

Book Report

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Introduction.

For my book report I decided to read '*The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas*', by John Boyne. As a comparison I read '*Journey to the River Sea*', by Eva Ibbotson. They are two powerfully told books, that are similar in that they are both told through the eyes of an innocent child pointing out the flaws in the adult world, and highlighting the simplicity of childhood. A similar theme throughout each book is the sense of friendship and loyalty shown by both Bruno and Maia to their friends. -Shmuel in Bruno's case and Finn and Clovis in Maia's. I found both these books incredibly gripping, especially *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas*, and in both cases I found the books nearly impossible to put down.

Themes and Characters.

In *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* and *Journey to the River Sea*, there are, as I said, two similar themes in each book. In my view, the most emphasised theme is the idea of friendship and loyalty, through thick and thin. In *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas*, Bruno befriends Shmuel, despite them being so incredibly different to one another. This was one thing I particularly loved about Bruno. He really didn't seem to care where you were from, or what you looked like, as long as you were a good, decent person. Take for example, Pavel, although we only meet him once or twice in the book, we can see straight away that he is a good, kind man. Bruno, unlike his father, sister, and everyone else he knows, likes Pavel for who he is as a person, instead of what religion he follows, or what nationality or race he is. Bruno upon meeting Pavel accepts straight away that although Pavel might not necessarily *look* like your average doctor, he really is one, and truly believes Pavel when he assures him that that scrape on his knee is not life threatening. On the other hand, when we look at the character of Lieutenant Kotler, we see that although to Bruno's strongly Nazi parents, Kurt Kotler may seem like the perfect young man, Bruno thinks he's is condescending, arrogant and cruel, and he's

completely right.

However, Bruno's sister Gretel think the sun shines out of Kotler's head, and can't understand why Bruno doesn't like him. I think that Lieutenant Kotler is my least favourite character I have ever read about, he is cruel, and cold bloodedly murders Pavel for spilling wine on him. An interesting point to note about Kotler, is that although he is supposedly a 'Nazi' we get the impression that he is maybe secretly a Jew, or maybe has Jewish origins. I gathered this from a few hints given to us by John Boyne during the book. We read that according to Bruno, Kotler's pale blonde hair looked 'almost dyed' hinting that maybe in fact Kotler's hair was naturally another colour, maybe even the dark brown of the Jewish people's hair. Another time we get a sense that Kotler has not been entirely honest about who he is when he is having dinner with Bruno's family, and he lets slip that his Father left Germany for Switzerland in 1938, which made me, and seemingly the Herr Commandant too, quite suspicious about who he really was. Later on in the book we find out that Kotler has been 'assigned a different post'... What this means we can only guess, but in my opinion, Kotler was actually Jewish himself, and it is this hypocrisy of his, the fact that he himself was maybe Jewish, but he treated other Jews so awfully, that adds to my intense dislike of his character.

Coming back to the subject of themes, I think perhaps the most touching aspect of this book is Bruno's unfailing loyalty to Shmuel, and the true extent of his friendship with him. After Bruno gets Shmuel into trouble with Lieutenant Kotler, he feels so much remorse that he agrees to do anything to help Shmuel, so when Shmuel's father goes 'missing' (he has probably been killed), and Shmuel asks Bruno to don the blue and white striped pyjamas, and come through the fence to help him look for his father, Bruno puts aside his fear, and sense of foreboding, and bravely crawls under the fence to help Shmuel.

This theme of friendship is similarly portrayed in *Journey to the River sea*, in which Maia puts aside her own well being, in order to help her friends Finn and Clovis. When Maia hears that she is not going to be going to Clovis' performance of Little Lord Fauntleroy with Gwendolyn, Beatrice and Mrs. Carter, although she had promised Clovis on the boat that she would be there, she defys her orders to stay at home, and walks by herself through the rainforest to Manaus.

This is a key moment in the book, because it is at this point where we really see the true strength of Maia's kindness and loyalty, and also at this point, Maia meets Finn for the first time, although he is disguised as an Indian boy. Maia is prepared to sacrifice her well-being to help lead her greedy cousins to Clovis, who is pretending to be Finn, and hiding in the museum. If Maia's plan doesn't work, and the twins find her out to be lying, her life will be made even more miserable than it already is, and there will be nothing at all that she can do about it. Although in the end their plan works out, it is nearly ruined by Clovis losing his nerve.

Clovis is a very odd character, because although you find characters like him in many books, they are usually portrayed as one of the 'bad' characters rather than a 'good' character. Clovis is a whiny, sulky boy, who is scared of everything, and although he has had quite a tough life, he doesn't make the best of it like Maia and Finn, but instead yearns for things he once had but gave up. When Maia and Finn come up with the plan to keep Finn in Brazil by Clovis pretending to be him, and Clovis going back to England instead of him, which was what he really wanted, at first Clovis agrees, and goes along with it. But at the very last second, he loses his nerve, and tries to back out of the plan, prepared to sacrifice Finn for the good of himself. However, luckily, just when Finn is about to reveal himself to the two detectives looking for him, Miss Minton says "Come out Finn Tavener! Come out and be a man!" And Clovis realises that she is right and he 'reveals' himself to the detectives, the first, and nearly only brave thing we see him do throughout the book. For these reasons I didn't really like the character of Clovis very much at all.

Finn on the other hand, is completely the opposite. He's kind, he loves the outdoors, and when Clovis decides he is too afraid to face up to the detectives and 'reveal' himself to them, Finn is prepared to put himself forward in Clovis' place.

The second theme that is evident in both books, is the idea of childhood innocence. Bruno really doesn't understand the things going on at the time in which he lived, and one moment that I personally found very touching, was when Bruno is talking to his Father in his office at Out With, and when he gets up to leave, he salutes and says 'Heil Hitler', which he tells us he thinks just means "Goodbye, have a nice day!", but we know that it is the salute of Nazi soldiers to each other, and to Hitler. We can also see Bruno's ignorance when he first

arrives at 'Out With', and he looks outside his bedroom window, and sees the people in striped pyjamas walking around in the concentration camp. And although he doesn't understand what was going on outside, it made him feel 'very cold and unsafe'.

In *Journey to the River Sea* we can see that Maia has quite a similar personality to Bruno, and like him, believes that no one is bad, and everything will always turn out fine in the end. Before she travels to Brazil to at last meet her cousins, and her aunt and uncle, she imagines them as this stereotypical, perfect family. Then, when she arrives at the Carter's, and to the reader it becomes very clear why Maia has been invited to stay with them, and even when Beatrice pinches Maia when shaking her hand, Maia manages to convince herself that they are good people and really truly want her to be there.

Plot summary and setting.

The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas is the sad story of a young German boy, Bruno, a Nazi Commandant's son, who moves from a large, beautiful house in Berlin, to a small, squalid house in Poland. From the window of his new home, sees strange people walking around wearing blue and white striped pyjamas.

The story is set during WWII, in a Jewish concentration camp called 'Out With' by Bruno, although, although it is never actually said in the book, I came to take 'Out With' to actually be 'Auschwitz', a very real, very terrible Jewish concentration camp. One day Bruno decides to go exploring and meets and befriends a small, thin Jewish boy living in a concentration camp called Shmuel. Shmuel and Bruno are pretty much the same person, born into completely different circumstances, as they share the same birthday, Bruno an 'aryan' German, Shmuel a Polish Jew. Bruno's new friendship with Shmuel helps him forget his homesickness for his lovely big house in Berlin, and his three best friends for life, Karl, Daniel and Martin. This story is slightly different from the Holocaust stories you usually hear of, in that it's told not only from the Nazi side, but from a Nazi child's point of view. However, in my opinion it is unlikely that a Nazi Commandant's son would be unaware of 'what' a Jew was, and of whether he was one himself or not, as at the time young non-Jewish German boys and girls were brainwashed with Nazi regime. But even taking this into account, it does not detract from the well told tale, as John Boyne expertly drags you deeper and deeper into the storyline. *The Boy in the Striped*

Pyjamas is the fantastically told story of true friendship, and loyalty.

My comparison book, *Journey to the River Sea*, is a decidedly more cheerful tale. It is the story of orphaned Maia, who goes to live with her father's second cousin's family in Manaus, Brazil. Maia, although nervous about leaving England and everything and everyone familiar to her, is an imaginative girl, and tries to make the best out the situations she finds herself in. When she arrives in Brazil, she straight away realises the harsh contrast between England, and what is to be her new home. The bright, loud colours of Brazil compared to the grey, dreary, drizzly colours of England, would surely be surprising to anyone! Maia falls in love with the beautiful Brailian rainforest, and although the Carters don't allow Maia, Beatrice or Gwendolyn anything to do with 'real' Brazil, not the food, the people, or the rainforest, Maia and Miss. Minton soon find a way to enable Maia to experience the wonders of the Amazon.

Maia soon befriends Finn and Clovis, and most of the book is dedicated to their struggle to be allowed to choose their own lives. Finn, desperately striving to remain in the rainforest where he belongs, and Clovis the complete opposite, wanting to be allowed back to England. One thing I quite liked about this book is that there is no sense of 'claustrophobic' setting, if you know what I mean. The action is always happenng somewhere new, and Eva Ibbotsen describes each wonderful – or in the case of 'Tapherini', the Carter's bungalow, not so wonderful – place with fantastic detail, making you really feel as though you are right there in the book with Maia! In the *Boy in the Striped pyjamas* there wasn't as much emphasis on the separate locations of the action, and John Boyne didn't really go into much detail, which I didn't really like, because I like to know exactly where abouts in the setting I am, and exactly what it looks like.

Style of Writing

Both books that I read were told from the point of view of a child, which I quite liked because I felt I could relate to what they were thinking and feeling. Both Ibbotsen and Boyne write the book in the 'third person', and I also liked this, because sometimes when I'm reading a book in the first person, I get a little confused about who is doing what. While John Boyne wrote *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* in a very definate time zone, giving us a lot of facts, events and even a few dates to show us exactly what time period this was going on in, *Journey to the River Sea* is much more vague, although there are a few

clues we are given as to when it was set, such as the fact that Maia and Miss. Minton travelled to Manaus by boat, instead of just hopping on a plane, which shows us that the story was obviously set quite a while ago. There are other clues to, such as the way the characters speak and act that lead you to believe that the story was not set in modern times.

I felt that the beginning of *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* was excellent, because you plunge straight in to Bruno arriving home from school, to find the maid Maria packing away his things. This really caught my attention, because straight away I was intrigued as to why Bruno's things were being packed. John Boyne has a very unique style of writing I think, because he doesn't tell you when, where, how and why the things that happen, happen, but instead leaves you to think about it and come to your own conclusion. In contrast, Eva Ibbotson wrote *Journey to the River Sea* is very 'black and white' way. Everything is explained well, although having said that, Ibbotson does put in a few mysteries that make you think 'hmmm I wonder what that's about...', such as the mystery surrounding Miss. Minton, Bernard Taverner and the 'maid' who helped Bernard escape from Westwood (who turns out in the end to have been Miss. Minton herself!).

One thing I really liked about *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* was that it doesn't have the standard happy ending, where everyone walks off into the sunset, and lives happily ever after, but instead has a heartwrenchingly sad ending, in which Bruno and Shmuel are gassed to death, which although made me cry, I though was incredibly touching because even to the last minute of his life Bruno remained the brave, innocent boy he always had been. I think that the second last chapter, although not the end of the actual book, for me it felt like the end, because the chapter after it, the last chapter, is almost like an epilogue, rather than the end of the story. The last sentence of the chapter is one of my favourite ever endings.. "And then the room went very dark, and somehow, despite the chaos that followed, Bruno found that he was still holding Shmuel's hand in his own and nothing in the world would have persuaded him to let it go." I found this last sentence, although sad, incredibly effective, and I think John Boyne really did a good job with it. *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* is probably one of my favourite books of all time, after Harry Potter (of course!), and I certainly would recommend it to anyone, of any age. It's even suitable for younger readers because John Boyne never

actually writes of the atrocities that happened both in the book and at the time, but for older readers it is clear what he is talking about. The ending of *Journey to the River Sea* is a happy ending, and although I prefer books to have a little twist at the end, the 'happy ever after' type of ending suited this book, since most of the book was written in almost a fairytale style anyway.

I really enjoyed both the books I read. Although in many ways bittersweet, *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* was an incredible read, it was emotional, gripping, and in places hilariously funny. *Journey to the River Sea* was also a great read, it was interesting, and uncomplicated, an easy, relaxing read.