

The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas

John Boyne

The Boy in the Striped Pajamas tells two overlapping stories, one of Bruno's search for boyhood companions and a return to his ordinary life, and one of the horrors of the Holocaust. The tension in *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas* comes from understanding that Bruno witnesses and experiences a far greater tragedy than he realizes.

Bruno struggles with his family's departure from Berlin and must leave behind all the things he feels are necessary for boyhood. When Bruno's family moves to Out-With (a mispronunciation of Auschwitz), they leave behind their large house, their neighborhood and its daily rhythms, and, most importantly to Bruno, his three best friends for life. In more existential terms, Bruno loses his community, his understanding of home, and his companionship. He is isolated, confused, and lonely. At the beginning of the novel, Bruno thinks he wants to return to his home in Berlin, but his real goal is to reestablish those lost aspects of his life.

After the Fury—Bruno's name for Hitler, the *Führer*—comes to their home in Berlin for dinner, Bruno's father is promoted to the position of Commandant at Out-With. The family must move from Berlin to an isolated house just outside the concentration camp with no community besides the soldiers under Father's command. No one in their family is enthusiastic about the move, but Father, Mother, and Gretel all stress to Bruno that Father's job is extremely important, and they are needed there.

At first, Bruno and Gretel have no one to socialize with and no way to spend their time. They are restless, lonely, and temperamental. They soon get a tutor and slowly develop new rhythms in their new house. Bruno gets used to the fact that it is smaller with less to explore, partly because he begins to explore outside the house instead. On his adventures, Bruno meets a boy on the other side of the fence named Shmuel. Bruno notices that Shmuel looks terribly unhealthy and sad, but he does not inquire because he doesn't want to appear rude. Instead, the boys talk about what they have in common, and their lives before Out-With. The two become fast friends, and Bruno walks to meet Shmuel nearly every day, bringing food at Shmuel's request.

When Bruno meets Shmuel, he is delighted to find they have so much in common because Bruno hears echoes of all his same losses in Shmuel's story. Like Bruno, Shmuel was forced to leave his home and was separated from his community and friends. What Bruno does not understand, however, is the vast difference in scale between his life shift and Shmuel's. The audience understands the far greater cost of what has been taken from Shmuel, a Jew in a concentration camp. He too has lost his community, his sense of home, and his companionship, but he has also been stripped of his basic human dignity, which Bruno retains. Shmuel was brought to Out-With as a prisoner, not as the son of a high-ranking military official.

After nearly a year of friendship, Shmuel's father goes missing and Shmuel asks for Bruno's help in looking for him. Bruno agrees to go under the fence into Out-With disguised as a Jew to help Shmuel search. Bruno recently had lice, so his hair is shaved like Shmuel's and Shmuel steals clothes for Bruno to wear. Bruno successfully sneaks in and the two boys look for evidence that might lead to Shmuel's dad. They find nothing, but a group of guards forces them on a march before Bruno can return home. Bruno and Shmuel, along with others in the camp, are marched into a gas chamber and the door closes. The reader with any knowledge of Holocaust history will understand the foreshadowing here: Bruno will never return home, but will instead be treated as a Jew and violently killed.

Ultimately, Bruno is a child in search of his childhood. When he moves to Out-With, he feels he has lost everything. Although Bruno knows nothing of the Holocaust, the novel assumes the reader does. Therefore, Bruno's loss of childhood stands in for—and illuminates—the significantly larger loss of humanity on the other side of the fence. In Bruno's relationship with Shmuel, connection and empathy become the glue that binds them. Bruno differs from the adults around him when he seeks a friend, while Father and the other soldiers treat the Jews as less than human. In the end, this deliberate dehumanization takes Shmuel's and Bruno's lives at the same time.

The novel ends with this: "Of course all this happened a long time ago and nothing like that could ever happen again. Not in this day and age." We are meant to look beyond these simple, final words and see the dark, tongue-in-cheek truth. The tragedies of Bruno's and Shmuel's stories—and that of the Holocaust as a whole—are always possible as long as people lack empathy. The storybook ending would leave Bruno and Shmuel's tragic fate in the past, but this use of a limited narrator reminds us that life is not as tidy. The novel suggests the best way to ensure people live with human dignity is to continually seek community and connection in the people we meet, however we meet them.

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The Boy in the Striped Pajamas tells the story of Bruno, a young German boy growing up during World War II. As a nine-year-old, Bruno lived in his own world of imagination. He enjoyed reading adventure stories and going on expeditions to explore the lesser-known corners of his family's massive house in Berlin. Although his father served as an officer in Germany's Nazi Party, Bruno understood little about his work. Nor did he understand anything about the war. Bruno's main concerns in life were to follow the strict rules set forth by his parents and to steer clear of his older sister, Gretel. Otherwise, he enjoyed seeing the hustle and bustle of Berlin and spending time with his three best friends: Karl, Daniel, and Martin.

Normal life suddenly shattered when Bruno came home from school one day and found the family maid, Maria, packing his belongings. Bruno's mother explained that Father would soon begin a new job and that the family needed to move immediately. Several days later, the family boarded a train and traveled to their new home. Bruno disapproved of the new house. Not only was it smaller than their Berlin home, but it also struck him as cold and lonely. And to make matters worse, there were soldiers everywhere.

On the day of the family's arrival, Bruno looked out the window of his new bedroom and witnessed an odd sight. On the other side of a very tall fence that stretched far into the distance, he saw a large number of boys and men of all ages wearing striped pajamas and matching caps. Bruno went to consult his sister about their new life. Gretel knew that their new home was called "Out-With," but other than that, she remained as much in the dark as Bruno. Bruno decided to speak with Father. After voicing his frustration about the new house and arguing for the family's return to Berlin, Bruno asked who the people on the other side of the fence were. Father explained that they were "not people at all" and that Bruno shouldn't worry about them.

Bruno persisted in his complaints about the new house. One day, he tried to get Maria to express disapproval of the family's move, but she refused. She told Bruno that Father was a good man and that he had helped her and her family in their time of greatest need. For this reason, she would not speak a word against him. Maria had never told Bruno about her life before, and her story made him realize that she was a complete person with her own life history and experience.

Weeks passed, and Bruno struggled to keep himself occupied. One day, he decided to erect a tire swing. While playing on his new swing, Bruno fell and scraped his leg. An older Jewish man named Pavel saw the accident from the kitchen window. Pavel, who used to be a doctor but now helped prepare and serve the family's meals, brought Bruno in and dressed his wound. Bruno felt grateful for Pavel's help, but he also wondered why a doctor would bother working as a servant.

More weeks passed, and Bruno decided to go exploring. In the afternoon, after history and geography lessons with his tutor, Herr Liszt, Bruno set out walking along the fence that he could

see from his window. He walked for an hour before coming upon a boy who introduced himself as Shmuel. Bruno and Shmuel sat on either side of the fence and told each other about their lives. Shmuel explained how his family had been forced to move into a crowded ghetto and then again to get on a train to come to this camp in a remote part of Poland.

Excited to have made a friend, Bruno returned to the same spot along the fence nearly every day over the coming weeks and months. As time passed, Bruno noticed that Shmuel grew thinner and weaker. His skin looked increasingly gray. Bruno started stealing bread and cheese for his hungry friend.

One day, in the midst of preparations for a party to celebrate Father's birthday, Bruno walked into the kitchen and found Shmuel there polishing glasses. Bruno gave Shmuel some chicken to eat, but a young soldier named Lieutenant Kotler came in and caught Shmuel in the act. Bruno hated and feared Lieutenant Kotler, who seemed especially cruel. In a moment of panic, Bruno denied knowing Shmuel, and Lieutenant Kotler threatened to teach Shmuel a lesson later. Shmuel didn't appear at the fence for nearly a week, and when he did, he had bruises everywhere.

A year after the family's arrival at Out-With, Mother grew increasingly listless and frustrated with life there. When both children got lice, Mother convinced Father that it was time for her to take the kids back to Berlin.

Bruno told Shmuel the bad news about his impending departure, and he lamented the fact that they had never gotten to play together properly. Shmuel had bad news of his own: his father had gone missing. The two boys made a plan for their last day together. Shmuel would bring a pair of striped pajamas, and Bruno would crawl through the small opening at the bottom of the fence in disguise to help his friend look for his father. They enacted their plan the following day. After searching in vain for clues that would lead to Shmuel's missing father, Bruno wanted to go home. Just then, a group of soldiers surrounded the area in which Bruno and Shmuel stood and forced everyone to march into a long, dark building. As the doors were locked and terror erupted around the two boys, Bruno took Shmuel's hand and told him he was his best friend.

Bruno was never heard from again.