

BOOK REVIEW

Title and Author

THE BOY IN STRIPED PYJAMAS

By John Boyne

Introduction

The book primarily takes place in an Auschwitz concentration camp during World War II. I chose this book because I found the short blurb, which talks about dealing with a very sensitive and important piece of history in human civilization, on the back of the book to be quite interesting. My initial expectations when picking out this book was that the story would completely revolve around the unlikely friendship that two young boys share. After reading, I realized that the story delved into much more hard-hitting topics like human cruelty and disturbing historical events.

Summary

The story follows Bruno, a nine-year old, who has to move from Berlin to a house near a concentration camp, because of his father's job. He already misses his friends back home and dislikes the new, weird place they moved to. However, Bruno makes a friend in Shmuel, a Jewish prisoner, who was born on the same day as Bruno- April 15th. Despite their obvious differences in life, they become quick friends, which shows the central themes of the story- innocence, purity and naiveness even in the face of utmost cruelty.

Bruno's dad (Ralf) is portrayed as a high-ranking official who is devoted to the entire cause of the Nazi Party, while his mom (Elsa) is a character more keen in protecting Bruno from the endless suffering in the concentration camp. Another theme explored in the writing is the moral ambiguity or 'gray area' that is possessed by the main adult characters- Bruno's father and mother. The story doesn't completely delve into their personal actions, or inaction that could have caused misery and suffering in the life of the concentration camp prisoners.

Analysis and Opinion

In my opinion, Bruno and Shmuel's friendship is explored very well in the story, especially through their conversations, which feel authentic to how actual kids converse. Bruno's natural curiosity and Shmuel's need for a friend complement each other well. On the other hand, what I didn't particularly like is the whole story being told through Bruno's perspective. As refreshing as it is to view the world through his eyes, I would have preferred other perspectives as well- specifically Shmuel's (to gain better understanding of his life in the camp) and Ralf's (to figure out more about his specific role in the Nazi Party).

After Bruno and Shmuel's deaths, my initial reaction was that it was more unfair for Bruno to have died than Shmuel. This kind of reaction is intriguing, and I think the portrayal of Bruno's ignorance and innocence was in such a way to have induced this response. The sudden and untimely nature of Bruno's death right before he was supposed to leave back to Berlin really brings out the tragedy element of the story. One character who stood out to me most in the story was Bruno's older sister, Gretel, because of her character's growth throughout the story. She is initially portrayed as a typical pre-teen, who is bratty and bossy. Gretel is almost obsessed with being 'adult-like' and worshipped the Nazi Ideology whole-heartedly.

For example- in Chapter 16,

'Are we Jews?' Gretel opened her mouth wide, as if she had been slapped in the face. 'No, Bruno,' she said. 'No we most certainly are not. And you shouldn't even say something like that.'

Gretel is very disgruntled by Bruno's innocent question as to whether their family were Jews or not, and tells him that he shouldn't say something like that.

However, as the story progresses, Gretel begins to doubt and question the Nazi authority she had previously blindly followed. I found this character growth to be quite interesting.

Personal Connection

When I began this story, I was aware of how social constructs and prejudices were not something people are born with, but that people learn. However, through this book, I realized how uninformed I was regarding the extent of this issue. Everyday, I see people get judged and written off, because of differences in race, nationality, gender, age, etc. I even partake in this, everyone does. The story helped me to let go of assumptions I

made of people in the past. The ending in particular hit me hard, and left me quite emotional.

The book also reminded me of modern-day injustices like racial and ethnic discrimination, and war refugees being subjected to inhumane things. I realized that humans, as a society must learn to deal with unfair issues and uncomfortable problems that rage on, by actively challenging injustice. This book changed my perspective on how humanity, friendship and kindness can go a long way in everyone's life.

Conclusion

I believe that this book is thought-provoking, and quite a short read as well. Apart from the intense themes of wars and their cruel consequences, the story also shows us a wonderful depiction of a friendship between two young children. I believe this is the most refreshing part of the book. Readers interested in history, self-reflection or hard-hitting and emotional stories, would thoroughly enjoy this book the most. To conclude, I would recommend this book to all kinds of readers, but particularly those that like to ponder about a question, after completing a book.