Novel Notes

The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas
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The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas

This novel begins when Bruno, a nine-year-old boy from Germany, returns home from school to find that the family maid, Maria, and his mother are packing. He is told that the family is moving from their mansion in Berlin to a place called ‘Out-With’ due to his father’s important work. Bruno’s father is a Nazi commandant.

The family travels to the train station where Bruno notices that, unusually, the trains are heading in only one direction, east. When they arrive at the place they call Out-With, Bruno and his older sister Gretel soon see that something is not quite right about the place. Outside Bruno’s bedroom window people of all ages can be seen on the other side of a fence. All the people are wearing the same clothes, striped blue and white pyjamas and cloth caps.

It is clear that Bruno’s father is an important man at Out-With. ‘The Fury’ (Hitler) himself appointed Bruno’s father to the role. Soldiers frequent the house to discuss plans with him, in the office that is out of bounds to Bruno and his sister.

Bruno is bored of life at Out-With and longs to return to Berlin and his friends there. Gretel does not like to play with him. Instead she prefers to socialise with Lieutenant Kotler, whom Bruno dislikes. Rather than staying in the house, Bruno decides to explore his surroundings.

Bruno follows the fence of the camp for some time until he sees a boy on the other side, dressed like all the others on the other side of the fence. Although this boy is Jewish and lives in the camp, Bruno and Shmuel have a lot in common and a great friendship develops between them. Bruno visits Shmuel every day, bringing him food, and they talk about their lives. For the most part, Bruno considers his life similar to Shmuel’s.

One day, while everyone at Bruno’s house is preparing for a party, Bruno finds Shmuel in his kitchen polishing glasses. Bruno offers Shmuel food and he takes it. However, Lieutenant Kotler notices Shmuel eating and accuses him of stealing the food. Bruno fails to correct Lieutenant Kotler and Shmuel is punished. Bruno later apologises and the boys remain friends.

During the course of the book, Bruno slowly realises that the people on the other side of the fence are considered the enemy; however, this fails to affect his relationship with Shmuel. One day, just before Bruno and his mother are due to return home to Berlin, Shmuel asks for Bruno’s help to track down his father, who has gone missing. Shmuel provides striped pyjamas for Bruno and he sneaks into the camp by crawling under the fence.

Bruno is scared by what he sees in the camp, and wishes to return home. However, before he can do so, the soldiers make everyone march. They are marched into a shed and Bruno assumes it is to keep them out of the rain. It is there that the two boys meet their untimely death, hand in hand.

Bruno’s family doesn’t know what has happened to him and search the local area. His mother and sister eventually return to Berlin, hoping that he may have made his own way there. His father returns to where Bruno’s clothes were found, and discovers that the fence can be lifted up.

Issues and themes dealt with in this book include childhood innocence, family, friendship, barriers, death and loss.
John Boyne was born in Dublin. He studied English literature and creative writing at Trinity College Dublin, where he began his writing career.

He has published over 70 short stories and many novels for adults and young readers. *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas*, which was published in 2006, is his best-known work. It has also been made into a film.

This novel for young readers has won two Irish Book Awards, a horde of international awards and was named the Bisto Book of the Year in 2007. It spent more than 80 weeks at no.1 in Ireland, topped the New York Times bestseller list and has sold more than 5 million copies.

Curriculum Objectives

The child should be enabled to become a self-reliant, confident, independent reader, having time in class for sustained, silent reading; engage with books in groups or in a whole-class setting; use comprehension skills such as analysing, confirming, evaluating, synthesising and correlating to aid deduction, problem-solving and prediction; respond to poetry and fiction through discussion, writing, drama, the visual arts and dance; and appreciate issues in fiction.

Learning Outcomes

- Complete sentence starters about aspects of the novel.
- Illustrate a favourite/least favourite scene from the novel.
- Compare and contrast key characters from the novel.
- Write an original dialogue between two characters from the novel.
- Create another character for the story and discuss the impact of this character on events in the book.
- Write a letter to the author expressing your opinion of the book. Remember to include your address, start the letter off correctly and sign off correctly.
- Compose an alternative ending to the story.
- Redesign the front and back cover of this novel, including important information and a short summary.
Cross-curricular Links

History
This story is set during World War Two. Children can learn about this period in history, looking at aspects such as the causes of the war, fighting during the war, the main people involved, the Holocaust, etc.

Geography
Germany, Poland and Denmark are mentioned in this novel. Children can place these and other countries involved in World War Two on a map and learn about aspects such as climate, landscape, culture, food, etc.

SPHE
Children can explore feelings and emotions in a variety of ways, e.g. class discussions, circle time, role plays, etc. The themes of loss and death can also be covered, if appropriate.

Drama
Children could select scenes from the novel and dramatise them using approaches such as hot seating, narrated mimes and still images. The tensions in the novel could be explored using a conscience alley approach.

Suggestions for Classroom Work

- Complete the following sentences:
  - I would like to know...
  - I wonder why...
  - I felt sorry...

- Choose a scene from the book and illustrate it.

- Compare and contrast the following characters: Bruno and Shmuel, Bruno and Gretel, and Pavel and Lieutenant Kotler.

- Write an original dialogue between two characters from a book, e.g. Mother and Father, Bruno and Shmuel, Father and Lieutenant Kotler, etc.

- Create another character for the story. Explain how things would change with this character’s presence.

- Write a letter to the author expressing your opinion of the book. Remember to include your address, start the letter off correctly and sign off correctly.

- Write an alternative ending to the story.

- Redesign the front and back cover of this novel. Include the important information as well as a short summary on the back.
Web Links

A quiz about the novel:
http://www.scoilnet.ie/Quiz.aspx?id=1490

The trailer from the movie version of the novel:

A child-friendly resource about World War Two:
http://www.bbc.co.uk/schools/primaryhistory/world_war2/

A link to the Crocus project, to commemorate the children who died in the Holocaust:

Pre-reading Activities

Oral Pre-reading Questions

**Chapter 1**
Who do you think Bruno might be?

**Chapter 2**
How do you think Bruno will feel when he moves to the new house?

**Chapter 3**
Who do you think this chapter will be about? Why?

**Chapter 4**
What do you think the children saw outside the window?

**Chapter 5**
Where, do you think, will be out of bounds for the children?

**Chapter 6**
Predict what will happen next in the story.

**Chapter 7**
What sort of woman do you think Bruno’s mother is?

**Chapter 8**
Does the title of this chapter give you any clues about what might happen next?

**Chapter 9**
What do you think the title is trying to tell us, the readers?

**Chapter 10**
Predict what will happen next in the story.

**Chapter 11**
What or who do you think ‘The Fury’ is?

**Chapter 12**
What might Shmuel tell Bruno, do you think?

**Chapter 13**
Predict what might happen in this chapter.

**Chapter 14**
Who do you think Bruno is likely to lie to in this chapter? What might he lie about?
Chapter 15
What do you think will happen next in the story?

Chapter 16
Many months have passed since Bruno first arrived at Out-With. Do you think he will ever return to Berlin? Or will the family continue to live in Out-With?

Chapter 17
How might Bruno’s mother get her own way, do you think?

Chapter 18
What might the final adventure be, do you think?

Chapters 19 and 20
Do you think the boys’ plan will work?

Vocabulary
Select a passage from the book. List all the adjectives. Write another list of words that have the same meaning as the adjectives selected. Write a further list of words that mean the opposite to these words. Add new words to the class dictionary/word wall.

Comprehension Activity Sheets
Presented on the following pages are a selection of both lower and higher order questions for each section of this novel, which the teacher may choose from.
1. Who were Maria and Lars?

2. Describe what Bruno’s mother looked like.

3. What news did Bruno’s mother have for him when he returned from school?

4. Why did Bruno not like the idea of leaving Berlin?

5. Why do you think Gretel might be called a hopeless case?

6. If you were Bruno, what questions would you like to ask your parents? Write down three questions.

7. What evidence is there to suggest that Bruno’s family was well-off?
1. How was Bruno’s family’s new house different to their home in Berlin?

2. What staff did the family have at their new home?

3. What did Bruno suggest to his mother when they arrived at their new house?

4. Who did Bruno see leaving his parents’ room?

5. Do you agree with Bruno when he says that all fathers are serious?

6. If you could help, what would you do to try to make Bruno happier in his new home?

7. What might Bruno have seen when he looked out the window?
1. What things annoyed Bruno about his sister?

2. What ages were Bruno and Gretel?

3. In what way were Gretel’s friends mean to Bruno?

4. What did Bruno see out of Gretel’s window?

5. Do you think Bruno’s new house is scary? Why? Why not?

6. Why do you think the author has not yet described what’s outside Bruno’s window?

7. Do you think there really are children outside?
1. What did the children see when they looked out the window?

2. How did Gretel explain what she saw in front of her?

3. Why did Bruno not agree with Gretel’s explanation?

4. How were the soldiers treating the children?

5. What sort of place was the camp, do you think?

6. Why do you think all the people were wearing the same clothes?

7. Which bedroom would you prefer? Why?
1. How was the family transported to their new home?

2. What was odd about the train station?

3. How was Bruno's father different to the other soldiers that stood downstairs in the house?

4. Why did Bruno’s father dismiss the other men?

5. Why, do you think, was Bruno’s father’s office nicer than the other rooms in the house?

6. Do you think Bruno has a nice father? Give a reason for your answer.

7. What might Bruno’s father have meant when he said that the people outside were not really people at all?

8. Do you agree with Bruno’s father that home is where your family is? Explain your answer.
1. Why was Bruno talking to himself in his room?

2. Why did Bruno value Maria’s opinion?

3. What kind thing did Bruno’s father do for Maria?

4. How did Gretel treat Maria in comparison to the way Bruno treated her?

5. Why did Maria advise Bruno to keep quiet about his dislike of the place, do you think?

6. What thoughts do you think were racing through Bruno’s head as he ran away from the house?

7. Do you think the title of this chapter is a good one? Why?/Why not?
1. Why did Bruno’s mother not like Bruno laughing at Herr Roller?

2. How did Gretel act around Lieutenant Kotler?

3. How did Lieutenant Kotler treat Pavel?

4. How did Bruno injure himself?

5. Why, do you think, was Pavel now working for the family rather than working as a doctor?

6. What, do you think, made Bruno uneasy about leaving his sister with Lieutenant Kotler?

7. What did you learn about Bruno’s mother in this chapter?

8. What else would you like to know about Bruno’s mother?
1. What had Bruno’s grandfather done for a living?

2. How did Bruno’s grandmother entertain the family at parties?

3. What happened at the last play that Bruno, Gretel and their grandmother performed together?

4. What did Bruno’s grandmother mean when she said her son was a puppet on a string, do you think?

5. What does Bruno’s father do that upsets his mother, do you think?

6. Summarise what you know about Bruno’s father so far.

7. How do you think the war was affecting Bruno’s family?
1. What did Herr Liszt want to teach Bruno about?

2. What jobs would need to be done before ‘The Fury’ arrived for dinner?

3. What did the plaque on the garden bench read?

4. Where, do you think, will Bruno explore?

5. If you were an explorer, where would you like to explore? Why would you like to explore that place?

6. If you had a private tutor, what would you want to learn about? Explain your answer.

7. Why, in your opinion, did Herr Liszt think social sciences, particularly history, were important subjects to study?
1. What did Bruno discover on the other side of the fence as he was exploring?

2. What did Bruno and Shmuel have in common?

3. Why did Shmuel think his mother was a smart woman?

4. What did Bruno and Shmuel talk about?

5. What, do you think, did Shmuel think of Bruno?

6. If you were Bruno, what questions would you have asked Shmuel?

7. How might Shmuel’s life be different to Bruno’s?
1. Who was ‘The Fury’?

2. What jobs needed to be done before the arrival of ‘The Fury’ for dinner?

3. How were the children prepared for the visit of ‘The Fury’?


5. From what you have read so far, what do you think was discussed at the important dinner?

6. What is your opinion of Bruno’s father? Why do you think that way about him?

7. Summarise this chapter briefly from the point of view of Bruno’s mother.
1. What was life like for Shmuel before his family was forced to move away?

2. What sort of armband did Shmuel and his family have to wear?

3. Who brought Shmuel and his family to the camp?

4. Why could Bruno not understand why Shmuel was sad?

5. Compare Bruno with Shmuel. How are they similar and how are they different?

6. Imagine you are Bruno. Write a diary entry about your day.

7. Do you think Bruno and Shmuel could be friends, even though they are on different sides of the fence?
1. What was Bruno doing when Maria entered the kitchen?

2. Why did Bruno think that Shmuel might know Pavel?

3. What did Bruno notice about Pavel at dinner?

4. What were Bruno’s father’s views on history?

5. Why do you think nobody stopped Lieutenant Kotler from mistreating Pavel at dinner?

6. What effect did the incident at dinner have on Bruno?
1. What secret did Bruno accidently reveal to his sister?

2. How did Bruno try to cover up his mistake?

3. How did Bruno try making himself red with embarrassment?

4. Why, do you think, did Bruno not tell his sister about Shmuel?

5. If you were Bruno, would you have told Gretel about Shmuel?

6. What might have happened to Shmuel’s grandfather?

7. If you were Bruno, how would you try to cheer up Shmuel the next time you met him?
1. Why did Bruno and Shmuel see less of each other for the next few weeks?

2. What event were Bruno’s mother and Lieutenant Kotler planning?

3. Name some reasons why Bruno disliked Lieutenant Kotler.

4. Why was Shmuel brought to Bruno’s house?

5. Why do you think Bruno lied about being friends with Shmuel?

6. How did Bruno feel about his actions in the kitchen? Do you think he was right to feel that way?

7. What would have happened if Bruno had told Lieutenant Kotler that he and Shmuel were friends, do you think?

8. Why do you think Bruno and Shmuel's friendship was able to survive Bruno's betrayal?
1. What caused the family to return to Berlin briefly?

2. What aspects of his life at Out-With was Bruno happy with?

3. Why did Bruno consider his friendship with Shmuel unusual?

4. How had Gretel changed since moving to Out-With?

5. What did Gretel tell Bruno about the fence?

6. Why do you think people of different religions were separated by a fence?

7. Why, do you think, were Bruno and Shmuel friends when they were on different sides of the fence?
1. What did Bruno overhear his parents discussing?

2. What would be different for Bruno if the family was to return to Berlin?

3. What decision did Bruno’s father make with the family?

4. Why do you think Bruno’s father enquired about what Bruno knew about the other side of the fence?

5. What advantages and disadvantages will returning to Berlin bring to the family, do you think?

6. Imagine you are Bruno. Write a diary entry about the decision that has been made.

7. How do you think Shmuel will react to the news?
1. Why was Shmuel particularly unhappy when he arrived at the fence?

2. How did Shmuel react to Bruno’s news?

3. What plan did Bruno come up with so that he could visit Shmuel’s side of the fence?

4. Why was Shmuel looking forward to Bruno’s next visit?

5. Do you think Bruno’s plan was good? Why?/Why not?

6. What were the dangers associated with the plan, do you think?

7. If you were moving away and were not going to see your best friend again, how would you like to spend your last day together?
1. Why was it difficult for Bruno to change his clothes?

2. Why could Bruno not wear his boots on the other side of the fence?

3. What had Bruno expected to see on Shmuel’s side of the fence?

4. Why was Bruno unable to go home for his dinner?

5. Were you shocked by the ending? Why?

6. Would you have liked a different ending? Why?

7. Rewrite the ending briefly from Gretel’s point of view.

8. *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* is told as a fable. What would you identify as the most important messages in the story?
Book Report Sheet

If you don’t have enough space to write your answers, use the notes section on the following pages.

Pupil’s name: ___________________________  Class: _____________  Date: ___________________________

Title of book: __________________________  Author: ________________  Illustrator: __________________________

Setting (where the story took place):

________________________________________________________________________________________

List the main characters:

1. __________________________  2. __________________________

3. __________________________  4. __________________________

Write about each of the following:

Your favourite character: ________________________________________________________________

The plot: _____________________________________________________________________________

The climax: ___________________________________________________________________________

The ending: ___________________________________________________________________________

Write four adjectives to describe this book:

1. ___________  2. ___________  3. ___________  4. ___________

Did you like the book? Why?/Why not?

_____________________________________________________________________________________

Grade the book (✔️ Tick one)

Easy to read  ❌  Just right  ❌  A little difficult  ❌  Difficult  ✔️

Rate the book out of ten: /10