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## The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas: A Blessing or Curse for Holocaust Education?

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# *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas:* A Blessing or Curse for Holocaust Education?

MICHAEL GRAY

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This essay analyses the effectiveness of *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* as a pedagogic tool in Holocaust education. Drawing upon an empirical study conducted on 298 students' preconceptions of the Holocaust, it suggests that the book and the film have had a large influence on existing ideas and have helped to establish problematic misconceptions. By highlighting its historical inaccuracies and skewed moral messages, this essay suggests that *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* is principally a curse for Holocaust education. It concludes by considering practical responses to the story's popularity and how its negative impact can be reduced.

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Since its publication in 2006 and subsequent film adaptation two years later, *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* has become an influential and important representation of the Holocaust. In addition to selling over a million copies in the UK alone, the book has been translated into 46 languages around the world.<sup>1</sup> It tells the story of Bruno, a 9-year-old boy who moves from his home in Berlin to a fictional Auschwitz because of his father's promotion to commandant of the camp. Bruno strikes up an unlikely friendship with Shmuel, an inmate of Auschwitz, and on entering the camp to assist Shmuel in finding his father, is rounded up by the Nazis and put into a gas chamber where both children are murdered. This essay, in addition to providing a theoretical and critical analysis of its pedagogic implications, explores the impact of *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* on children's thinking and the way it influences how they understand the Holocaust.

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## The Impact of Popular Culture

Western Holocaust consciousness has indubitably been connected to its development in popular culture and certain events have been of particular importance. The media coverage of the Eichmann trial in 1961 helped to establish the Holocaust as a phenomenon connected to, but independent from, the Second World War. This impacted on school curricula and, according to Arye Carmon, 'prior to 1961, it was difficult to find the Holocaust on the educational agenda of any community (even those in Israel and the Jewish communities throughout North America)'.<sup>2</sup> As Jeffrey Alexander astutely remarks, 'in the beginning, in April 1945, the Holocaust was not the "Holocaust" ... For an audience to be traumatized by an experience which they themselves do not directly share, symbolic extension and psychological identification are required.'<sup>3</sup> This collective traumatisation principally occurred through popular representation such as literary texts, theatrical productions and museum exhibitions. The nature of the subject matter has not made the Holocaust exempt from representation and as Saul Friedlander observed, 'the extermination of the Jews of Europe is as accessible to both representation and interpretation as any other historical event'.<sup>4</sup>

Yet central to the development of Holocaust consciousness in Western society and culture has been the role of television and filmic representations. This particular form of culture has always been widely and cheaply accessible with broader and greater appeal than many other art forms. According to Daniel Levy and Natan Sznajder, the broadcasting of the miniseries *Holocaust* on NBC television network in 1978 marked 'a major turning point in the media representation and the "Americanization" of the Holocaust'.<sup>5</sup> The release of Steven Spielberg's *Schindler's List* in 1993 was, again in the words of Levy and Sznajder, crucial for 'the dissemination of the Holocaust as a global icon',<sup>6</sup> while Thomas Fallace stated that as a consequence of this film and the opening of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington DC, 'popular and media interest in the Holocaust came to a crescendo'.<sup>7</sup> Both of these watersheds in Holocaust consciousness generated strong responses, with Elie Wiesel stating in reference to the NBC broadcast that 'it

transforms an ontological event into a soap opera', and that 'it [the Holocaust] cannot be explained nor can it be visualized'.<sup>8</sup> Michael Bernstein described *Schindler's List* as 'flawed', 'simplistic', 'inappropriate' and a film that 'manipulates the emotions'. Yet he recognised the extent of its commercial and popular impact when he referred to 'the *Schindler's List* effect'.<sup>9</sup> Such an effect has been well documented by scholars. Fallace discussed it regarding American Holocaust education and consciousness,<sup>10</sup> while Milena Santerini wrote of the Italian public that 'Steven Spielberg's *Schindler's List* became a defining moment in the new generation's awareness of the Holocaust'.<sup>11</sup> The collection of ten essays offering a critical perspective of *Schindler's List* in *Spielberg's Holocaust*, edited by Loshitzky, bring to the fore many of the controversial debates about the film and Holocaust representation more broadly, as well as its impact on society.<sup>12</sup> Clearly Holocaust representation goes far beyond Hollywood productions such as *Schindler's List* or other filmic representations such as *The Pianist* (2002), *Defiance* (2008) or *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* (2008). Yet in relation to popularity and exposure, it seems that few representations of the Holocaust are so widely consumed, especially amongst young people.<sup>13</sup>

Consequently, as characterised by Friedlander's edited collection *The Limits of Representation: Nazism and the Final Solution*, scholarly debate and critical analysis of Holocaust representation is required. As Friedlander himself acknowledges, 'we are dealing with an event which tests our traditional conceptual and representational categories, an "event at the limits"'.<sup>14</sup> Yet minimal debate or scholarly analysis has taken place regarding *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas*. This seems particularly problematic due to the symbiosis between culture and education. Clearly both teachers and students are influenced by various forms of culture, while culture is often a product of or a statement about certain values and beliefs which are part of an educational framework. *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* makes cultural and moral statements (sometimes inadvertently perhaps) and is likely to influence teachers' ideas about the Holocaust as well as those of their students.

In addition, no efforts have been made to assess the impact of the book and the film on society's Holocaust consciousness or,

perhaps most importantly, within the classroom.<sup>15</sup> The national study conducted on teachers in 2009 by the Institute of Education's (IOE's) Holocaust Education Development Programme (HEDP)<sup>16</sup> found that the most commonly cited resource for teaching the Holocaust was *Schindler's List*, with 51 of the 127 practitioners who made reference to it believing it was their most useful resource. The research found that 76 per cent (n765) of teachers 'said they were likely to use feature films about the Holocaust', including Polanski's *The Pianist* and *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas*.<sup>17</sup> It is noteworthy that this particular study was conducted very soon after the release of *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* and that were it to be repeated today, it seems likely that more teachers would be using the book and the film in their lessons.

Although *Schindler's List* and *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* differ in the scholarly attention that they have received, both were heavily promoted as beneficial teaching resources and distributed to schools.<sup>18</sup> Spielberg screened his film for free to nearly two million students of high-school age in over 40 states, while an edited version was sent without charge to every secondary school in the UK by the Holocaust Educational Trust.<sup>19</sup> Within the United Kingdom, Miramax (the film's distributor) and Film Education worked together to run screenings of *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* and supply online educational resources based around the production, in addition to sending mailers to 12,000 schools about national screenings and background information on the film.<sup>20</sup> The London Jewish Cultural Centre (LJCC) and Miramax also commissioned a nationwide study of 1,200 UK students, aged 11–16, examining their knowledge of the Holocaust, presumably with the hope of exposing ignorance and justifying the need for the film. The findings, which were based on the report's press release, were sensationally reported by the British media. Headlines focused on students thinking that Auschwitz was beer and mistaking images of Winston Churchill or Albert Einstein for Adolf Hitler. The designers of the research would have benefited from engaging with Katherine Bischooping's excellent paper, 'Method and Meaning in Holocaust-Knowledge Surveys', in which she was particularly critical of both closed and multiple choice questions as a means of assessing knowledge.<sup>21</sup> To make matters worse, the press report and

consequently also the British media, generalised the data, suggesting for example, that nationally, ‘the equivalent of over 270,000 secondary school pupils could not identify a swastika as the Nazi emblem’.<sup>22</sup> This was despite no discussion of the demographic composition of the sample. In essence, the study appeared to be a fundamentally flawed piece of research, which was at least partially driven by commercial interests.

### **Pupil Preconceptions**

Despite its flaws, the 2009 survey commissioned by the LJCC and Miramax recognised the importance of considering students’ knowledge of the Holocaust. After all, only by appreciating what they know and understand about a subject can teachers build upon existing intellectual foundations and challenge misconceptions and error. This was stressed by Chris Husbands, when he stated:

Cognitive psychologists have pointed out that an enormous proportion of children’s learning has already occurred before they enter formal schooling: their use of language, their understandings of themselves and their world is already highly advanced by the time they reach the age of five. Pupils do not come into school as ‘empty vessels’. They bring into school, and into the history classroom, their own ideas about their own world, their knowledge, understandings and, as important, misunderstandings about the societies they are learning about, and a set of more general assumptions about the way people behave.<sup>23</sup>

Exploring students’ preconceptions about the Holocaust seems particularly salient as the Nazis’ attempted destruction of European Jewry is so dominant as a discourse within popular culture. It thus seems that learners are more likely to arrive with established ideas about the Holocaust than they are about many other historical events.

The importance of students’ preconceptions means that one very important way of assessing the educational value of *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* is to look at its impact on learners’ thinking. Between September 2012 and February 2013, 298 respondents

aged 13 and 14 participated in mixed-method research. The study, which took place in four schools in Oxfordshire and London, was conducted on students who had not previously studied the Holocaust in history at secondary school level. The students came from a wide range of backgrounds and were broadly representative of national demographics in terms of religious affiliation and ethnic identity.

Participants were asked to write anything they knew about 'the treatment of Jews during the Second World War'. They then filled in a three page questionnaire, which explored both the sources and nature of their existing knowledge. Thirty-six students selected using random sampling techniques were then interviewed in groups of three, with 15 students taking part in a second round of interviews. Through triangulating the data from the exercise, questionnaire and interviews, greater validity of the findings was achieved. Codes were developed from the qualitative data, using the principles of emergent theory but influenced by the results of pilot studies and existing literature.<sup>24</sup>

Out of 298 respondents, 38 of them (12.8 per cent) explicitly referred to *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* when asked to write what they knew about the treatment of Jews during the Second World War. This exercise was always conducted before the questionnaire and thus it is impossible that the students were influenced by the list of books and films which were given to them in their other written task. If more than one in eight of the respondents made reference to *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas*, simply when asked to write about what they knew regarding the treatment of the Jews during the Second World War, it would appear to be a major influence on their ideas and understandings.

In total, 75.8 per cent (n226) of the 298 respondents had either read the book or watched the film of *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas*. This was a considerably higher percentage than those who had engaged with *Anne Frank: The Diary of a Young Girl* (48.9 per cent, n146) or *Schindler's List* (9.7 per cent, n29).<sup>25</sup> Although girls made up 52 per cent (n155) of the sample, they constituted 63.7 per cent (n93) of those who had read *Anne Frank: The Diary of a Young Girl* or seen the dramatisation for television. Boys made up 48 per cent (n143) of the sample and yet 79.4 per cent (n23) of

those had watched *Schindler's List*.<sup>26</sup> By contrast, the number of boys who had either read the book or watched the film of *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* (51.3 per cent, n116) was almost identical to the number of girls (48.7 per cent, n110). These findings suggest that *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas*, perhaps more so than either *Anne Frank: The Diary of a Young Girl* or *Schindler's List*, has a broad appeal to contemporary 13 and 14 year olds, which is irrespective of their sex.

Simply because *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* had been seen by the majority of the sample, it did not mean *ipso facto* that either the book or the film were the most significant influences on adolescents' ideas about the Holocaust. In order to ascertain the relationship between the story and its impact, careful analysis of the respondents' answers was conducted. It was necessary to explore whether or not there were correlations between the responses that they gave and the narrative and ideas found within *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas*.

While on some of the occasions students simply wrote that they had either read the book or watched the film, others passed their judgement on its value, historical accuracy or its ability to entertain or inform:

*The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* is a great film because it shows the brutality of the German people towards them.

*The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* gave a great insight into Jewish gas camps.

You can find out by watching *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas*.

The movie *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* gave me an insight to what actually may happen in a concentration camp.

I also read *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas*. I learnt a lot about concentration camps from this.

As the comments suggest, there was minimal recognition of the limitations of the story. One exception recognised the story's fictional nature but still suggested that it was a useful source of information on the Holocaust:

Although this book is fictional it contains a lot of real life events they carried out on Jews.

During the follow-up interviews, respondents were asked whether or not they had learnt anything about the Holocaust as a consequence of *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas*. The following excerpt typifies the sort of responses that were given:

Definitely, like it was possibly the best source until like other sources you read about, but before that it was possibly a great image to put in your mind about what the Holocaust was like. [Sic]

The second round of interviews also provided an opportunity to ask the respondents whether or not they believed that the story of *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* was true. The majority of interviewees believed that it was based on a true story:

Pupil 1: Obviously it's based on a true story.

Interviewer: In what sense do you mean, 'it's based on a true story'?

Pupil 1: It does say it's based on a true story. There was a General's son who bonded with one of the Jewish boys and went in. I'm not sure if that's actually true but I think it says at the beginning of the film it's based on a true story.

One boy, in contrast to the comments given above, remarked: 'I think some of it may be put on. Some of it may be acted to make it more emotional.'

The divergence of opinion regarding the 'truthfulness' of the film was also manifested in an earlier interview. When one of the respondents mentioned *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas*, another boy recalled how he had been shown the film when at primary school and had found it awfully upsetting. He remarked upon this experience that, 'I literally ran out. I actually thought it was true.' Immediately, the third interviewee exclaimed with seeming incredulity, 'It is true!' Such an exchange, as well as the comments above, seem to indicate that adolescents are often intellectually ill-

equipped to ascertain the historical accuracy of a film which is set in the past and may consequently mistake fiction for fact and imagination for reality.

Further evidence of mistaking fiction for fact was demonstrated when respondents made reference to *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* when answering questions about the Holocaust. When discussing perpetrators and collaborators during an interview, one girl justified her belief that very few people knew what was going on by making reference to the film *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas*. Although she acknowledged the fictional nature of the story, she made erroneous inferences from it, which suggested that she accepted the accuracy of at least many aspects of the narrative:

I know *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* is made up, but you know that when his mother finds out that she didn't know they were being burnt and gassed, I mean and then burnt the bodies burnt until the smoke, and then that guy was like, 'they smell bad when they're dead'. And so she didn't know and she was living next to one and her husband was high up in the Nazi reign.

Another respondent's comment demonstrated a serious misconception about the Holocaust, which also appeared to emerge as a consequence of *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas*. When asked, 'why did the Nazis' killing of the Jews end?' he wrote: 'I think it ended when one of the Nazi children died in the poisonous gas in the Jew camp.' It seems likely that this response was caused because of the pupil's encounter with *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* and concurs with the proposition that many adolescents struggle to understand that simply because fiction is set in the past; it is not necessarily representative or accurate.

The influence of *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* appeared to stretch significantly beyond explicit references. Its effect was particularly evident in the answers that students gave when answering questions about the Nazi camp system. In the questionnaire, respondents were given the statement: 'during World War Two, many Jews were sent into camps like Auschwitz and Dachau'. They were then asked the following two questions:

‘What do you know about any of these camps?’, and ‘Describe what you think would happen to Jews upon arrival at a camp’. Overall, students’ knowledge of the camp system appeared more accurate than their understanding of other aspects of the Holocaust such as the ghettos or the Einsatzgruppen and 57 per cent of the sample provided two or more facts about the camps. While it is difficult to know whether *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* has had a positive effect on their knowledge, there was a correlation between the most commonly cited facts and their appearance in the story. For example, when describing what would happen to Jews upon their arrival at a camp, the single largest comment, with 40.9 per cent (n122) of the sample, referred to them being stripped, put in uniform or given new clothes. In addition, 28.5 per cent (n85) stated that they would be made to work, 19.8 per cent (n59) remarked that their heads would be shaved, and 18.5 per cent (n55) declared that they would be killed or gassed. Particularly revealing was the terminology that the students used. In the answers given, 3.6 per cent (n10) of respondents referred to the inmates’ uniforms as ‘pyjamas’, 2.7 per cent (n8) described it as ‘stripy clothing’ and 6.3 per cent (n19) as ‘striped pyjamas’. Such descriptions were more common during the interviews when students were shown two photographs of inmates at the liberation of the camps. One respondent said for example, ‘there’s only one guy in pyjamas and the rest are in casuals’, while in response to the question, ‘What do you think is happening in these two photos?’, a student replied: ‘they are all wearing striped pyjamas’. This terminological shift in popular discourse appears to be a consequence of *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* as such descriptions of inmates’ uniforms do not seem to exist before the publication of John Boyne’s novel. Whether or not this shift in vocabulary will be a permanent one is difficult to know.

Another apparent impact on students’ thinking regarding the camp system was seen by the fact that 14 of them remarked that the Nazis presented the camps as ‘holiday camps’. It seems probable that this has originated from a scene in the film when Bruno surreptitiously looks into his Father’s study and sees him showing a propaganda film to other members of the SS, which advertises the

camp as a place of fun and enjoyment. Consequently, students wrote comments such as:

These camps were advertised on TV as very happy and comfortable but in reality they were rough and the Jews were sent there to get tired and die.

I know that the camps were perceived to be good on the videos; that is why so many Jews volunteered to go there, but in fact they were horrible, dingy and often cramped.

They were advertised as quite nice places yet when they arrived they were quite the opposite.

Such misconceptions have important pedagogic implications. By holding to the view that Jews ‘volunteered to go there’, students will not understand the coercive and violent nature of deportations and the selections that occurred within the ghettos. While some Jews during the early deportation did believe that the camps would be better than the ghettos and while the Nazis undoubtedly covered the nature and function of the camps (with varying degrees of success), it is problematic and confusing for adolescents if they hold to the belief that the Nazis persuaded the Jews to go to the camps. The scene from the film which has caused these misconceptions is based upon the fact that in 1944 the Nazis ordered the production of a propaganda film on life in Theresienstadt called *The Führer gives the Jews a City*.<sup>27</sup> Nevertheless, contrary to the suggestion of the film and the interpretations of the students, this piece of propaganda was not intended to persuade Jews to go to the camps, the vast majority of whom had been murdered by this stage in the war. Instead, it was created after successfully deceiving the visitors of the International Red Cross to Theresienstadt earlier that year.

Of course, it is Auschwitz and not Theresienstadt which is the focal point of the story, despite the fact that in the book it is only referred to as ‘Out-With’. One respondent, who recognised the intended reference, mentioned *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* when answering a question on the camps and used it to support his belief about its location: ‘*The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* was based on Auschwitz – they were in the middle of nowhere.’ The isolation

of the camp is certainly emphasised in the book and another pupil commented: 'Auschwitz was far away from people. It was in the middle of nowhere.' This stands in stark contrast to what Martin Gilbert writes when he says: 'Auschwitz was not a remote village in eastern Poland, but a large town at a main railway junction, in a region annexed to the German Reich'.<sup>28</sup> The development of Auschwitz as a complex was thus not determined by its location 'in the middle of nowhere'. It originated because IG Farben chose to base their new factory there; a decision which appears to have been made on the basis of abundant raw materials such as lime and coal, as well as the opportunity to gain tax exemption on investments in the east under the Eastern Fiscal Assistance Law of December 1940.<sup>29</sup> Himmler visited Auschwitz for the first time ten days after hearing the news of IG Farben's plans.<sup>30</sup>

*The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* also influenced respondents' understanding of inmates' acquiescence with the Nazis. During the interviews, a scenario was given to the students about Sonderkommandos and why some Jews took on this role, leading to the following discussion:

Pupil 1: I think a lot of people did obey the orders for their protection and I think they did it for extra food and things like that.

Pupil 3: In *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* there was, when they were going into the gas chambers, there was a man who was saying ...

Pupil 1: I think he was a Jew as well.

Pupil 3: Yeah, he was saying, it's just a shower and you're just having a shower.

The students in this interview appeared to understand that some Jews may have only assisted the Nazis in order to protect themselves. It seems probable that the filmmakers of *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas*, during the gas chamber scene, were depicting the inmates shepherding the Jews to their deaths as Sonderkommando. Moreover, it is a uniformed inmate who actually closes the door on the gas chamber itself. However, these 'special units' were only

responsible for the disposing of corpses not for implementing the murder, which was the role of the SS. Here is another example of *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* having established (or potentially reinforced) a misconception in the minds of the respondents.

Overall, it seems evident that the story of *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* had a significant impact on students' preconceptions. Over 75 per cent of the sample had either read the book or watched the film before they had commenced their formal study of the Holocaust in history lessons. While respondents frequently remarked that they were fascinated and interested in the subject of the Holocaust – perhaps in no small part due to John Boyne's story – they had nevertheless clearly acquired detrimental misconceptions.

### **Historical Accuracy: Does it Really Matter?**

We must return to our original question: is *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* a blessing or curse for Holocaust educators? In order to satisfactorily answer this, the discussion must be expanded beyond student preconceptions to develop the consideration of the story's historical accuracy, its purpose as a piece of literature and cinematography and whether or not it may be positively utilised in at least some areas of Holocaust education.

In addition to the inaccurate representations of the Holocaust highlighted above, there are perhaps even more significant problems which ought to be acknowledged. The most important of these is the sheer implausibility of the story in the first place. If Bruno and Shmuel, born on 15 April 1934, are 9 years old, then the story is set around 1943. In the book, Shmuel informs Bruno that he and his family were moved to the Cracow Ghetto until, 'one day the soldiers all came with huge trucks ... and everyone was told to leave the houses ... and the trucks took us to a train'.<sup>31</sup> Most deportations from Cracow went to Belzec, although there were some that did go from Cracow to Auschwitz. Nevertheless, if Shmuel was going to be kept alive to work, then it is much more plausible that he would have been sent to the labour camp at Plaszów rather than Auschwitz, the latter of which, by June 1943, had all four of its 'new crematoria' operational.<sup>32</sup> Yet Shmuel states

that 'there are a lot of us – boys our age, I mean – on this side of the fence'.<sup>33</sup> This is impossible. While exceptional cases existed, Jewish children were gassed on arrival at extermination centres like Auschwitz.

Not only does the survival of Shmuel for such a long time seem problematic, but his relationship with Bruno also appears untenable. Shmuel would not have had the opportunity afforded to him to leisurely come each day to the perimeter of the fence, which in the film is void of any guards and appears not to be electrified. It also seems that a 9-year-old son of a senior Nazi, educated in Berlin and no doubt a member of the *Hitler Jugend*, would surely not have such an accommodating and open-minded attitude towards a Jew. His exposure to constant state antisemitism in his schooling would undoubtedly have shaped his world view and prevented the innocence and naivety which Boyne creates in the character of Bruno.

The innocence and ignorance of Bruno is also evident in his mother Elsa, the commandant's wife. In fact the story supports the idea that the systematic mass murder of Europe's Jews was so well hidden that only the key perpetrators really knew what was going on. In reality, an operation of the size and scale of the Holocaust involved hundreds of thousands of people, such as administrators and bureaucrats, train drivers and station masters, industrial suppliers and business enterprisers. Countless people knew what was going on; they had to have known, and if they didn't know, it was because they actively chose to remain in ignorance. Despite the euphemistic language and the Nazi deception, the fate of Europe's Jews was ignored to a far greater extent than it was unknown. The story of *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* suggests that the opposite was the case.

It is important to ask whether the implausibility of the story and historical inaccuracy really matter. After all, we are dealing with literature and not a textbook; a film and not a documentary. Yet for this very reason its influence is likely to be all the greater and its impact the more telling as it will be accessed by a wider range and larger number of people. Thus the Holocaust ought not to be a chapter of human history which is exploited for financial ends, trivialised for the sake of literary goals or universalised for social

agendas. Rather it should be considered as a historical phenomenon, for its own sake. This is not to say that the historian has a monopoly on the subject. Yehuda Bauer is quite correct when he asserts: 'The historian's art is, after all, limited, and the writer, the poet, the artist, the dramatist, the musician, the psychologist, and, for the religious among us, the theologian have to be asked to add their insights.'<sup>34</sup>

Nevertheless, if one is to choose the Holocaust as their subject matter, they must do so carefully, judiciously, thoughtfully and sensitively, appreciating the complexities and difficulties which surround it. As David Cesarani astutely remarked: 'it is incumbent upon anyone touching the subject in any genre to get the facts right'.<sup>35</sup> Friedlander also asserts that depiction of the Holocaust 'should not be distorted or banalized by grossly inadequate representations. Some claim to "truth" appears particularly imperative. It suggests, in other words, that there are limits to representation which should not be but can easily be transgressed.'<sup>36</sup>

Such a forthright position may not be universally shared by those engaged in Holocaust studies or Holocaust education. While few, if any, would suggest that the facts don't matter at all, the emphasis has often been placed on what 'lessons' can be learnt about the Holocaust. Geoffrey Short, for example, wrote that: 'knowledge of how the Holocaust is relevant to contemporary life (both locally and globally) has to be seen as a necessary condition of successful Holocaust education'.<sup>37</sup> Elsewhere, Short argued that some of the key purposes of Holocaust education, among others, are to promote antiracism, show students that their attitudes are culturally determined and to highlight the perils of turning a blind eye to evil.<sup>38</sup> Conversely, Monique Eckmann has suggested that such aims are guilty of 'putting the lessons of history before the knowledge of the history itself', and that Holocaust education 'is first and foremost a duty of history: the duty to transmit and to teach and learn the history'.<sup>39</sup> Consequently it seems that the educators' aims are central in determining how much value they put on the historical accuracy of Holocaust representation. Yet even those who advocate that Holocaust education is principally about teaching social and moral 'lessons' for today, must appreciate that their goals are assisted by employing a specific pedagogy which

emphasises the importance of historical accuracy and a respect for evidence. By drawing generalised and universalised analogies between the biological antisemitism of the Third Reich and name-calling in the playground is only going to trivialise the past and demonstrate to the children the hollowness and inappropriateness of the rhetoric. Dienne Hondius noted: ‘Some Holocaust education projects, for instance, have a pronounced moral tone, which can provoke irritation and resistance among students, who tend to dislike being preached to. The end result can be the opposite of what one attempts to accomplish.’<sup>40</sup> More effective for all concerned, is surely to demand historical accuracy and factual rigour. By developing adolescents’ knowledge and understanding of the Holocaust, what happened, why it happened and how it happened, they are much more likely to shun antisemitism and reject Holocaust denial.<sup>41</sup> Nevertheless, the studies to date which suggest that the mere possession of certain knowledge about the Holocaust leads to better citizens is far from convincing and it seems that how specific knowledge is received and applied is equally if not more important.<sup>42</sup>

### **What about the Moral Messages?**

Advocating the cardinality of historical accuracy is not implying that moral education ought to be marginalised. Clearly there is an important role for this within a child’s schooling. Nevertheless, if moral education discusses the Holocaust, which no doubt it could, it must ensure that it avoids generalisations or simplifications, which undermine the complexities of the past. This is one of the problems with *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas*. By focusing on a moral message about childhood, innocence, family and friendship, the Holocaust as a historical phenomenon is undermined at best and jettisoned at worst. Yet even if one were to adopt the questionable belief that Holocaust education is exclusively about teaching contemporary moral and social ‘lessons’, then *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* would still not be a blessing for such practitioners. John Boyne’s novel and its subsequent adaptation into a film are ethically flawed and inadvertently give out contentious and skewed moral messages.

It is the way in which the story ends that is particularly contentious. Throughout both the book and film, the readers' and viewers' sympathies and affections are principally attached to Bruno. His character is developed to a far greater extent than Shmuel, who does not even appear in the book until Chapter 10. Ultimately therefore, the sadness which the reader and viewer feel at the end of the story is principally for Bruno. This is especially highlighted in the film, where the grief and distress of Bruno's family is shown so vividly. There is a sense that the audience ought to share in their sorrow, for they too have grown attached to this young, naive and innocent German boy. It seems incomprehensible that a Holocaust film encourages the viewer to sympathise with one of the key perpetrators of the Nazi regime and to feel upset over a German death rather than a Jewish death. It seems inconceivable that a book which is set in the Holocaust turns the murderers into the victims. While it might be argued that this is a story about innocence and childhood, rather than a Holocaust story per se, any author or film maker who chooses to use the Holocaust as their context, especially one who sets the film around a commandant and Auschwitz, is, whether they recognise it or not, producing a Holocaust story.

On the title page of the book *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* is described as a fable, and one may legitimately suggest that any critique of the story must recognise this. While there is some validity to this argument, it does not detract from the fact that *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* is a Holocaust representation and must thus be judged accordingly. A fable by definition intends to convey a moral message and as suggested above, the morality implied within this narrative is highly problematic. While the sympathy is arguably drawn towards the perpetrators rather than the victims, one could suggest other ways in which the moral message is skewed. If one were to imagine a so-called 'happier' ending to the story for example, it would presumably be one where the commandant rescues Bruno before he is gassed and takes him back to his home in Berlin where he lives happily ever after. Yet one can be left in no doubt what would have happened to Shmuel and the other Jews at Auschwitz.

To make matters worse, both the book and the film imply that

the commandant underwent some sort of repentance and no longer wanted to implement the mass murder of the Jews. Such a change of heart seems very unlikely and threatens to undermine the extremity and the intensity of the Nazis' antisemitism. Overall, therefore, it seems that even though the book may describe itself as a fable, this does not justify its use within schools because its moral message is highly questionable. Cesarani certainly suggests this when he wrote:

However much we are supposed to think that Bruno's fate will prove to his Nazi parents that the mass murder of people just because they are Jews is wrong, the alternative moral to the story is that you should keep a closer eye on your kids.<sup>43</sup>

Despite its flaws in this regard, *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* does do an effective job in humanising the perpetrators and showing that despite the scale and barbarism of their crimes, they were, by and large, typical human beings conducting an untypical phenomenon. Primo Levi wrote of Rudolph Hoess, the commandant of Auschwitz during most of the camp's existence,

We can believe him when he [Hoess] claims that he never enjoyed inflicting pain or killing: he was no sadist, he had nothing of the Satanist ... Rudolph Hoess may have been one of the worst criminals of all time, but his makeup was not dissimilar from that of any citizen of any country. His guilt, which was not inscribed in his genes or in his German birth, lay entirely in the fact that he was unable to resist pressure exerted on him by a violent environment even before Hitler's takeover.<sup>44</sup>

Similarly, Hannah Arendt famously remarked of Eichmann:

The trouble with Eichmann was precisely that so many were like him, and that the many were neither perverted nor sadistic, that they were, and still are, terribly and terrifyingly normal. From the viewpoint of our legal institutions and of our moral standards of judgment, this normality was much more terrifying than all the atrocities put together.<sup>45</sup>

It is important for adolescents to get away from the mentality

that all the perpetrators were psychologically deranged. Some of the respondents in the empirical study made comments to this effect; for example, Hitler was ‘a sadistic psychopath’ and that the Nazis were ‘mad’. Christopher Edwards and Siobhan O’Dowd also found in a study on students’ preconceptions of the Holocaust that the class had an ‘apparent sense of ease with the “Hitler was a nutter” school of thought’.<sup>46</sup> It is difficult to explain with confidence why this preconception is particularly common, but to the average child, the planning and implementation of mass murder may seem so irrational that it is seen as madness. *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* appears to challenge the idea that all perpetrators were psychologically deranged, although it does not necessarily challenge the ‘Hitler was a nutter’ school of thought to which Edwards and O’Dowd refer.

Despite its role in normalising the perpetrators, the moral messages of *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* remain problematic and there seems minimal justification for its inclusion within the curriculum.

### **Cross-curricular Learning**

The empirical study discussed above suggested that *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* was commonly used in a number of subjects. Respondents noted that they had studied the book in English, while others remarked that they had been shown the film in religious education lessons, as well as in history classes, and in one case, even at primary school. While further research into the frequency and nature of its use in schools would be a valuable one, it seems likely that *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* is utilised as a resource by practitioners from a range of disciplines. What this means in reality is that adolescents may first come across the Holocaust by reading John Boyne’s novel in an English lesson, without any historical or religious contextual understanding. The HEDP’s 2009 study found that it was not until year 9 (when learners are aged 13 and 14) that history became the principal subject for teaching the Holocaust.<sup>47</sup> It thus seems likely that if children come across problematic fictional accounts such as *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* before they study the Holocaust in history lessons, then they are likely to acquire the

wide range of misconceptions that were demonstrated in the empirical study. This is likely to have a detrimental effect on how they integrate new knowledge into their existing ideas. In order to create cognitive coherence, adolescents may reject, distort or misinterpret what they are taught in the history classroom. M. Suzanne Donovan and John Bransford in *How Students Learn* remarked:

Students come to the classroom with preconceptions about how the world works. If their initial understanding is not engaged, they may fail to grasp the new concepts and information, or they may learn them for purposes of a test but revert to their preconceptions outside the classroom.<sup>48</sup>

Furthermore, ‘while prior learning is a powerful support for further learning, it can also lead to the development of conceptions that can act as barriers to learning’.<sup>49</sup> In order to reduce the barriers to learning through the construction of unhelpful prior conceptions, those involved in Holocaust education within each school need to collaborate and compromise for the benefit of the learner. Rather than each subject working in isolation, pursuing their own pedagogic agendas, departments should adopt a more holistic approach and recognise how they can each benefit each other. For example, if children have developed an understanding of Judaism and Jewish identity in religious education lessons, then this ought to provide a stronger conceptual foundation for studying the Holocaust. After all, as Sue Foster and Carrie Mercier state: ‘it is impossible to tell the story of the Holocaust without talking about “the Jews”’.<sup>50</sup> They go on to state that students,

Need to know what a synagogue is and why it is important to the life of the Jewish community if they are going to understand the significance of *Kristallnacht*. They need to learn about the place and importance of the scriptures and sacred writings of the Jewish tradition if they are to realize the meaning of the burning of Jewish books.<sup>51</sup>

In the same way that religious knowledge assists adolescents’ historical understanding of the Holocaust, so a firm grasp of the past helps them to comprehend and discern Holocaust literature,

drama and art. There is no guarantee that some students will not simply see these representations as ‘sources of information’, but with historical understanding they should at least be better placed to critically assess them. Similarly, students can better grasp concepts of evil, antisemitism and prejudice, commonly discussed in citizenship and religious education classes, once they appreciate the historical detail and context. Consequently, it seems that every department can meaningfully contribute to a learner’s understanding of the Holocaust but that this is unlikely to happen effectively unless there is cooperation. This cross-curricular approach would surely reduce the impact of *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* on children’s preconceptions. After all, the entirety of respondents in the empirical study discussed above, had not yet studied the Holocaust in history lessons.

### Is it all Bad?

Although it may have very limited educational benefit, it might well be argued that this popular and accessible story raises awareness of the Holocaust, although it might equally be argued that it presents a different ‘Holocaust’ to the historical reality. Yet despite its simplicities and inaccuracies, it may encourage children and young people to find out what really happened.<sup>52</sup> In other words, *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* generates interest in the Holocaust and also helps to secure the memory of this paradigmatic genocide. Such an argument makes sense and Holocaust remembrance seems particularly pertinent in a world which contains antisemitism<sup>53</sup> and where resentment and opposition to the Holocaust exists in some Muslim-majority schools.<sup>54</sup>

Yet, how effectively is *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* going to tackle antisemitism and opposition to Holocaust education when the protagonists are overwhelmingly German and when the Jewish characters in the film are only ever presented as weak, vulnerable and helpless? If teachers are looking to address such issues, ignorance and attitudes, it seems that there are many better ways than studying this fictional narrative. Nevertheless, for the typical adolescent, it does seem the case that *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* is likely to generate interest in the Holocaust and produce

enthusiasm for studying the topic. During the empirical study, respondents almost universally expressed their eagerness for studying the topic and frequently remarked that this was one of the most interesting periods of history. While it is difficult to know how influential *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* happened to be in generating these responses, it seems that this potential benefit does not outweigh the misconceptions that the story generates in the minds of young learners.

The argument that *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* is important for preserving Holocaust memory for the next generation is not a straightforward one. The ubiquity of Holocaust references and its universalisation in recent decades has certainly strengthened the memory of the Holocaust. Yet, as Paul Salmons very perceptively argues, it is the *form* of memory which actually matters:

In a media-driven world where hardly a day goes by without some reference to Hitler, Auschwitz or the Nazis it may seem perverse to worry about how secure is the memory of the Holocaust. But as schools across the country mark Holocaust Memorial Day (officially January 27) what is at stake is not whether we choose to remember but what form that memory takes and how far we are prepared to confront this traumatic past and seek to understand it.<sup>55</sup>

In light of this, we may hope that the form of memory that is perpetuated is not historically inaccurate or morally dubious. Yet the apparent popularity and significance of *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* as a representation of the Holocaust suggests that society and popular culture is either not particularly concerned with the type of memory that occurs, or else it is unable to distinguish between different forms and judge appropriately.

### So What do We Do Now?

While this essay has argued that *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* generates misconceptions and, from a pedagogic perspective, is highly problematic, one cannot ignore the fact that both the book and the film have had a huge impact on Holocaust education and are continuing to do so. It is no use burying one's head in the sand

and ignoring the fact that John Boyne's story is perhaps the most influential representation of the Holocaust in recent years. This consequently generates important questions for those involved in Holocaust education. Should, for example, at least parts of the story be used in schools and approached from a critical perspective? How can teachers best be educated about the problems connected with using it? To what extent must practitioners work on deconstructing the misconceptions that have been produced by *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas*? Answering such questions effectively involve lengthy and complex responses, which go beyond the remit of this essay. Nevertheless, it is important to address them here briefly.

As argued above, cross-curricular Holocaust education, which is grounded in students' religious and historical understanding, certainly makes room for Holocaust representation. If adolescents study *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* as a literary text after they have been taught the Holocaust in history lessons, then the negative impact of the story ought to be much reduced (so long as they have actually developed a secure knowledge and understanding). Moreover, if the teacher highlights the historical inaccuracy and questions the content and morality of the book, then the experience is likely to be beneficial. The same can be said if such an approach is adopted towards showing the film. Where difficulties really emerge is when the book or the film is uncritically shown in history lessons as a 'source of knowledge' and subsequently gives the impression that the teacher is authorising the content as factually accurate.

Despite its problems, it seems probable that many practitioners will continue to use *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* when teaching the Holocaust in history, religious education or English classes. With heavy teaching loads and a lack of Holocaust expertise, many practitioners may see *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* as an easy, popular or even reliable way of teaching the subject. In the light of this, one might legitimately argue that they should be encouraged to be critical in their approach to it and selective in which chapters or scenes they use. For example, the discourse between Bruno and Shmuel in Chapter 10 of the book contains a discussion which introduces the reader to important aspects of the Holocaust, such

as the assault on Polish Jewry and the process of ghettoisation. The story also shows how the Nazis employed the Star of David to mark out Jews and, at the start of Chapter 15, Boyne points to the deteriorating state of Shmuel by declaring that he was ‘getting even thinner by the day and his face was growing more and more grey’.<sup>56</sup> It is therefore possible to use extracts and scenes from *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* in a pedagogically sound fashion, although teachers must ensure that they do not give the appearance of authorising the wholesale content as historically accurate.

It could be argued that the production of critical and thoughtful resources on *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* enable students to adopt an analytical and judicious approach. In 2012, Film Distributors’ Association, Film Education and the Holocaust Educational Trust (HET) produced a DVD containing scenes from Holocaust films and an accompanying CD-ROM of resources called *Thinking Film: Thinking History*. The menu of the DVD clearly divides the clips into those based on fiction (including *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas*), those based on a true story (including *Defiance*, *Schindler’s List* and *The Pianist*) and factual accounts (including *Night and Fog* and *Shoah*). The two minute scene selected for the DVD shows the commandant playing members of the SS the propaganda video on life in the camp. The CD-ROM describes in detail what this scene is based upon and the propaganda film that was made on life in Theresienstadt.

Producing such resources challenges the notion that films are to be watched uncritically and enables popular Holocaust representations like *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* to be used thoughtfully. Conversely, one might argue that such resources may encourage teachers to use John Boyne’s story when otherwise they would not do so.

Responding to both the popularity and problematic nature of *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* is particularly difficult because it is impossible to say for how long the story will remain in common usage. Will adolescents be widely reading the book or watching the film in five, ten or fifteen years’ time? Will a new Holocaust representation replace its prominence and, if so, will it be more or less pedagogically problematic than *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas*? While this essay does not have the answer to these questions, it

seems a pertinent fact that in the HEDP's 2009 study of trends and practices in Holocaust education in England, it found that *Schindler's List* remained the most commonly cited resource for teaching about the subject 16 years after its release.<sup>57</sup> If *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* maintains similar longevity of popularity, researchers and educators must increase their efforts to understand and challenge the negative impact that the book and film can have on adolescents' understanding of the Holocaust.

This brings us back to our original question: is *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* a blessing or curse to Holocaust education? As a consequence of the problematic misconceptions that it appears to generate, its historical inaccuracies and skewed moral message, *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* appears to be a curse and not a blessing for Holocaust education. Responding to its popularity and limiting its negative impact on adolescents is an important challenge for the future of Holocaust education.

#### NOTES

1. <http://www.johnboyne.com/striped-pyjamas-hits-1-million-in-uk/>
2. Carmon, 'Teaching the Holocaust', 212.
3. Alexander, 'On the Social Construction of Moral Universals', 6–7.
4. Friedlander, 'Introduction', 2.
5. Levy and Sznajder, 'Memory Unbound', 96.
6. *Ibid.*, 97.
7. Fallace, *The Emergence of Holocaust Education*, 4.
8. E. Wiesel, 'Trivializing the Holocaust', *The New York Times* (16 April 1978), Section 2: 1.
9. Bernstein, 'The *Schindler's List* Effect', 429.
10. Fallace, *The Emergence of Holocaust Education*.
11. Santerini, 'Holocaust Education in Italy', 226.
12. Loshitzky (ed.), *Spielberg's Holocaust*.
13. See for example, Gray, 'Preconceptions of the Holocaust'.
14. Friedlander, 'Introduction', 2–3.
15. Although research is currently being conducted by the Institute of Education's (IOE) Centre for Holocaust Education (CfHE) on the impact and influence of *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* on students' understanding and consciousness of the Holocaust.
16. Now called the Centre for Holocaust Education (CfHE).
17. Pettigrew et al., *Teaching about the Holocaust*, 43.
18. Although it must be taken into account that Western Holocaust consciousness in 1993 was not comparable to its levels in 2008.
19. Fallace, *The Emergence of Holocaust Education*, 115.
20. London Jewish Cultural Centre, Press Release, 'Full Scale of Holocaust Unknown to British Children' (2008).

21. Bischoping, 'Method and Meaning in Holocaust-Knowledge Surveys'.
22. LJCC Press Release.
23. Husbands, *What is History Teaching?* 80.
24. For further details on this study's methodology, see Gray, 'Preconceptions of the Holocaust'.
25. Other popular books or films included *The Pianist* (7.3 per cent, n22), *Life is Beautiful* (7.3 per cent, n22), *Defiance* (6.0 per cent, n18), *Night* by Elie Wiesel (2.6 per cent, n8) and *If this is a Man* by Primo Levi (1.6 per cent, n5).
26. It is difficult to suggest why this was the case and further research would be needed in order to offer explanations for this statistic.
27. *Theresienstadt: ein Dokumentarfilm aus dem Juedischen Siedlungsgebiet* (Theresienstadt: A Documentary Film about the Jewish Settlement) also known as *Der Fuehrer schenkt den Juden eine Stadt* (The Fuehrer Gives the Jews a City). Produced by the Ministry of Propaganda of the Third Reich (1944) and directed by Kurt Gerron.
28. Gilbert, *The Holocaust*, 287.
29. Steinbacher, *Auschwitz*, 47.
30. *Ibid.*, 50.
31. Boyne, *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas*, 129.
32. Steinbacher, *Auschwitz*, 99.
33. Boyne, *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas*, 110.
34. Bauer, *Re-thinking the Holocaust*, 23.
35. Cesarani, 'Striped Pyjamas'.
36. Friedlander, *Probing the Limits*, 3.
37. Short, 'Learning from Genocide?', 378.
38. Short, 'Lessons of the Holocaust', 285–6.
39. Eckmann, 'Exploring the Relevance of Holocaust Education', 10.
40. Hondius, 'Finding Common Good in Education', S64.
41. For a fuller discussion on the relationship between ignorance and antisemitism, see Gray, *Contemporary Debates in Holocaust Education*, 13–16.
42. Cowan and Maitles, 'Does Addressing Prejudice?'
43. Cesarani, 'Striped Pyjamas'.
44. Levi, 'Introduction', 20.
45. Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, Epilogue, 304.
46. Edwards and O'Dowd, 'The Edge of Knowing', 23.
47. Pettigrew et al., *Teaching about the Holocaust*, 36.
48. Donovan and Bransford, 'Introduction', 1.
49. *Ibid.*, 5.
50. Foster and Mercier, 'The Jewish Background and the Religious Dimension', 25.
51. *Ibid.*, 28.
52. Conversely, however, children may leave feeling that they now know about the subject as many of their earlier comments suggested.
53. The Community Security Trust recorded 219 antisemitic incidents across the United Kingdom between January and June 2013. Community Security Trust, *Antisemitic Incidents Report*, 1.
54. Short, 'Reluctant Learners?'; Rutland, 'Creating Effective Holocaust Education'.
55. Salmons, 'Remembering without knowing?'
56. Boyne, *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas*, 161.
57. Pettigrew et al., *Teaching about the Holocaust*, 43.

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