiration behind this? What about its impact when written in translation?**

**JB:** As with the question of it being a fable, I decided not to use the actual words in order that the reader would know where, in general, I was talking about without making it absolutely specific to any place. *THE BOY IN THE STRIPED PAJAMAS* is *not* a novel about Auschwitz, it is about two boys on either side of a fence at a concentration camp during World War II. While it is clear that I am implying a specific camp, it was important to me to recognise that there were many more camps in operation at that time, and many millions of innocents who died in Belsen, Dachau, Buchenwald, etc. and each of these should be remembered too. Regarding translation difficulties --- I have had e-mails from

various translators who are working on the book, and while the wordplay of the English language version might be hard to replicate, they have each responded professionally and creatively to the challenge in an attempt to maintain the integrity of my ideas.

**TRC: Is it realistic to think that a nine-year-old boy (especially the son of the Commandant) would be so in the dark as to what was taking place around him? How could he not know?**

**JB:** This is perhaps the question I have been asked the most about this novel and I feel very strongly that Bruno's innocence and ignorance are not only crucial to the story, but appropriate to the times, too. In a way, the question implies a wider question: how could so many millions of people have been murdered under the eyes of the whole world without anyone knowing about it? How, indeed. When the war ended and the camps were liberated, the world was shocked by what they learned. But it had been going on for years. And the whole point is that it continues to go on today in places around the world, and what do we do about it as society, as people?

On a separate note, the idea that Bruno, an innocent nine year old, would understand the events taking place around him implies the hindsight knowledge gained only by the passing of time and the study of history. And to search for a reason why this story --- this piece of fiction --- *couldn't* have happened, when I am never for a moment suggesting that this particular story *did* happen, is something that I find an extraordinary response from any reader.

**TRC: This brings up an interesting debate about context and reference points. In the present day, we cite the Holocaust as an example of genocide. It happened, we have studied it, written books about it, etc. It can be argued that we would know if it was happening to us. It is often asserted that back then, the people involved (children and adults alike) didn't grasp what was going on...that it would have been feasible for a nine-year-old to have been unaware of the monstrosities taking place because that particular idea had never been planted in his or her consciousness before. What are your thoughts on this matter?**

**JB:** Well, this really refers back to my previous answer. It's a broader social question really, rather than a question of literary technique, and one that has been written about widely, as you suggest. I'm 34, I wasn't alive during the War; for those people who *were* alive and who weren't part of the Nazi establishment during that time, the question is more appropriate to them --- what did you know, when did you know it, and what did you do about it? Purely in terms of my novel, however, I stand by my belief that Bruno is an innocent child in a time and place that he does not understand; he has grown up with a father who has been in the Nazi party since he can remember --- why on earth would he question this when he has never known anything different?

**TRC: The conversation between Greta and Bruno in which the two discuss the difference between "Jews & Opposites" is quite intriguing on many levels. Can you talk a bit more about that?**

**JB:** Gretel is the type of child who likes to think that she knows more than she does. She's not quite as ignorant as Bruno is, and as the novel progresses she opens her eyes to the events around her and, appropriate to people at the time, approves of them. However, when she is discussing the Jews and the Opposite, she is still at that midway point where she has identified some facts but is confused about others. She sees things in black and white, as the world being populated by two distinct types of people. More crucially for me, I consider Gretel's character the moment when her dolls are taken down and replaced by maps. Here is another response to those who criticise Bruno's innocence; Gretel becomes indoctrinated. And whether Bruno ultimately would have or not is left to the reader to decide.

**TRC: The women in THE BOY IN THE STRIPED PAJAMAS stand out as multilayered characters in that they are subordinate to their male counterparts, but still manage to maintain their internal strength and a small degree of independence. Gretel (Bruno's sister) is young and flighty yet attracts the attention of Lieutenant Kotler. Bruno's mother is clearly subservient to her husband but still exerts influence over her family. Bruno's grandmother is the most uninhibited and openly berates her son and everything he's involved in. Even "the Fury's" companion quietly defies him in subtle ways. Did you intentionally create female characters with varying degrees of inner fortitude, commensurate with their age? If so, explain.**

**JB:** Yes. After my third novel, CRIPPEN, was published, there were some reviewers who felt I was very hard on my female characters. (*The Guardian* in the UK felt it was a little misogynist, an accusation that bothered me and made me consider those characters anew). Personally, I didn't really agree; I felt those characters were just quite broadly drawn for comic effect. When I was writing THE BOY IN THE STRIPED PAJAMAS, however, I knew that I wanted to work harder than I had before on my female characters and make them quite strong; we don't often read about female characters during the Second World War, and almost never about German females, so it was interesting for me to consider how they might have acted. The strongest of all, for me, is Grandmother, who represents the voice of reason in German society at that time, the person who is willing to stand up and say no, to condemn what is going on and to try to get others to see the evil that they are responsible for. And of course, this voice must be silenced so Grandmother dies halfway through the book. That last voice of reason is gone. Mother, too, is torn at times but ultimately puts her own position in society over everything else. Gretel is just a child, but her attraction to Kotler is as much an attraction to the Party as to a handsome young man. And as for Eva Braun, I really wanted her to be seen through Bruno's eyes and to consider the effect that she might have had on a young boy.

**TRC: In the process of writing THE BOY IN THE STRIPED PAJAMAS, were you worried that some of your older readers might get offended?**

**JB:** No. I wrote the book from start to finish without considering any audience, young or old. I wrote the story I wanted to write and tried to invest in it as much emotional honesty and integrity as I could. After it was accepted for publication, yes, I wondered what the response to it would be, but I didn't alter a single word, nor was I ever asked to, based on any potential controversy that might come my way. And since it was published in the UK, I have received hundreds of letters and e-mails from people regarding the content, most of which have been overwhelmingly positive. Those who have had problems with the book, I have been happy to reply with my personal response to their questions and issues. I hope they have been satisfied that my intention was to write a literary work that would address innocence and evil, without either trivialising the events of the time or pandering to contemporary political correctness.

**TRC: What kind of research did you do when writing this book?**

**JB:** I had long been a student of the Holocaust and had read most of the important writers on that subject. It was a subject that I was drawn to again and again, particularly in relation to contemporary events during my own lifetime; however, I never considered that I would write about it. Ironically, for the most part, I agree with Elie Wiesel's statement that "if you weren't there, don't write about it." But I'm a writer. It's all I've ever been. I didn't decide to write a novel about the Holocaust, I didn't plan to write one, I didn't search for a story to tell about that time. The story came to me almost fully formed and within 100 hours of the initial idea coming into my head, the entire first draft --- a little over 50,000 words --- was written and sitting on my desk. And there it was. As a writer, what else could I do then but want someone to read it?

**TRC: Did you toy with other endings before writing this one? If so, why did you choose this one?**

**JB:** No, and while I made many alterations from the first to the last draft, expanding some characters (such as Pavel) and creating some new scenes, the last two chapters of the book are almost identical, word for word, with the first draft that I finished at lunchtime on April 30, 2004 (my 33rd birthday, as it happens). I never imagined any other ending and never could. The book loses all meaning without it.

**TRC: Do you prefer to read a specific genre of books? Might you have a few favorite books to recommend to your readers?**

**JB:** I read everything that interests me --- contemporary novels, biographies, histories, classics. Like most writers and avid readers, I have a pile of books beside me as I type this that I

want to read. My two greatest influences are Charles Dickens and John Irving, writers separated by more than a century. The last three books I read were by Colm Toibin, John Updike and Joan Didion. I'm also interested in keeping up with the latest novels by writers my own age, some of which are shockingly bad and some of which I wish I had written!

**TRC: Looking at your published library, it is clear that you are fascinated by history. Your first novel, THE THIEF OF TIME, features a 256-year-old protagonist reflecting on the historical contributions he made in his life. THE CONGRESS OF ROUGH RIDERS is a retelling of the life of Buffalo Bill Cody, told from the point of view of his fictional great-grandson, William. CRIPPEN, your third novel, is the story of Dr. Hawley Harvey Crippen who was chased by the Scotland Yard in 1910 after he murdered his wife. And now, a novel about the Holocaust. Where did this preoccupation with history arise and what might you be tackling next?**

**JB:** It's always been my preoccupation. I've always loved reading about the past and studying it. As a young writer, I don't think I ever set out to be a historical novelist (I'm not even sure I am one), but it seems to be what I enjoy doing the most and I think I'm getting better at it. I was on a stage once with two other writers and an audience member asked us about historical writing; one of the writers dismissed it entirely as utterly pointless (and indeed, his own novels are all set in contemporary times) but I found that such a comment showed a very small understanding of how literature works. Without historical novels, we would never have William Golding's *Sea Trilogy*. Or Robert Graves's *Claudius* novels. Or a contemporary writer like Sarah Waters's wonderful books. The idea that you can't explore contemporary themes in a historical setting is ludicrous. Do I want to write a novel set today? Only if I have the right story to tell. The times don't matter at all --- it's always the story, the story, the story.

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