# The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas
## Introduction to the Story & Themes

*These resources assume that the reader has already viewed the film, and therefore contains some mild plot spoilers. Certificate 12A*

**Story synopsis**
Based on John Boyne's novel of the same name, *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* is a 'fable' about a young boy – Bruno - whose world changes when his family moves to a new house, unaware that it stands at the entrance to a concentration camp. Bruno's father is the new Commandant in charge of the camp, but his son understands little of his father's business, knowing only that he has an important job, and is in charge of a number of soldiers.

Stuck inside the house with only his mother, sister and an aged schoolteacher for company, Bruno quickly becomes isolated and lonely. He misses his school friends from Berlin desperately, just as he misses the huge, beautiful house in which he used to live. Fond of exploration, Bruno finds his new home to be frustratingly short of interesting discoveries. However, when he notices that a garden gate has been left open, he begins a journey that will ultimately end in tragedy.

Bruno explores the beautiful local countryside, like any child wandering innocently through such a scene. He has no idea of the ominous nature of that place. Neither does he understand the relevance of, or reason for, the high metal fence that he discovers at the end of his walk.

On the other side of the fence is Shmuel, a young boy of exactly Bruno's age, dressed in blue-grey striped pyjamas. He is pale and dishevelled; his head is shaved. He is a Jew, and although neither boy truly understands what is going on, he is a prisoner of the Nazis, and ultimately of Bruno's father.

Despite the fence and all that it represents, the two boys become great friends, their relationship running in stark contrast to what is going on between the adults in their lives. Their friendship is strong, and even survives a moment of betrayal which, although played out between children, echoes the bigger picture of the camp.

In the end, it is the innocence of youth, and the inherent goodness of the boys' friendship, which leads to the film's tragic and shocking conclusion. As it unfolds, we are offered an insight into the true horrors of this unspeakable genocide, but with a twist of perspective which not only strikes at the heart, but also causes the head to think again.

**THEMES**
The film has a number of moral themes, and some of them are unpacked here. Also included are discussion questions for each point, which may help you to talk about the film and its message with youth or small groups.

**Betrayal**
When Shmuel is brought to Bruno's house to clean his glasses, Bruno sees that his friend is looking greyer and hungrier than ever before. With no understanding of the complexities of their situation, Bruno offers his friend just a small bite of the vast banquet that is laid out before him. Shmuel devours the cake, but not quickly enough – he is caught in the act by the menacing Lieutenant Kotler. As his defence, Shmuel tells Kotler that he was given the cake by his friend, Bruno. Shocked and enraged, Kotler asks Bruno if this is true. Bruno thinks for a moment, then denies he's ever seen Shmuel in his life.

Possible discussion questions:

- Why do you think Bruno betrays his friend here?
- If you were Shmuel, how do you think you might treat Bruno after this?
- What other stories of betrayal have you heard and what were the consequences?

**Fatherhood**
Bruno loves and respects his father, like any good son. But what Bruno doesn't realise is that the man he calls father is actually the Commandant in charge of a Nazi death camp. By the end of the film, those two roles will have intersected in a way that neither of them could ever have imagined possible.

Possible discussion questions:

- Is the Commandant a good father?
- The Bible tells us to 'honour your father and mother' – how can that verse apply to someone like Bruno?
- Do you see the film's ending as delivering a kind of justice to the Commandant? Why or why not?

**Friendship**
Bruno and Shmuel have much in common – they're both lonely; both love football; and they both want a friend. Their desire to become friends with one another overrides cultural and racial boundaries, survives a moment of painful betrayal, and eventually leads to a tragic end.

Possible discussion questions:

- What does the film have to say about friendship?
- Why do Bruno and Shmuel become friends?
- Why does their friendship survive Bruno's betrayal?

**Grace**
One of the most moving moments in the story, Bruno's injured knee is attended to by Pavel, the Jewish man who the family brings in to peel vegetables in their kitchen. As they talk, Bruno discovers that Pavel isn't a vegetable peeler by trade, but a doctor. At home he was a highly respected professional; here he is a slave. Yet, despite the degradation he is subjected to at the hands of Bruno's father, Pavel still runs to help the wounded German

boy, and asks for nothing in return. It says so much about the state of Pavel's heart.

Possible discussion questions:

- Pavel bandages Bruno's knee when he is injured. In the context of the situation, why do you think he does that?
- What kind of person do you think Pavel is? How easy or difficult do you think he would find it to become a humble slave?
- What is your understanding of the word 'grace?' How is it in evidence here?

**The Holocaust**

The story of Bruno and Shmuel is played out against the backdrop of one of the most terrible events in human history: the Jewish holocaust. Although the children don't understand, they are watching genocide unfold first-hand, and Bruno's father is the man giving the orders. In the film, members of Bruno's family and nation describe Shmuel and his people as sub-human, and while this story is a fable, it is based upon a time when the Nazis truly acted upon such a belief.

Possible discussion questions:

- Do you see the Holocaust as being important to Christians? Why or why not?
- Do you think such a thing could happen again?
- How do the events of the Holocaust continue to have relevance today?

**Innocence**

The sight of Bruno leaping through sun-drenched fields is a marked contrast to some of the other images and locations in the film. Although it takes place against a backdrop of war and inhumanity, this is still Bruno's childhood – he is still a symbol of hope, of uncorrupted human beauty. In contrast, his sister is quickly indoctrinated by the Nazi propaganda machine – her innocence in some way removed.

Possible discussion questions:

- Who could be termed 'guilty' or 'innocent' in this film?
- How are Bruno and Gretel different? Why do they respond differently to the teaching of Herr Liszt?
- How do you think Bruno might have acted in this story if he and Shmuel were 13-year-olds?

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