



LETS TALK ABOUT THE BOY IN THE STRIPED PAJAMAS

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Over the past ten years, I have had the honor of delivering Echoes and Reflections professional development programs to thousands of educators across the United States. During that time, I have seen the differences from state to state with respect to when and how the Holocaust is covered in school or district curriculum; however, my experiences have also taught me that the similarities greatly outweigh the differences. Educators care deeply about teaching the history of the Holocaust and feel a profound responsibility to provide accurate, authentic, and sensitive instruction—instruction that honors the memory of the victims and provides an opportunity for students to think critically about what the Holocaust can teach us about the moral and ethical choices people make and the impact of those choices.

Another striking similarity is the selection of texts that teachers across the country have told me they use in their classrooms—namely, *The Diary of Anne Frank*, Elie Wiesel’s *Night*, and John Boyne’s *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas*. The first two titles have been part of the canon of Holocaust literature for decades, and while there are certainly cautions for how to use these texts effectively, they are the words of those who experienced the events about which they write and show respect for the survivors and the victims. But, let’s talk about that third title.*

The Boy in the Striped Pajamas calls itself a fable—a story of two young boys who meet in a place that most readers understand to be Auschwitz but that the characters do not know as anything other than where they are at a particular moment in time. In fact, the word “Auschwitz” never appears in the text. Soon after the book was published in 2006, Boyne shared in an interview that he was well aware of the complexity of writing about a topic like the Holocaust and was therefore careful not to portray the storyline as anything other than fiction, changing certain aspects of concentration camp history in order to serve the story. Like any fable, there is no expectation that this story be factually accurate; the purpose is to convey universal “truths” and moral lessons. Boyne hoped that his fable would challenge readers—especially young readers—to think about the “fences” that divide groups of people and be inspired to work to dismantle them whenever and wherever possible.

The question that must be asked, however, is whether students are clear that *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas* is a fable when they begin reading it? This is particularly important when students have an opportunity to self-select texts for independent reading, a practice used in many language arts classrooms. Without adequate framing, students may believe that they are reading a novel based on fact, and walk away with historical inaccuracies in terms of time, place, and events that result in gross misinformation about the Holocaust in general, and Auschwitz specifically.

The Boy in the Striped Pajamas can leave students thinking that being in Auschwitz wasn’t that “bad”—after all, the inmates who walk around in pajamas seem “fine,” and children move around freely and have clandestine meetings at a fence that is not electrified and even allows for crawling underneath. Boyne’s book never reveals or even hints at the constant presence of death that permeated Auschwitz, nor the forced labor, starvation, brutal beatings, and dehumanization. The author’s portrayal of young Bruno’s innocence and naiveté about what was happening in the camp his father directed yards from his home allows the myth that those who were not directly involved can claim innocence.

One can argue that works of fiction set during the Holocaust do not present themselves as attempting to tell the history of the Holocaust; however, a topic as sensitive and tragic as the Holocaust if not presented carefully can disrespect the truth of the experience, lead students to doubt the facts of the Holocaust, or cause confusion. Often when romanticized events compete with factual information, it is the romanticized events that will be remembered.



For me, this has been reinforced when adults that I have spoken to do not realize that Chelmno extermination camp had an almost zero survival rate and cite Jane Yolen's fictional *Briar Rose* as their source of understanding about this camp. In lieu of historical knowledge, the romanticized story of a young female protagonist escaping from Chelmno became what readers knew (or believed they knew) about the camp. It is critical for readers of Holocaust fiction to have accurate historical knowledge so that they are not confused by the historical inaccuracies often found in fictional accounts of the Holocaust. It is for all these reasons that at Echoes and Reflections, we do not recommend using this text in teaching. Instead, we encourage teachers to select authentic memoirs or diaries that can resonate with teenage readers while giving them accurate information about the Holocaust.

That being said, I have discussed *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas* with teachers who use it. They often respond that this is a book that resonates for their students; they are thrilled that students are interested in the story and express empathy toward Bruno and Shmuel. While it is true that we can never truly understand what the victims or survivors experienced or felt, Holocaust fiction can appeal to certain readers whose empathy can be aroused from efforts to imagine themselves in the plot.

In my conversations with teachers, I have asked them how they deconstruct these responses with their students. While all good teachers hope to foster empathy in their students, what exactly can students learn from stepping into the fable-like world of two young boys that leads them to think they understand what happened at Auschwitz? Why does the book engender so much empathy for Bruno? Are students able to consider how they would have felt at the end of the book if only Shmuel had died? Does the story of Bruno and Shmuel add to their understanding of this tragic time in human history? If Elie Wiesel's *Night* honors how Jews fought for survival in Auschwitz and *The Diary of Anne Frank* is a testament to the human spirit, does *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas* honor the victims and survivors of the Holocaust? Such questioning allows students to think more deeply about the text—how and what they are feeling and for whom.

If educators do ultimately make the choice to teach *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas* with students, it should be done with the greatest care and preparation. Using primary sources including visual history testimony should always be the first choice of teaching materials as they help students be clear about what happened historically and what did not and could not have happened. In response to queries from teachers about use of the text, Echoes and Reflections recommends that students study the material in our Unit 5: The "Final Solution." This will allow students to raise issues and questions about the narrative based on accurate historical knowledge. An activity for helping students analyze fiction about the Holocaust is outlined in Making Connections.

** The focus here is on the text, not the film, even though the commentary here can apply to the film as well. Depiction of the Holocaust in film is a topic that warrants its own discussion.*

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