

# Earlsdon Literary Magazine 160

*The newsletter of the AVID Readers Group, based at Earlsdon Library*

**Next meeting:** Thursday 9<sup>th</sup> January 8pm

**Venue:** Earlsdon Library

**Book for discussion:** *Noughts and Crosses* – Malorie Blackman

## More Questions than Answers

### December's Book

*The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* – John Boyne

This is written from the point of view of a nine year-old German boy, Bruno. His father is suddenly transferred to a new job, far from their home in Berlin, so Bruno and his twelve year old sister, Gretel, have to move to a strange place called Outwith. It is all the doing of someone called the Fury and Bruno is not happy. From the bedroom window of his new home, he can see a fenced-off place, where everyone wears striped pyjamas. At a loose end without his friends and regular schooling, he goes out and walks until he reaches the fence. There he meets a boy of his age, Shmuel, and thereafter goes to meet and talk to him on a regular basis.

The teachers in the group attested that this book is popular amongst the target audience of 12/13 year olds. Even so, many thought that this was an unlikely set-up. Would the son of the Commandant really be free to walk alone to the perimeter fence? Would an inmate be able to sit next to the fence without a guard noticing and doing something about it? Surely even a nine year-old would ask questions about the camp and the lack of food about which Shmuel complains? What had happened to his father?

Bruno comes over as a very immature and unquestioning child. One view was that this was a deliberate attempt to portray how Germans and Jews were conditioned to obey orders without questioning. His father too seems not to have a choice about taking the post.

There were hints at other uncertainties. Was the father really a Nazi? Why had the previous Commandant left so suddenly? What were the views of the grandparents?

Some thought it a bit trite and possibly unlikely that both Gretel and her mother are attracted to the nasty Lieutenant Kotler, aged 19.

The book has been made into a successful film, which some had seen. We had some discussion about the advantages of seeing the film before reading the book and vice versa.

This was a quick and easy read, as you might expect. Several readers guessed what was going to happen as soon as Bruno had his head shaved. Most people thought it was a good book for the target audience, and Dave pronounced it the best book we have read for years. Praise indeed!

**Chris Wilkin**

### Next month we will be reading:

*A book whose title, and even author, is yet to be confirmed!*  
The date for discussion of this book is Thursday 13<sup>th</sup> February.

## Ideas for further reading

Since I missed the last meeting, I can't use my usual trick of basing this section on other books which came up in the discussion. I did consider writing about Teen Fiction but we have more of that to come and I'm about to spend a few days with some avid teenage readers (their parents will be there too!) so I think I'll possibly have more to offer on the subject next time.

One of the things which strikes many people about *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* is the narrative voice. Although Bruno does not tell his own story, it is almost all from his perspective complete with his lack of perception, mishearing and self-absorption. It's a difficult trick to pull off, and not one that is often tried in books aimed at adults so, when it succeeds, the books are often well-received.

As an example consider *Emma Donoghue's Room*, which was a bestseller a couple of years ago: the narrator, Jack, has a different understanding of the world not just because he is five, but because his world is the room in which he was conceived, born and has lived his whole life. Another, which is appearing at or near the top of many of the 'best books of 2013' lists – *The Ocean at the End of the Lane* by *Neil Gaiman* – has also been put on a shelf labelled 'child-narrator' by many [goodreads](#) users, but I can say anything else about it because it's still on my wishlist. Anyone out there able to tell us more?

I ask because the list is quite subjective, including as it does *Muriel Barbery's The Elegance of the Hedgehog*. I really enjoyed this book ( one of my friends described as 'typically French'), but it is only partly from the point of view of Paloma who, although she is twelve, is terribly precocious and so her perception is skewed by philosophy as often as by lack of experience.

Finally one I'd forgotten. *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* by *Jonathan Safran Foer* is about a boy whose father was a victim of 9/11 and whose mother has begun to move on. He decides to find out more about a key from his father's closet and, in his journey, meets a whole lot of other lost souls who help him discover his truth. It's a book that you will find either extremely moving or incredibly irritating, but I've yet to meet anyone who thought it was merely 'OK'.

*What books did you get for Christmas? Which was the first you dived into?*

*Is it possible for the film to be better than the book?*

*Have you just read a fantastic book that you are itching to talk about?*

**Contributions for ELM are always welcome** and can be sent to Catherine Fitzsimons  
[cathfitz5317@yahoo.com](mailto:cathfitz5317@yahoo.com).



## What's On

A new Readers' Group, **Asibaleni**, started last month to explore African literature.

They meet on the **first Friday of the month** at **2pm** in the meeting room at **Central Library**.

For more information call 76832314 or e-mail [central.library@coventry.gov.uk](mailto:central.library@coventry.gov.uk)