

The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas Study Guide

The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas by John Boyne

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Plot Summary

The *Boy in the Striped Pajamas* is a young adult novel by writer John Boyne. In this novel, a young boy is frustrated when he learns that his family has been forced to relocate due to his father's new job in the German military. The family's new home is in the middle of nowhere where young Bruno has no one to play with and nothing to do with the exception of exploring the boundaries of the odd fenced-in compound next door to the family's home. In the end, Bruno does make a friend, but this friend is trapped behind the fence, destined to never play with Bruno with the abandon of most kids their age. *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas* is a look at the Holocaust through the eyes of a child who comes to see the unfairness of it in a way only innocence can reveal.

Bruno comes home from school one day to discover that his family is preparing to move. Bruno has always lived in Berlin and therefore he is greatly distressed by this move. Bruno's distress increases when he discovers the family will be moving to a house in the middle of nowhere that is much smaller than their previous house. Bruno begs his father to allow them to return to Berlin, but Bruno's father explains that the job has been given in this new place is a very important job and that it is imperative to his father's career that they all remain where they are.

Bruno can see out his bedroom window an odd-fenced compound next door to the family's home where hundreds of children appear to live. When Bruno shows this view to his sister, they both realize that the people are not all children, but they appear to be because the clothing they are wearing looks like striped pajamas. Bruno wonders who these people are, but no one seems willing to talk about them.

As part of his father's job, there seem to always be soldiers around the house. One morning, Bruno decides to build a tire swing in the front yard. One of the soldiers orders an elderly man, a servant in the house, to help Bruno. Later, when Bruno falls from the newly constructed swing, the servant comes to his aid. This servant, Pavel, cares for Bruno's wounds. When Bruno asks about his knowledge, Pavel reveals that he was a doctor before the war. Bruno is confused as to why Pavel no longer works as a doctor. Maria, the family's maid, tells Bruno that Pavel cannot work as a doctor any longer because he is a Jew.

A short time later, Bruno begins exploring the fence that divides his family's property from the compound next door. When Bruno has walked for what seems like hours, he comes across a young boy about his own age. This boy, Shmuel, lives on the other side of the fence. Shmuel tells Bruno how he once lived above his father's watch store, but the soldiers came and first moved his family into a single room they were forced to share with many others and then brought them to this camp.

Bruno and Shmuel begin meeting nearly every day after Bruno's lessons. Bruno often brings Shmuel food, when he does not eat it himself on the long walk, because Shmuel seems hungry. Then one day Bruno is surprised to find Shmuel in his house, given the job of cleaning the fancy glasses owned by Bruno's mother. Shmuel gets into trouble



after eating some chicken Bruno gave him. Bruno was afraid to tell the truth, allowing the soldier to believe Shmuel stole the chicken.

To make amends to Shmuel for lying about the chicken, Bruno hatches a plan to go into the compound dressed like Shmuel to help while Shmuel looks for his father. On that day Shmuel and Bruno search the entire compound for Shmuel's father, but never find a single clue. Finally Bruno decides he must go home for dinner. However, Bruno and Shmuel find themselves in the middle of a large group of people when the soldiers come and force the people into a small building. Shmuel and Bruno hold hands as people begin to panic in the small room.

Bruno's parents search frantically for Bruno for weeks after he disappears. Finally Bruno's mother returns to Berlin with his sister. A year after his disappearance, Bruno's father visits the place where Bruno left his clothing, finally realizing what happened to his son. When the Allied soldiers come a few months later, Bruno's father no longer cares what they might do to him.



Chapters 1-5

Chapters 1-5 Summary

This is a young adult novel about the Holocaust. The author has chosen to tell the story through the eyes of a naive young child because he feels that no one who was not a victim of the Holocaust can truly understand the atrocities that took place in the concentration camps during this period in history.

Chapter 1. Bruno Makes a Discovery. Nine year old Bruno comes home from school one day to discover the maid packing the things in his room. Bruno rushes to his mother and learns that the entire family is leaving Berlin because Bruno's father, an officer in the German military, has been given a prestigious job by the Fuhrer or Fury as Bruno calls him. Bruno is upset because he loves exploring this house he has lived in all his life and does not want to leave behind his three best friends for life.

Chapter 2. The New House. Bruno is disappointed with the new house because it is smaller than his previous home and because it is in the middle of nowhere. Bruno complains to his mother, but she is too busy to listen. Bruno complains to the maid, but she is too respectful to respond much.

Chapter 3. The Hopeless Case. Bruno goes into his sister Gretel's room and complains about the house. Gretel tries to reassure Bruno that they will only be at Out-With, what they both believe is the name of the house, for the foreseeable future. Gretel thinks this is only about a month. Bruno then asks Gretel about the children next door, showing her the window in his bedroom that looks out on a fenced compound next to the house.

Chapter 4. What They Saw Through the Window. Gretel watches what Bruno had thought were children because of their striped pyjamas and wonders where all the mothers, grandmothers, and daughters are. The only people she can see are men and boys. Gretel does not understand what the compound is any more than Bruno. Neither can understand the purpose of the compound and Gretel just decides not to think about it any longer.

Chapter 5. Out of Bounds at All Times and No Exceptions. Bruno knocks on the door to his father's office even though he knows his father's office is off limits to him. Bruno's father welcomes him inside and asks Bruno how he likes his new home. Bruno is very honest and admits that he thinks this move was a big mistake. Bruno continues, asking his father to please allow the family to return to Berlin. When Bruno's father tells him that this move is because of a special job the Fury has asked his father to do, Bruno assumes it is more a punishment than a reward and asks his father to apologize for whatever he might have done wrong so that the Fury will allow them to go home. Bruno's father becomes angry and sends Bruno to his room.



Chapters 1-5 Analysis

In these first chapters, the reader is introduced to Bruno, the main character of the novel. Bruno is a precocious child who has clearly been spoiled by his parents and their comfortable lifestyle. Bruno enjoys his own routines, his freedom to play as he likes, and the city that has been his home since he was born. Therefore, when all of this is taken away when his father is given a job promotion, Bruno does not take it well. Bruno is taken from everything that has always been familiar, from what he has always taken for granted. By doing this, the author not only has revealed Bruno's character, but he also has taken a young boy out of his normal surroundings and placed him in a place that leaves Bruno vulnerable to new influences and experiences.

The adult reader of this novel who is familiar with history during this time period will recognize several things about the backstory of the novel that a child like Bruno might not understand. For example, the more knowledgeable reader knows that the Fury is really the Fuhrer, Adolf Hitler, who was the leader of Germany during World War II, the time period in which this novel is set. Further, the knowledgeable reader will also recognize the name of the house that Gretel mentions, Out-With, as Auschwitz, a notorious concentration camp in use during the war.

The author has gone a long way to establish the innocence of his main character in these early chapters. At the same time, the reader realizes that Bruno's parents are less than innocent. Bruno's father has accepted the command of a concentration camp where Jews were imprisoned and murdered during World War II and Bruno's mother has moved her family to this concentration camp despite her personal misgivings about the situation and accepts the use of concentration camp inmates as servants in her home. As innocent as Bruno may be, his parents are not despite their attempts to keep the truth of the father's job from the children.



Chapters 6-10

Chapters 6-10 Summary

Chapter 6. The Overpaid Maid. Still unhappy with his new living situation a few days later, Bruno complains to the family maid, Maria. At first Maria resists speaking with Bruno about his unhappiness, but when Bruno makes a disparaging remark against his father, Maria jumps to the father's defense. Maria tells Bruno how her mother once worked for his grandmother when she was a well-known singer. When Maria came to Bruno's father down on her luck and in need of a job, he quickly gave her one. Not only that, but Bruno's father paid for medical care for Maria's mother and for her burial expenses when the older woman died. Maria assures Bruno that his father is a good man despite his present job for the Fury.

Chapter 7. How Mother Took Credit for Something That She Hadn't Done. Several weeks later, a bored Bruno decides to make a tire swing. Bruno's father is at the compound and his mother is in the city shopping, so Bruno has to ask one of the soldiers for a tire. The only soldier around is Lieutenant Kotler, a boy about seventeen whom Bruno found unpleasant, but for whom Gretel has developed a crush. Kotler orders Pavel, an elderly man who comes to the house every day to prepare the vegetables and serve the family dinner, to help Bruno get a tire from a storage shed. After Pavel carries the tire to the tree Bruno had previously chosen for his swing, Bruno puts it up on his own. As he plays on it, Bruno swings up too high and falls off. Pavel, who had been watching from the kitchen window, comes out and takes Bruno into the house where he cleans and bandages Bruno's injuries. As they talk, Pavel tells Bruno he is a doctor. Later, when Bruno's mother comes in and learns what has happened, she tells Pavel to tell everyone that she cleaned and dressed Bruno's injuries.

Chapter 8. Why Grandmother Stormed Out. Bruno misses his grandparents. Bruno recalls how his grandmother always had Gretel and Bruno help her put on a play of some sort for holidays. Last Christmas, however, was overshadowed when Grandmother became angry with Bruno's father. Bruno's father had recently been promoted by the Fury and was wearing his new uniform. Bruno's grandmother, his father's mother, was very unhappy not only with her son's promotion, but with his affiliation with Hitler. This led to an argument that Bruno and Gretel overheard from the stairs in their own house before their grandmother stormed out of the house.

Chapter 9. Bruno Remembers That He Used to Enjoy Exploration. Months pass by. A tutor is brought in to give Bruno and Gretel their lessons. Bruno dislikes that the tutor will not let him concentrate on reading and art rather than history and science. After a lecture from the tutor, Bruno decides to begin exploring again as he did when he lived in Berlin. Bruno, who has long been curious about the fence that divides his house from the compound next door, decides to begin by exploring the fence. Bruno begins his exploration by reading the plaque on a bench in the garden beside the house. The plaque commemorates the opening of Out-With in June of 1940.



Chapter 10. The Dot That Became a Speck That Became a Blob That Became a Figure That Became a Boy. Bruno walks for a long time before spotting a dot in the distance that eventually became a boy about his age. Bruno begins to talk to the boy and discovers that they were born on the same exact day. In fact, Bruno and Shmuel have a great deal in common even though Shmuel was born in and grew up in Poland.

Chapters 6-10 Analysis

In this set of chapters, Bruno learns to adjust to his new situation. While still unhappy with his new living arrangements, and bored without someone to play with, Bruno makes the best of what he has on the advice of the family maid and his sister. Bruno makes a tire swing only to fall and injure himself, but is lucky to find that the waiter who comes to serve his family dinner each night is a doctor. Bruno is confused as to why this man no longer works as a doctor, but the reader knows that Pavel must be a prisoner from Auschwitz who comes to serve the family under orders from Bruno's father. Bruno is slowly becoming aware of what is happening around him, but continues to be so innocent that the full impact of it does not set in.

Bruno begins exploring the world around him. As he explores the fence that divides his home from the compound next door, Bruno begins to wonder about the people on the other side. Bruno has been told by his father that the people he sees through his bedroom window are not people, which confuses Bruno because he can see that they are people. Bruno also wonders what those people have done to be on that side of the fence who makes the determination as to who will be on what side of the fence. This is a profound question that Bruno cannot fully appreciate but the reader can.

Bruno meets Shmuel. Shmuel is a young Jewish boy who lives in the concentration camp at Auschwitz. Bruno can see that Shmuel is thin and sickly looking, but cannot appreciate that this is because Shmuel is slowly starving to death. Bruno also cannot fully understand that Shmuel is being held at Auschwitz against his will or that his mother has more than likely already been killed while his father, grandfather, and himself could face possible execution at any time. Even Shmuel does not fully understand his own predicament due to the innocence of his age and therefore cannot fully inform Bruno of the truth.



Chapters 11-15

Chapters 11-15 Summary

Chapter 11. The Fury. Bruno recalls the night the Fury came to his house for dinner, how nervous his parents were and how he had to wear his best clothes. Bruno recalls meeting the Fury and his pretty companion, how the woman was much kinder than the Fury and made some nice comments to Bruno before dinner. Afterward, Bruno overheard his parents arguing and a few days later the family moved.

Chapter 12. Shmuel Thinks of an Answer to Bruno's Question. After Bruno asks what Shmuel and the others are doing on the other side of the fence, Shmuel tells him how his family was forced out of their home by soldiers and forced to live in a small room with many other people, then taken to this camp where they were separated from his mother. Bruno asks what games Shmuel plays over there, but learns they are not allowed to play. Bruno then promises to come back the next day.

Chapter 13. The Bottle of Wine. Bruno begins to visit Shmuel every day, bringing him food when he can and when the long walk does not force Bruno to eat it himself. One day Bruno asks Maria about Pavel, how he is a doctor but works as a waiter. Maria explains how Pavel is a Jew and not allowed to practice medicine anymore. Bruno tells this to Shmuel. Bruno tells Shmuel he wants to be a soldier like his father, but Shmuel admits he does not like soldiers any longer, especially Lieutenant Kotler.

That night at dinner, Bruno takes a special interest in Pavel. As Kotler and Bruno's father talk about how Kotler's father ran away before the war began, Bruno becomes aware of tension in the room and Pavel's apparent inability to garner the energy necessary to wait on the family. Bruno's father has to call Pavel several times to fill his wine glass. When Pavel turns to fill Kotler's wine glass, the bottle slips from his hand and he spills the wine on Kotler. Kotler becomes violent against Pavel, but no one does anything to stop him. This frightens Bruno.

Chapter 14. Bruno Tells a Perfectly Reasonable Lie. One day it rains and Bruno cannot visit Shmuel. Bruno accidentally mentions Shmuel to Gretel. In fear of being forced to stop seeing Shmuel, Bruno lies to Gretel and tells her that Shmuel is his imaginary friend.

Chapter 15. Something He Shouldn't Have Done. As his father's birthday approaches, Bruno's mother begins to prepare a big party. On the special day, Bruno goes downstairs to read a new book his father has given him and runs into Lieutenant Kotler. Kotler teases Bruno until Bruno's mother comes and sends him on his way. Bruno goes into the kitchen where he discovers Shmuel. Shmuel has been brought to the house to clean his mother's special crystal glasses. Bruno talks to Shmuel and thoughtlessly eats some leftover chicken from lunch. When Bruno sees how hungry Shmuel is, he cuts him several pieces. After Shmuel has eaten the chicken, Kotler comes into the room and



accuses Shmuel of stealing. Shmuel claims Bruno gave him the food, but Bruno is so frightened of Kotler that he denies it. A few days later Bruno sees bruises on Shmuel's face.

Chapters 11-15 Analysis

Bruno gets to know Shmuel much better as they begin to meet every day. Shmuel is a quiet, sad boy who talks about the horrible things the soldiers have done to his family by forcing them out of their home and into the concentration camp. Shmuel, however, clearly does not fully comprehend the atrocities taking place around him than Bruno does. However, Shmuel does know he is starving to death but he is too frightened to ask for food from Bruno or to steal it from Bruno's home.

When Shmuel comes to Bruno's house to clean glasses, Bruno gives him food as he would any of his little friends who have come to visit. However, Kotler catches them. Kotler has already proved his cruelty in front of Bruno on several occasions, most recently when he beat Pavel in front of the family for spilling wine on him. Bruno is clearly frightened of Kotler even though other members of his family, specifically the women in his family, are clearly in adoration of Kotler. This is why Bruno lies when he could have saved Shmuel a beating when he is caught eating some of the family's food. However, the knowledgeable reader wonders if things might have been worse for both Shmuel and Bruno had Kotler learned they are friends.



Chapters 16-20

Chapters 16-20 Summary

Chapter 16. The Haircut. Bruno and his family return to Berlin briefly for the funeral of Bruno's grandmother. Bruno is surprised that he is not more relieved to have gone home. Back at Out-With, Kotler is transferred. This causes some trouble at home as Gretel protests the loss of her crush and becomes a moody teenager. About this time it is discovered that Gretel and Bruno both have lice. To get rid of it, Bruno's head is shaved.

Chapter 17. Mother Gets Her Own Way. Using the lice as a catalyst, Bruno's mother begins arguing that living at Out-With is not safe for the children. Mother wants to move back to Berlin with the children, leaving father alone at Out-With. At first they argue about it, but soon Bruno's father calls the children into his office and announces that they will be moving back to Berlin with mother very soon.

Chapter 18. Thinking Up the Final Adventure. A few days after learning about the move back to Berlin, Shmuel is late to their regular meeting. Bruno learns that Shmuel is upset because his father is missing. Bruno offers to ask his father for Shmuel, but Shmuel refuses. Bruno suggests that he go onto the other side of the fence and help Shmuel look for his father. To keep from getting into trouble, Bruno suggests that Shmuel bring him some of the striped pyjamas everyone wears on that side of the fence. Bruno thinks he will look like everyone else on that side of the fence because of his haircut.

Chapter 19. What Happened the Next Day. It rained all the morning before Bruno was supposed to help Shmuel find his dad, but the rain stopped just in time for Bruno to make his daily walk to his meeting place with Shmuel. Shmuel is waiting for Bruno with a pair of striped pyjamas just like his own. Bruno quickly undresses and dons the pyjamas, disgusted by their smell. Bruno then slides under the fence and follows Shmuel to the camp. Bruno is not as impressed with the compound as he had thought he would be. There were no shops, no food vendors, and no pretty little houses like he always imagined. In fact, the compound seems like a really sad place and Bruno wants to leave right away.

Shmuel reminds Bruno about his promise to help find his father. Together the boys search the camp, looking for some kind of clue as to where Shmuel's father might have gone. After several hours they do not find anything. Bruno realizes it is beginning to get dark. Bruno wants to leave. However, before they can leave the boys are caught up in a group of prisoners being gathered by the soldiers for an unknown reason. Bruno and Shmuel hold hands as they are herded into a long room. Bruno tells Shmuel that he is his best friend as they wait for the soldiers to let them out of the room.



Chapter 20. The Last Chapter. Bruno's family searched for him for weeks, finding nothing except his clothes folded and abandoned outside the fence to the camp. After a month, Bruno's mother left for Berlin in hopes that Bruno somehow made his way there alone, but disappointed to find the family home empty. A year after Bruno's disappearance, his father returns to the spot where the clothes were found. Examining the fence for the first time, Bruno's father finally realizes what must have happened to his child. When the Allied soldiers come a few months later, Bruno's father no longer cares what they might do to him.

Chapters 16-20 Analysis

The book begins with Bruno so unhappy about having to come to Out-With that he is impudent with his father and is nearly punished for his outburst. After more than a year, however, Bruno's attitude has taken a complete three-sixty. Bruno no longer wants to go home now that his mother has finally convinced his father that raising two children in the shadow of a concentration camp is a bad idea. In fact, Bruno argues against it, determined not to lose his friend, Shmuel. When it becomes clear that Bruno cannot win this argument any easier than he won the last, Bruno decides to do something big to help Shmuel.

Bruno gets it into his head that he needs to do something good for Shmuel. Therefore, when Shmuel tells Bruno that his father is missing, Bruno decides to use his exploring skills to help find Shmuel's dad. The reader must admit that it took a surprisingly long time for one of these boys to consider crossing the fence. It seems second nature to boys this age to get into some kind of trouble. However, both boys greatly underestimate just how much trouble they might get into. With Kotler gone, there are few of the soldiers in the camp who might rescue Bruno, which might work well for him on one hand, but when Bruno is swept up with other inmates and placed in a gas chamber it works against him.

The end of this book is a logical ending if the reader considers the nature of the story and the place where these boys live. However, it is a shock to the reader just the same as they watch both boys, two boys who are very much alike except for one glaring difference, die needlessly.



Characters

Bruno

Bruno is a nine-year-old boy when the novel begins. Bruno has lived in the same house in Berlin since he can remember. Therefore, when Bruno learns that his family is moving out of the house, he is deeply saddened. Not only will Bruno have to leave the house he loves so much, but he will be forced to leave behind the three boys he has sworn to be best friends with for life. Bruno is devastated.

When Bruno arrives at his new house, he is disappointed by the house's size and by its location. There is no city where Bruno can explore and no space in the house that does not have a purpose. Bruno is bored and hates his new home, but in time he begins to adjust to the changes in his life. When Bruno meets Shmuel, a strange little boy who lives behind the fence next to Bruno's new house, he begins to find some enjoyment in his new situation. In time, Bruno even comes to prefer his new home over the old one.

Bruno is a very naive young boy who has been taken from his home and placed in an unexpected situation. Bruno has no clue that his father is now the commander of a concentration camp in Nazi occupied Poland. All Bruno knows is that his father is a powerful man in the military and that there is a fence separating Bruno's family from a large group of men and boys for reasons he does not understand and does not care enough to explore with his father. It is the naivety that places Bruno in danger and creates a story about the Holocaust that is deeply haunting.

Gretel

Gretel is Bruno's older sister by three years. Bruno refers to Gretel as the hopeless case because he does not understand her moods and actions most of the time. When the family moves to Out-With, Gretel is still a little girl who enjoys playing with her large collection of dolls. However, as time passes and Gretel develops a crush on Lieutenant Kotler she begins to change her attitude. Gretel becomes something of a moral compass for Bruno as the novel progresses. In fact, with Gretel's new, more mature, attitude, she and Bruno actually begin to become something like friends.

Bruno's Mother

Bruno's mother, who was initially very proud of her husband when he was promoted to a higher rank in the military, is devastated when she learns at a dinner with the Fuhrer that her husband has been reassigned as the commandant of a concentration camp. While Bruno's mother does not appear to have a problem with what takes place in the concentration camp, she does have a problem with being relocated to such a remote location and she is concerned about raising her two children so close to a concentration camp and with inmates of the camp in the house as servants.



Bruno's mother is a complicated character. While she seems to have sympathy for Pavel, she also seems to have developed a strong relationship with Lieutenant Kotler, one of her husband's soldiers who is especially cruel to the concentration camp inmates, including Pavel. In fact, the older reader suspects that Bruno's mother and Lieutenant Kotler might be having an extramarital affair in the weeks leading up to Kotler's reassignment away from Out-With. With Kotler's absence, Bruno's mother finally talks her husband into allowing the family to leave Out-With without him, pushing Bruno to do something kind for his friend, Shmuel, before it is too late.

Bruno's Father

Bruno's father is a high-ranking soldier with the military in Germany during World War II. To show how important Bruno's father is, the author reveals that Adolf Hitler came to dinner at Bruno's family home in Berlin and personally assigned Bruno's father to command the camp at Out-With. Bruno's father takes this assignment with the prestige that he believes it is given despite his wife's objections and his mother's clear distaste for his role in the military.

Bruno's father appears to the reader to be a simple man who is simply ambitious. Although it is never made clear whether Bruno's father believes in what he is doing at Out-With, it is made clear that he is a kind and generous man when Maria tells her story of his generosity. The reader suspects that Bruno's father is a man who does not necessarily agree with the Führer's view of the Jews, but he has every intention of following orders in order to make life better for himself and his family in his chosen career. This ambition will eventually come back to haunt Bruno's father after Bruno disappears.

The Fury

The Fury is the Führer, Adolf Hitler. Bruno refers to Hitler as the Fury throughout the novel because this is how he hears and pronounces Führer. Adolf Hitler was the leader of Germany prior to and during World War II. It was under Hitler's orders that concentration camps such as Out-With, or Auschwitz, were created. Hitler believed that Jews, Gypsies, and various other groups of people were diluting the superior race of Germans and ordered their imprisonment and often their deaths in order to correct this situation.

Shmuel

Shmuel is a young boy who happens to have been born on the same day as young Bruno. Shmuel is an inmate at Out-With, having been brought there with his father, mother, and brother shortly before Bruno moved there. Shmuel is a Jew and for this reason alone finds himself on the wrong side of the fence. Bruno and Shmuel become good friends, often discussing the fence and the reasons for its existence, neither fully understanding what is going on around them. When Shmuel's father goes missing, he



asks Bruno for help. It is in offering this help to Shmuel that Bruno and Shmuel find themselves herded into a gas chamber in the final moments of their lives.

Lieutenant Kotler

Lieutenant Kotler is a very ambitious young soldier who works at Out-With with Bruno's father. Kotler is good looking, the typical blond and blue eyed German that Hitler was trying so hard to create in wartime Germany. Kotler is incredibly cruel to the inmates at Out-With, demonstrating his lack of tolerance in front of Bruno on several occasions, causing Bruno to be afraid of Kotler when Shmuel is confronted for stealing food from the family's kitchen. For this reason Bruno lies, causing Shmuel to take a beating at Kotler's hands.

The reader learns that Kotler's father did not agree with the sentiments of pre-war Germany and left the country in order to avoid military service. Kotler is deeply ashamed of this and perhaps this explains why Kotler is so cruel to the Jews at Out-With. At the same time, Kotler is a good-looking, charming man who appears to have charmed his way into the hearts of both Bruno's mother and sister. For this reason, Kotler is moved from Out-With. While this is a good thing for the inmates that Kotler often abused, such as Shmuel, it proves to be deadly for Bruno because Kotler is the one soldier in his father's command who would have recognized Bruno even when he was dressed as an inmate at the camp.

Pavel

Pavel is an elderly man who comes to Bruno's home each day to prepare the vegetables for the evening meal and then acts as waiter to serve the family. Pavel was a doctor before the war and he uses his skills to care for Bruno when he falls from his newly created tire swing. Bruno later learns from Maria that Pavel is a Jew and it is this that has caused Pavel to be brought to this place and kept from practicing medicine.

One night Pavel has grown tired and listless. The reader understands that this is because Pavel, who serves the family food each night is denied food for himself. Pavel is starving to death and this situation causes him to be physically ill. As a result, Pavel misses requests for more wine from Bruno's parents and spills wine on Kotler, causing Kotler to beat Pavel in front of the family with no interference from Bruno's parents. It is this situation that brings Bruno the closest to finally understand what is happening in the camp his father commands.

Maria

Maria is the family maid. Maria has been with the family since Bruno was three. When Bruno becomes frustrated with the family's move to Out-With, he complains to Maria. It is Maria who tells Bruno the story of his father's kindness when her own mother became ill and died. It is Maria who gives Bruno's father a more rounded character, allowing the



reader to see that it is simple ambition, not cruelty, that causes Bruno's father to do what he does as commander of Auschwitz.

Grandmother

Grandmother is Bruno's grandmother by way of his father. Grandmother was once a singer and she is still someone who enjoys being the center of attention. Grandmother is also an opinionated woman who does not shy away from voicing her opinions. Grandmother is ashamed of her own son's role in the atrocities being committed by Hitler and his armies. Grandmother does not like that her son is advancing in Hitler's army and would prefer if he quit. When Bruno's father is transferred to Out-With, Grandmother never comes to visit.



Objects/Places

Banister

Bruno likes to slide down the banister in his home in Berlin from the top floor to the bottom.

Dolls

Gretel has a large collection of dolls that she plays with every day. After Kotler is reassigned, Gretel throws away all her dolls and turns her attention to other matters such as new hairstyles.

Tire Swing

Bruno builds a tire swing with an old tire and some rope a short time after coming to Out-With in order to entertain himself. However, Bruno falls off the swing and injures himself, forcing Pavel to treat his wounds.

Glasses

Bruno's mother has an expensive set of glasses given to her on her wedding day that she uses for special occasions and to dose herself with sherry. Shmuel comes to the house before a party celebrating the birthday of Bruno's father in order to polish these glasses.

Costumes

Bruno's grandmother would plan short plays for Bruno and Gretel to perform with her on special occasions. Bruno recalls that grandmother always had a great costume for him to wear in these performances. Bruno is reminded of this when he puts on the striped pyjamas from the camp in order to help Shmuel search for his father.

Armband

Shmuel wears an armband that shows the Jewish star on it that his mother made for him at the beginning of the war. Bruno compares this armband with one his father wears that displays the swastika, the symbol of the Nazi party.



Food

Bruno often brings Shmuel food when he visits him because he seems to enjoy it. However, Bruno sometimes eats the food because the long walk to their meeting place makes him hungry.

Father's Office

Bruno refers to his father's office as Out of Bounds At All Times And No Exceptions because this is the rule for the children in regards to the office.

Fence

There is a fence around the concentration camp where Bruno's father is the commander. The fence becomes a symbol in this story of the perceived differences between people due to prejudices. Bruno crosses the fence only to meet his own death.

Striped Pajamas

All the inmates of Out-With wear what Bruno thinks of as striped pyjamas. Bruno dons a pair of these pyjamas himself when he sneaks into the camp to help his friend find evidence of his father's whereabouts.

Out-With

Out-With is how Bruno pronounces the name of the concentration camp where his father is the commander. The reader can assume that Out-With is a simple mispronunciation of the concentration camp Auschwitz.

Berlin

It is in Berlin where Bruno and his family live before the father's job transfer forces them to move to Out-With.



Themes

Symbolism of the Fence

The major theme of this novel is the question of who chooses those who are one side of the fence and those who are the other. The fence that separates Auschwitz from the rest of the countryside becomes a symbol in this theme. Bruno sees this fence the first day of his arrival at Out-With, his term for the area, and begins to wonder about the people on the other side who are all wearing striped pyjamas. Bruno asks his father about these people and is told they are not really people, but is given no other information.

As the book progresses, Bruno learns little things about the people who live on the other side of the fence. Among these things, Bruno learns that the people on the other side of the fence are Jews. Bruno quickly shows the reader that he does not understand what being a Jew means and when he asks someone, he chooses his sister, Gretel, who also does not fully understand the meaning of the word. Therefore Bruno continues to have little understanding of what the people on the other side of the fence have done to be there.

When Bruno meets Shmuel, one of the first questions he asks is why all those people are on the other side of the fence. Bruno wants to know if life is better over there and why he and his family are not on the other side of the fence. Not only this, but Bruno wants to know who chooses who gets to be on one side of the fence and who is on the other. Bruno never really gets an answer to his question. However, his question is a profound one that many scholars and other intellectuals throughout time have also struggled with only to find themselves no closer to an answer than Bruno.

Family

A major theme of this novel is family. Bruno's family plays a significant role in his life and the events of the plot. Bruno would not have had to move to Out-With if his father had not been made commander of the camp by Hitler. However, Bruno finds himself in the middle of a fight between his parents about this move because his mother feels that raising children so close to a concentration camp is not a good thing while his father is determined to keep his family together because of how it will impact his career.

Bruno's family is not a happy one. Bruno, like most boys his age, does not get along with his sister. Both children are filled with their own struggles as they grow up and begin to find their own way in the world. Bruno's parents also do not get along during much of this novel. Bruno's mother wants to return to Berlin in order to keep her children safe from the people who live at Out-With. Bruno's father is intent on furthering his career and this requires a show of unity in his family at Out-With. This tension causes



Bruno to find himself alone a great deal of the time, allowing him to befriend Shmuel, a young inmate at the camp.

Shmuel's family is also deeply important to him. When he came to the camp, his mother was taken away and Shmuel was left with his father, brother, and grandfather. In a short time Shmuel's grandfather also disappeared. Therefore, when Shmuel's father disappears after leaving with a work group, Shmuel is deeply saddened and afraid he will never see him again. It is for this reason that Bruno agrees to sneak into the camp and help him search for evidence of his father's whereabouts, a situation that leads to the climax of the novel. For this reason, and those mentioned above, family is a major theme of the novel.

Innocence

At the end of the novel the author has inserted a note. In this note, the author suggests that it was deeply important that the main character of this novel be someone of great innocence because no one short of those who were victims of the concentration camps could ever fully understand the impact of these atrocious places. For this reason, the author chose a highly naive and innocent child for his main character.

Bruno is only nine years old when the novel begins. For this reason, Bruno cannot properly pronounce important terms in the plot such as Fuhrer and Auschwitz. This allows the reader to see the camp where Bruno's family has come to live as a place of mystery, the same as it appears to young Bruno. However, the knowledgeable reader also knows on a deeper level the truth about this place and to understand what is happening to young Shmuel, to Pavel, and to the other inmates of the camp.

The author has used innocence to describe atrocities that are indescribable, to create a story of two boys who in their similarities and their friendship question the cruelty of humanity in a way that causes the reader to see the world through fresh eyes. Innocence is extremely important in the plot of this novel not only because of the subject matter, but also because if Bruno had better understood what his father's job was and what Out-With truly was, he would not have found himself in the situation that led to the climactic finale of the book.



Style

Point of View

The novel is written in the third-person omniscient point of view. This novel is seen through the eyes of Bruno, a nine-year-old German boy whose father has just become commander of the concentration camp at Auschwitz. The author remains in Bruno's head throughout the majority of the novel, making the point of view limited because the events of the novel are seen only through Bruno's eyes, thoughts, and emotions. However, the point of view expands at the end of the novel, allowing the reader to see the reaction of Bruno's father when he finally realizes what happened to his missing son.

The point of view of this novel works with the plot because the novel's main theme centers on the idea that Bruno does not know how horrible the atrocities taking place under his father's command are. It is important that there be a certain amount of innocence in the main characters to support the events of the plot. For this reason, the majority of the novel is seen only through the eyes of the main character, Bruno. However, there are some elements that must be explained to the reader that cannot be explained in Bruno's voice. For this reason, the author expands into the minds of other characters on rare occasions, most notably in the final chapter of the novel when the father discovers what really happened to his young son.

Setting

The novel is set in Germany and Poland during World War II. The novel begins in Berlin where Bruno has known a very comfortable life due to the fact that his father is a high ranking soldier with Hitler's army. The novel quickly moves to Auschwitz, a village in Poland where the German's have opened a concentration camp to house Jews. Bruno's father has become commander of Auschwitz, which Bruno refers to as Out-With, forcing Bruno and his family to live in the shadow of the concentration camp.

The setting of this novel is crucial to the overall plot of the novel. The main themes of this novel center around the impact of the concentration camp on two very similar little boys. For this purpose, both boys must be the same age, be innocent as to the purpose of the concentration camp, and live in a time and place when the concentration camps were in operation. For this reason, the setting of this novel is very important to the overall plot of the novel and works well with the plot and characters of the novel.

Language and Meaning

Although the novel is set in Germany and Poland and the reader understands that the characters are speaking German to one another, the novel is written in a simple, clear English. There are no foreign terms or phrases in the novel that require translation.



However, there are several examples of words that Bruno pronounces differently from the literal translation. These words, such as Fury for Fuhrer and Out-With for Auschwitz, further enhances the innocence with which Bruno views the world around him, including the concentration camp that houses his closest neighbors.

The language of the novel is important for several reasons. The first important element of the language is that it is simple enough that even the youngest readers of the intended audience can understand the language and therefore the plot of the novel. This novel was intended for young adults, which suggests that children as young as ten or eleven are part of the intended audience. It is important that the language be simple for these young readers. Another important element of the language of this novel is that the novel is written in way that supports the main characters of the novel. The main character of this novel is a young boy who is too innocent to realize that his family has just moved in next door to a German concentration camp. The language of this novel supports this innocence, making the main theme of the novel believable for the reader. Finally, the language of this novel is important because it makes the characters seem believable even though it was not written in German or Polish, the native languages of the main characters. In his way, the author has created believable characters but has managed to keep to his own native language in a way that allows readers of all ages to understand the plot of the novel and also sympathize with the main characters.

Structure

The novel is divided into twenty chapters with each chapter with a specific title that hints to the events that will take place in the chapter. The novel is written in both dialogue and narration, giving the reader a clear picture of the events taking place in the plot as well as how these events impact the young narrator, Bruno.

There is only one plot to this novel with several small subplots. The main plot follows Bruno as he adjusts to his new home and makes a new friend. One of the subplots follows Bruno's relationship with each family member, specifically his sister. Another subplot hints at discord in the marriage of Bruno's parents and clear unhappiness in the mother's situation. The plot comes to a surprising conclusion at the end of the novel after each subplot has been concluded in one manner or another.



Quotes

"One afternoon, when Bruno came home from school, he was surprised to find Maria, the family's maid—who always kept her head bowed and never looked up from the carpet—standing in his bedroom, pulling all his belongings out of the wardrobe and packing them in four large wooden crates, even the things he'd hidden at the back that belonged to him and were nobody else's business." (Chapter 1, p. 1).

"He walked slowly towards it, hoping that from here he might be able to see all the way back to Berlin and his house and the streets around it and the tables where the people sat and drank their frothy drinks and told each other hilarious stories. He walked slowly because he didn't want to be disappointed." (Chapter 2, p. 20).

"But she was still watching from the window and this time she wasn't looking at the flowers or the pavement or the bench with the plaque on it or the tall fence or the wooden telegraph poles or the barbed wire bales or the hard ground beyond them or the huts or the small buildings or the smoke stacks; instead she was looking at the people." (Chapter 4, p. 35).

"There was only one thing for it and that was to speak to Father." (Chapter 5, p. 39).

"In the distance he could see the gate that led to the road that led to the train station that led home, but the idea of going there, the idea of running away and being left on his own without anyone at all, was even more unpleasant to him than the idea of staying." (Chapter 6, p. 66).

"Bruno wasn't entirely sure why, but he knew that he didn't like Lieutenant Kotler." (Chapter 7, p. 71).

"Bruno stared at him in surprise. This didn't make any sense to him. 'But you're a waiter,' he said slowly. 'And you peel the vegetables for dinner. How can you be a doctor too?'" (Chapter 7, pg. 82).

"The one thing Bruno tried not to think about was that he had been told on countless occasions by both Mother and Father that he was not allowed to walk in this direction, that he was not allowed anywhere near the fence or the camp, and most particularly that exploration was banned at Out-With. With No Exceptions." (Chapter 9, p. 103).

"The Fury was far shorter than Father and not, Bruno supposed, quite as strong. He had dark hair, which was cut quite short, and a tiny moustache - so tiny in fact that Bruno wondered why he bothered with it at all or whether he had simply forgotten a piece when he was shaving." (Chapter 11, pg. 121).



"And while Bruno realized that Father was generally a very kind and thoughtful man, it hardly seemed fair or right that no one had stopped Lieutenant Kotler getting so angry at Pavel, and if that was the kind of thing that went on at Out-With then he'd better not disagree with anyone any more about anything; in fact he would do well to keep his mouth shut and cause no chaos at all. Some people might not like it." (Chapter 13, p. 149).

"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." (Chapter 19, p. 213).

"There was nothing particularly special about this place, or different, but then he did a little exploration of his own and discovered that the base of the fence here was not properly attached to the ground as it was everywhere else and that, when lifted, it left a gap large enough for a very small person (such as a little boy) to crawl underneath. He looked into the distance then and followed it through logically, step by step by step, and when he did he found that his legs seemed to stop working right—as if they couldn't hold his body up any longer—and he ended up sitting on the ground in almost exactly the same position as Bruno had every afternoon for a year, although he didn't cross his legs beneath him." (Chapter 20, p. 215-216).

Topics for Discussion

Who is Bruno? Why is he unhappy with the idea of moving away from Berlin? Who does Bruno blame for this move? What one thing makes Bruno most unhappy about the move? Who does Bruno turn to for solace in his grief over the move? What reaction does Bruno get from his parents in regards to his feelings about the move? What reaction does Bruno see in his sister in reaction to the move?

Who is Gretel? What is her favorite pastime when the family first moves to Out-With? Who does Gretel develop a crush on? Is this type of crush acceptable in Gretel's time? How might parents react to such a crush in modern times? Why does Bruno call Gretel the hopeless case? How does Gretel help Bruno deal with the move?

What do Gretel and Bruno see out Bruno's bedroom window on their first day in Out-With? What does Gretel think it is? Why does Bruno think all the people he sees on the other side of the fence are children? What does Gretel notice about the genders of the people on the other side of the fence? Why does Gretel announce there is no one over there she wants to play with? What does Bruno think of this announcement?

What does Maria tell Bruno when he makes a disparaging remark about his father? Who did Bruno's father help that made Maria so grateful to him? Why would he do this? What does Maria's story seem to say about Bruno's father? How does this contrast with what the reader knows about the place in which Bruno's father has brought his family? Why did the author seem to think it was important to tell this story about Bruno's father?

Who is Pavel? Why does Pavel spend time at Bruno's house? What is his job? What was Pavel's job before the war? Why is Pavel no longer allowed to practice his former job? Why does Pavel serve the family dinner? What happens to Pavel when he spills wine on Kotler? Why does Bruno's parents not stop Kotler from punishing Pavel? What message does this send to Bruno and his sister about people like Pavel?

Who is Shmuel? Why does Bruno befriend him? What do they have in common? Why is Shmuel on one side of the fence and Bruno on the other? What answer does Bruno get to this oft asked question? Why does Shmuel look so sickly in comparison to Bruno? Why does Bruno not understand the circumstances under which Shmuel lives? Why does Bruno lie to Kotler and tell him that he is not friends with Shmuel and therefore did not give him any food in the family's house? What happens to Shmuel because of Bruno's lie?

Why does Bruno decide to go under the fence to help Shmuel find his father? What does Bruno think of the place where Shmuel lives? Why does Bruno not like it there? What does Bruno find when he helps Shmuel look for his father? What happens to Bruno and Shmuel? Why does it take Bruno's father a year to realize his son went

under the fence to enter the concentration camp? How does this situation compare to Bruno's lack of understanding of the concentration camp?