

Notes on using *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas – a fable* with young people

In our eagerness to engage with a new story it can be easy to overlook the title page of a book but observant readers of the first edition of John Boyne's award winning novel *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* (2006) will be aware that the full title is *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas – a fable*. A fable is a teaching tool, a fictional narrative with an edifying or instructional point often with a cautionary conclusion. Therefore, from the very outset this book proclaims itself to be a work of fiction rather than a historical account.

Works of fiction are created to stimulate the imagination and the cover of *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas – a fable* clearly indicates both the author's and publisher's intention to engage the imagination of the readers by promising to take them on a journey with a nine year old boy.

It's important that we treat the book as a work of fiction, which engages its readers with difficult issues, rather than a historical account. HMDT provide discussion questions for both adults and young people and encourage readers to talk with others on the ethical dilemmas and choices faced by the fictional characters. Feedback from schools, colleges and libraries indicates that the book has become a popular read for both adults and young people. With this in mind we also suggest using it in class room activities but we have deliberately placed these activities within the creative arts and English literature curriculum and not within history programmes.

Fences are a crucial theme running through the book. The author and publisher state their hope that the reader will never have to encounter a fence like the one described in the text. Fences are barriers drawn up to divide people. Fences can be physical, as in this book, or unseen but equally real barriers caused by hatred, discrimination and prejudice. Barriers can be created deliberately through propaganda campaigns such as the use of messages of hate broadcast on the radio which assisted in the Rwandan genocide or accidentally through communication breakdown or even a simple lack of understanding about another person's way of life.

Challenging the creation of barriers between people is an important aspect of Holocaust Memorial Day. Barriers and fences which divide people are important subjects for discussion in lessons which cover issues of morality and Human Rights. In subjects such as RE and Citizenship the choices we make, the artificial and imaginary barriers we either set up or challenge and break down are important issues. Young people can also

respond to the concept of barriers and divisions in creative ways through drama and dance, art and music.

On HMD we hope that young people and their teachers will want to challenge these divisions. They will, of course, encounter historical accounts of the Holocaust within the history classroom but the need to challenge discrimination and hatred can move beyond traditional subject boundaries. Storytelling is a safe way to engage with difficult issues. Since time began human beings have faced their greatest fears and thought about their actions when presented with a fictional story. RE teachers have always known this, using parables and allegorical stories, often ending them with a question such as ‘what would you have done - who took the right action in this story?’

Modern writers producing fiction for young people know this. They set their novels in familiar contemporary, historical or even future worlds where the central characters face challenges and go through a range of emotions. Young readers feel empathy for some characters and struggle to understand others. Such fiction is a good way to encourage serious thinking about the ways human beings act towards each other. These books can be read at two levels - a simple story the reader wants to finish or at a deeper level challenging readers’ understanding of what we consider to be right or wrong and encouraging further investigation and discussion on human nature, temptation, greed, kindness, heroism and sacrifice. They encourage us to examine our emotional responses to difficult situations.

C. S. Lewis set his *Narnia Chronicle* in an imaginary fantasy world, in *Noughts and Crosses* Marjorie Blackman created a world where people are divided, Philip Pullman set *His Dark Materials* in a parallel Oxford, Louis Sachar’s *Holes* unfolds in an imaginary camp within a Texan desert, but at the centre of these stories are characters reacting to others, facing difficulties and making choices. Historical novels, which are works of fiction but set in a well known time or linked with famous events, have a popular appeal. Johnny O’Brien’s *Jack Christie* novels set imaginary characters in familiar historical settings.

Creative teachers have used scenes from such books to encourage students to think about conflict, the consequences of actions and the way individuals treat others. They use stories to tell their students that human beings have the capacity for goodness as well as cruelty. They don’t claim that the stories are true but ask everyone to look for the truth that the fiction contains.

The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas – a *fable* is not an historical account of the Holocaust though it takes its inspiration from events at the time of the Holocaust. It is a fable, about barriers set in a familiar time. It isn’t a history text book. It does however

introduce students to the horrors which can be unleashed through hatred. The author explains that he wrote in the hope that the readers never have to encounter 'such a fence.' Using *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas – a fable* in a creative and imaginative way on HMD could encourage readers to recognise the steps which lead to fence building. We hope if you see one being created you are brave enough to challenge the hatred of the designers and builders.

Creative Tasks based on the fable

Talk about fences and barriers which divide people and consider how and why they are created. You could use examples from the build up to the Holocaust or genocides in Cambodia, Bosnia, Rwanda or present day Darfur or think about divisions created in your own communities. Prepare a speech which contains a reasoned argument to show how sad it is when people are separated by physical or unseen barriers. Finally imagine the ways people can break down barriers. Perhaps one person encourages others to challenge those who set up the barrier or maybe people can work together to bring the barrier down.

Write a short story which has three sections or a poem with three verses or script/improvise a short play which has three scenes. In your creation show how a barrier came into existence, then how it affected life on either side of the divide and finally tell how people worked together to break that barrier down.

Or

Create a piece of music which has three sections. In section one tell the story of the creation of a barrier between different groups. In the second, work in a minor key to illustrate the sadness of people divided from others. In the third, experiment with volume, starting quietly to represent one person challenging the barrier's creators and then gradually add more sounds, playing louder and louder, building a crescendo, to represent more and more people joining together to challenge hatred and discrimination, until finally the barrier crashes down.

Or

Create three paintings, drawings or three dimensional art pieces which could be displayed together. Call one *fractured community*, one *challenging the fence* and one *reunited*.