

## ***The Boy in the Stripped Pajamas***

**Written & Directed by Mark Herman**

**Based on the novel of the same name by John Boyne**

**Principal Actors: Asa Butterfield + Vera Farmigia & Jack Scanlon**



*This somber and well-intentioned Holocaust story is beautifully-acted and technically well-made, but totally misguided. Despite his best efforts, I don't think writer/director Mark Herman really gets it. Although he's removed all the geographic and historical markers, film is still a visual medium, and the elusive mystery of John Boyne's novel is destroyed by Herman's attempt to embody it. While I definitely recommend the book (especially for young readers), I cannot recommend the film.*

*NOTE: This film is suitable for children over 12 only if accompanied by their parents. Kids who read the book and want to see the film should be encouraged to do so, otherwise probably not.*

**Tzivi's Stars:** 

### **Metro Chicago Release Dates?**

**Opens 11/7/08 at multiple city venues, expanding to Landmark Renaissance Place Theatre in Highland Park on 11/14/08.**

My head and my heart are at war over *The Boy in the Stripped Pajamas*. Even as I continuously recoiled from all the things I didn't like about this somber and well-intentioned Holocaust story, I still couldn't help but be moved by the ending.

For the record, although I cover all Jewish culture topics in my monthly *JUF News* column "Tzivi's Spotlight," I think of myself primarily as a film critic. Therefore, when I go to see a film based on a novel, I never read the book until after I've seen the film. So I saw *The Boy in the Stripped Pajamas* as most of you will, knowing a great deal about the Holocaust in general, but knowing almost nothing about this particular story.

The main character is "Bruno" (Asa Butterfield), the eight-year old son of a Nazi officer. The film opens in Berlin, where Bruno is happily playing with apple-cheeked pals, all of whom are fed, housed, and clothed in luxury. But this charmed life ends abruptly one day when "Father" (David Thewlis) announces that they are moving—Bruno's father has a new assignment "in the country."

After traveling an indeterminate distance, first by train and then by car, Bruno arrives at a cold, modern, box-like house in the middle of nowhere. While the house has a domestic staff, some of whom are local and some of whom came with the family from Berlin, and Father's job requires a constant military presence, there are no other houses around them and therefore no neighbors. But wait: when he gets up on his tippy-toes and looks through his highest bedroom window, Bruno can see people way in the distance. Who are they, and why are they all dressed the same way?

His parents recoil from these simple questions, board up his window, and forbid him to explore beyond the brick wall surrounding their house. Then "Mother" (Vera Farmiga) begins making frequent shopping trips to an unseen village, while sister "Gretel" (Amber Beattie) flirts with young soldiers milling about in furtherance of Father's unspecified Nazi business. Bruno grows ever more bored and lonely until, surprise, surprise, he breaks free of the house in search of playmates.

Walking in the direction of the people seen from his window, Bruno very quickly arrives at a barbed wire fence, and sitting there, equally alone, is his doppelgänger "Shmuel" (Jack Scanlon). Conveniently they're both the same age, and they both speak German (in this case posh British-inflected English), so even though Bruno has never heard of a name like Shmuel before, they have no trouble communicating.

Time passes. Bruno brings Shmuel food; they chat and play games. Shmuel is always there, on his side of the fence, whenever Bruno comes to visit, and no one at home ever notices anything unusual. Then one of the handsome soldiers starts acting out, concretizing the pervasive sense of menace in the house, and Father decides to send his family away, so Bruno heads off for one last rendezvous with Shmuel.

For anyone with any knowledge of the Holocaust whatsoever, this plot is so absurd and improbable that I can barely make myself describe it. The book succeeds because it's elusive and gentle and never strays from Bruno's first-person account. We would be cruel ourselves if we did not empathize with children forced to live on the edge of "Out-With." ("That's the name of the house," Gretel explained. "Out with the people who lived here before us I expect. It must have to do with the fact that whoever lived here before us didn't do a very good job and someone said out with him and let's get a man in who can do it right.")

The film never invokes the dread name Auschwitz. In fact, Herman deliberately makes everything totally generic—maps, calendars, timeframes, and even the seasons of the year are all obscured. Where is this story set and how much time elapses from the point of unpacking to the point of repacking? Since space and time have no anchors, it's impossible to say. Bruno and Shmuel might as well be two Lost Boys living with Peter Pan in Never Land.

But film is a visual medium, and as soon as Shmuel's concentration camp becomes a place we can all see with our own eyes, history enters the frame with a vengeance and

the whole endeavor collapses. The true facts of the Holocaust are so monstrous that even now, few people truly accept the enormity of what happened and some go so far as to deny documented facts altogether, so making the onscreen story “generic” only serves the interests of those who want to universalize the Holocaust. I don’t believe that the Holocaust was the qualitative equivalent of past genocides, and I don’t believe we should minimize or trivialize the specific details of the Holocaust. Do you?

The creators of *The Boy in the Stripped Pajamas* (both John Boyne, who wrote the original novel, and Mark Herman, who wrote and directed this film adaptation) believe that their story will open conversations. They reason that sensitive parents will take their children to see their film and then these children will want to know more about the Holocaust, and then they will do more research and learn more facts. My heart wants to believe this too, but my head is skeptical. Yes, I cried at the end; I cried for the millions who lived and died in circumstances that put this film to shame.



John Boyne



Mark Herman

## Excerpts from October 23<sup>rd</sup> Chat with *Boy’s* Author & Director

### John Boyne (author of the original novel)

#### ***John’s thoughts on historical accuracy:***

So much of what people think they know [now] is from the movies. People ask how come there aren’t soldiers in towers watching Bruno and Shmuel? You know they’re getting that from some movie, not from anything else.

It might sound like a bit of a cop-out, but that’s why I put the word “fable” on the title page of my novel. I particularly didn’t want children to come to it and think that everything I’m saying in this book is exactly how it was. I would hope that they would just want to then go on and find out what it really was. I’ve made a point in each classroom of saying to them, “Look, this is just a novel. This is a piece of fiction and don’t read this and think this is how everything was; but that if you like it, go on and read this, this, and this.”

#### ***John’s thoughts on including the Nazi propaganda film (not in the book):***

The most common criticism I’ve heard of the novel is that Bruno is too stupid: how could he not know? While I don’t have a problem with people criticizing the novel, it’s

one criticism I've never understood. Bruno's grown up his whole life with his father in uniform. All he's ever known is soldiers and the idea that a 9-year-old boy, as he is in the book, would walk to a fence and assume that there's an extermination camp? What on earth kind of a 9-year-old boy would think of such a thing? It's ridiculous to me. There are other criticisms I can totally buy into and say, "Okay, well, I'll give you that," but I've never really got that one.

### **Mark Herman (writer/director of the film adaptation)**

#### ***Mark's thoughts on historical accuracy:***

I thought it was very important to take any reference to real people and real places out of the story. We're not making a documentary; we're making absolutely fictional story. This camp is just a camp. If people thought it was Auschwitz, they would say: "Well, which commandant is this? Which family is this?"

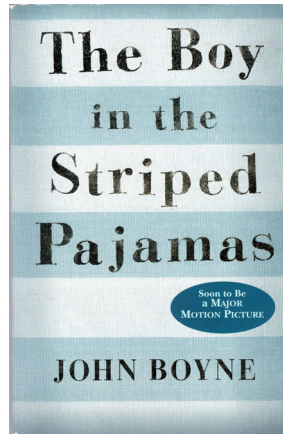
Also the depiction of the camp: purely through the fact that we have to tell the story through Bruno's eyes, that camp, for 90% of the movie has to look, has to be able to be mistaken for a farm in the child's eyes. So, it might not be "accurate," but it's not accurate for the very reason it has to look like a farm to tell the story. It has to be mistaken for a farm. It's like in any horror film, the monster is only revealed at the very end. So, in the last few scenes (when Bruno is actually in the camp), that was the only time we were really trying to depict the camp as a camp. Survivors who were at camps see this film and completely back up that the last few frames were realistic.

#### ***Mark's thoughts on including a Nazi propaganda film (not in the book):***

I felt people seeing this film with the benefit of our historical hindsight will be looking at the mother (for example) and saying: "Oh surely, she would know. Surely these people knew about what was going on." Very easy in 2008 to say that! But I just wanted to underline the fact that people were being fed propaganda at the time. And it's also, simply, Bruno's story because at the moment he's losing faith in his father or doubting his father, that faith is restored by seeing the camp in a good light.

#### ***Mark's thoughts on the ending:***

What I wanted, and what has happened, is that people's emotions are actually very confused at the end. I really like that that they're looking at Bruno's mother howling and thinking: "Do I feel sorry for her or do I think this all serves them right?" I like the way people do question; they're confused.



Jack Scanlon (left) as “Shmuel” & Asa Butterfield (right) as “Bruno”

## **SPOILER ALERT: From Page to Screen**

As stated above, I saw this film before reading its source book. For the record, I definitely do **NOT** believe that source books are **ALWAYS** better than film adaptations, and I can name several films which are actually better than their source books. In this case, however, while I definitely recommend the book (especially for young readers) I cannot recommend the film.

**If you have *not* seen the film yet, then please DO NOT read any further, but if you’ve already seen the film &/or read the book, then please read on.**

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Given the enormity of the issues addressed by *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas* this may seem petty, but the language barrier really bothered me. In the novel, Shmuel tells Bruno that his mother was a teacher, and she taught him German. This little detail helps humanize Shmuel, and I wish Herman had included it. As it is, Herman tells us absolutely nothing about Shmuel. Only Bruno gets a backstory.

Visit after visit, the workers in the camp never seem to make any progress on the hut they’re building, and there are no guards anywhere urging them on. No one ever yells at Shmuel or even notices that he’s playing checkers with a kid on the other side of the fence. In the novel this works because readers want to believe that Bruno and Shmuel have somehow found a “private spot” that no one else knows about. But while we’re watching Bruno and Shmuel play checkers, we can also see workers in the distance. Don’t we have to assume that if we can see the workers, then the workers can see Bruno and Shmuel? Furthermore, there’s never any feeling of anxiety in the camp scenes; the only menace is in the house. Again, this may well be Bruno’s POV, but onscreen it seems like willful blindness on the part of the filmmakers.

In Boyne’s novel, Bruno and Shmuel meet death together, gassed by Father’s soldiers, but his parents never really know what’s happened to him. By ending his novel with

*The Boy in the Striped Pajamas* Review – Special for Chicago’s JUF News.

open questions, Boyne is inviting his readers to join the search; Boyne clearly wants his readers to read more, learn more, keep trying to penetrate the mystery of what made these deaths possible.

But Herman plays by Hollywood rules that rob us of this mystery. In the last minutes of Herman’s film, all the characters with names run this way and that, in staccato chase scenes frenetically cross-cut to shrill, histrionic music. They search desperately for Bruno until the moment they find his clothes on the outside of the fence, at which point everyone knows, immediately and with great certainty, that Bruno has perished somewhere inside the fence. Mother and Father both shriek in pain and bellow with rage; Gretel sobs.

I understand that Herman has tried to do something very brave by actually showing two sweet-faced young boys holding hands as Zyklon B crystals are poured into vents above their heads, but the result is crudely melodramatic and manipulative. Auschwitz was a huge killing factory that routinely “processed” thousands of “units” every day. While Boyne managed to capture this reality, I don’t think Herman really gets it.

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**Tzivi’s Stars**  
**NOVEL**                      **FILM**



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