

Boy A

by Jonathan Trigell

A Guide for Reading Groups



PRIZES:

Winner: *John Llewellyn Rhys Prize*

Winner: *Waverton Good Read Award*

Winner: *World Books Day – Books To Talk About Prize*

PRAISE FOR BOY A:

‘The book bristles with issues of personal responsibility, social justice and the reformative value of prison life. It would give reading groups much to ponder over’ *New Books Mag*

‘A thought-provoking commentary on human nature... A gripping and disturbing read, *Boy A* is a carefully cultivated work that challenges readers while also being entirely gripping’ *Good Book Guide*

‘A fine and moving debut novel... this compulsively readable novel is more optimistic than it sounds... a rare treat’ *Independent*

‘A frankly amazing achievement from young Mr Trigell’ *FHM*

‘A modern day immorality tale about the attempted rehabilitation of a child implicated in murder... delivered with a horrific sense of foreboding’ *Arena*

‘Trigell brilliantly depicts the pressures of living with a terrible secret... written with a naive clarity which evokes the unfamiliar wonders of the outside world’ *Guardian*

‘Trigell masterfully builds sympathy for Jack’ *Entertainment Weekly*

DISCUSSION POINTS:

[Childhood / Parenthood]

1. Does Jack’s own childhood in any way explain his involvement in the crime?
2. Does Terry’s relationship with Zeb affect how he deals with Jack, and vice versa? Is Terry a good father?
3. Jack’s time in the young offenders’ institute brings him into contact with various adults, who are responsible for his well-being. These include the child psychologist, Elizabeth, who is herself a mother. Does this have a bearing on how she relates to Jack?
4. Research shows that children who commit murder (of whom there have been around 100 in the UK in recent times) and other violent crimes have themselves suffered abusive, neglected and brutalised childhoods. To what degree, if at all, can suffering ever be a mitigating factor in crime?

[Reckoning & responsibility]

1. How much responsibility for Jack's fate lies with the media? How much is of his own making?
2. Society struggles with its attitudes towards childhood, and child killers are sometimes portrayed as even more 'evil' than adults who commit similar crimes. Why do we struggle to understand these acts?
3. Is 'evil' a useful concept? Can a crime like murder ever be put in the past so that both the perpetrator and those who live with him/her forget about it to all intents and purposes?
4. What about Boy B? His story is told predominantly from Jack's perspective. Do we judge him more as a result?
5. It is easy to dislike Terry's son Zeb in the novel, because we feel for Jack and hope his new start can succeed. But aren't Zeb's actions quite understandable and more excusable than murder?

[Society & redemption]

1. It can be argued that fiction has a role to play in allowing us to discuss subjects that are taboo or uncomfortable. How does *Boy A* fit with this argument?
2. Does Jack learn anything by the end of the book? Is his character 'redeemed' in any way? And what about our redemption as readers? Do we get the ending we want / deserve?
3. Is there a 'core' in every person which remains unchanged throughout life?
4. *Boy A* prompts questions of liberal versus conservative values, particularly when it addresses our preconceptions of child offenders. Terry represents the idealistic liberal viewpoint, but this prevents him from seeing that his son Zeb needs stronger discipline and guidance. Is his liberalism as damaging as the mob mentality of the tabloid press?
5. Do you think that Michelle would have been able to forgive Jack for his crime given sufficient time? Would you be able to? Is our society as a whole actually capable of giving people the second chance to which our laws and judicial system say they are entitled?
6. 'The Choice', or suicide, is never far away from Jack. Through his refusal to take it should his strength be applauded, or would he simply have avoided a lot of pain for himself?
7. Should the primary aim of prison be to redeem/reform the offender?

[Key quotes]

What significance do these quotes have?

1. 'Terry is his parole contact, his only true friend, and now his uncle. He might just as well be God.' (p 4)
2. 'And so, before it reached its verdict, the jury knew the facts at least, if not the truth... But then a court isn't necessarily there to find the truth. Its purpose is more about finding a solution.' (p 111)
3. 'Angela was on her own that Monday, walking with the unknowing self-importance that only cats, and those who've seen the effect of their beauty from birth, can achieve.' (p 231)

[The writing process / fiction meets real life]

1. It can be argued that Jack's release from prison is a rebirth, and his experiences of the world are naïve. How does this device colour our perceptions of Jack?
2. To what degree is *Boy A* a classic coming of age novel? Through Jack's extreme difference, are we also examining what it means to be a 'normal' young man in Britain today?

3. Though *Boy A* is a work of fiction, and not based directly on any real-life case, parallels to a number of real child killings are hard to ignore. How does this affect our reading of the novel?
4. The author has indicated that in his original drafts of the murder scene in Chapter Y, the specifics of Boy A's involvement in the murder were more concrete. By leaving more to our interpretation, how does this affect our feelings towards Boy A?
5. We do not gain any insight into the narrative voice or perspective of Angela's family and their loss. If the author had included their point of view for balance, would our feelings about Jack change?
6. The end of the novel is often controversial among reading groups for its apparent ambiguities. But there may be clues throughout the novel - particularly in Jack's final body position and in the *Butch and Sundance* references in the previous chapter – as to what the author intends us to believe about Jack's chances of survival when the freeze-frame continues. What are these clues, or does it perhaps not matter, is it for the reader to believe what they want to?

IF YOU ENJOYED *BOY A*, YOU MIGHT ALSO LIKE:

We Need To Talk About Kevin
Lionel Shriver

Cries Unheard: The Story of Mary Bell
Gitta Sereny

Stuart: A Life Backwards
Alexander Masters

Death of a Murderer
Rupert Thomson

ALSO BY JONATHAN TRIGELL: **CHAM**

'Does for extreme winter sports what Alex Garland's *The Beach* did for backpacking' *Financial Times*

Long-dead Lord Byron started it. The rock star of his age. But a poet with about as much relevance to the blood grudge struggle that marks modern life for most of humanity, as he has to the practice of sliding down snowy slopes on planks of wood. And yet, it was thanks to Byron that Itchy ended up living in Chamonix Mont Blanc, the death-sport capital of the world, among the high mountains and low morals.

In the intervening years he has tried hard with alcohol and adrenaline to numb a past he can't atone for. Now a serial rapist is stalking Cham's tourist-thronged streets, haunting the same shadows as Itchy and triggering an obsession which will lead him far from Europe's zenith, to the depths of the valley and himself.

The promise of Jonathan Trigell's first novel, *Boy A*, is realised in this evocation of the world of extreme sports, where the reckless violence of a callow man's life comes back to haunt him.

'Impressive' *Daily Mirror*

'Jonathan Trigell's writing soars when describing the sublime mountain scenery and the rushing, redemptive exhilaration of skiing... But he's equally at ease conveying the murky moral ambiguity of Itchy's life... Exposing the darkness at the heart of a white world, Trigell's second novel is tense with foreboding: a clever, contemporary cliff hanger' *Metro*

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Jonathan Trigell

Jonathan Trigell was born in Welwyn in 1974. In 2002 he completed an MA in creative writing at Manchester University. He has been a TV extra, an outdoor pursuits instructor and a ski rep. His first novel, *Boy A*, won the prestigious John Llewellyn Rhys Prize for best work in the Commonwealth by an author under 35, and the Waverton Good Read Award, also for best first novel of 2004. In 2008, it was voted the

World Book Day – Book to Talk About. *Boy A* is now a major feature film starring Andrew Garfield and Peter Mullan.



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