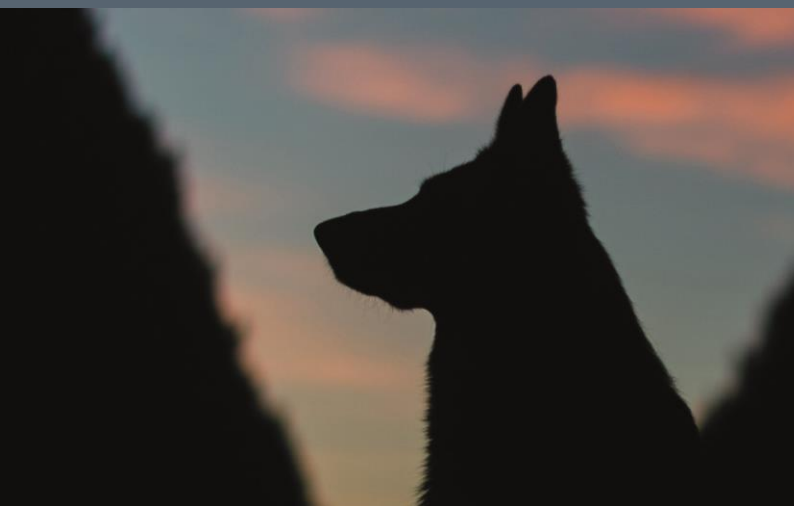




Book club 31: Crime & guilt

The Boy at the Top of the Mountain
by John Boyne

Rules

In this book club you will discuss *The Boy at the Top of the Mountain* by John Boyne in a group of 4-6 readers. The book club opens with a brief introduction that one of you reads out loud. The book club then continues in four rounds:

- 1 Round 1 consists of 5 questions about the plot. One of the group members acts as the quiz master who reads each question out loud, after which everyone (including the quiz master) writes down their answer. The correct answers will appear on the screen after you have turned over the final question card. You may then check your answers and calculate your scores.
- 2 Round 2 consists of asking and answering questions each of you have about the book/story. Each group member consults the group about elements of the text that they thought was unclear. Together, you try to find answers to the questions that are raised. After everything has been cleared up, your group is ready to proceed to the next round.
- 3 Round 3 consists of discussion questions. The person with the most correct answers to the quiz questions from round 1 gets to be the first to turn over a card and respond to the question. The other members of the group may then add to the discussion by responding and sharing their ideas. Take turns until all cards are flipped.
- 4 Round 4 is where you get to review the text. How many stars would you give the text and why? Discuss this together until you have reached a shared verdict. Use the text box to explain your choice.

This book club was developed by the editors of LitLab, a digital laboratory for high school literature research. For more teaching materials, visit www.litlab.nl. A teacher's guide and a didactic justification of this teaching method are available at www.litlab.nl/docenten.



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The Boy at the Top of the Mountain

Introduction

'A story of a boy who had started out with love and decency in his heart but had found himself corrupted by power. The story of a boy who had committed crimes with which he would have to live forever; a boy who had hurt people who loved him and been a party to the deaths of those who only ever showed him kindness; who had sacrificed his right to his own name and would have to spend a lifetime trying to earn it back again.' (p. 214)

John Boyne's *The Boy at the Top of the Mountain* tells the story of Pierrot/Pieter, who is growing up in Paris in 1935. When he becomes an orphan, he has to move to Germany to live with his aunt Beatrix. She works as a housekeeper at the Berghof, Adolf Hitler's mountain home. Through his aunt, Pieter becomes part of Hitler's household and gradually falls under his influence. As Hitler's ideas begin to change the way Pieter sees and treats the people around him, he becomes caught up in the cruelty of the Nazi regime. In the end, Pieter must find the answer to a difficult question: can he escape from Hitler's world, or is he changed forever?

Round 1: Understanding the plot

Take turns turning over a card and answering the question. After the person whose turn it is has answered, the rest may add to that answer or share their own views.

Round 2: Initial questions

Take turns selecting one of the excerpts (*fragmenten/stukjes*) from the book listed below. Think of a question you would like to ask one of the characters, and work together to find an answer to that question.

1. Pieter is being bullied by Hugo. Josette stands up for Pieter by saying hurtful things to Hugo: 'Hugo turned ... after him.' (p. 38-39)
2. Beatrix makes Pieter change his name: 'Can you ... will be Pieter'. (p.81)
3. Pieter talks about bullying: 'Don't let ... do I.' (p. 106)
4. Pieter reflects on his sins: 'Will there ... of sight' (p. 197-198)

Round 3: Discussion

Take turns turning over a card from a pile of your choice and answer the discussion question. The other members of the group may then add to the discussion by responding and sharing their ideas.

Round 4: Opinion

Review *The Boy at the Top of the Mountain* by rating the novel on a scale of one to five stars, and then provide an explanation for your choice. Discuss what aspects you enjoyed and what aspects you didn't, and provide reasons for your opinions. Reflect on whether the discussion influenced your individual perspective, and if so, how. Incorporate examples and arguments from your responses to the discussion questions to support your review.



Question 1

What are the two sisters who own the orphanage called?

Question 2

What two animal names do Pieter and Anshel use when they write to each other?

Question 3

What are the British royals called who visit Hitler at the Berghof?

Question 4

Who tries to poison Hitler?

Question 5

At the end of the novel, soldiers find Pieter at the Berghof. What country are they from?

Answers

- 1 Simone and Adèle Durand
- 2 Dog and fox
- 3 David (His Royal Highness / Duke of Windsor) and Wallis (Her Royal Highness / The Duchess of Windsor)
- 4 Ernst (the driver) and Beatrix
- 5 The United States



Question

3

Question

2

Question

1

Answers

Question

5

Question

4



Personal connections? **1**

At the beginning of the novel, Pieter is bullied by people around him. How do you think this affects or changes him? What effect do you think bullying can have on someone?

Personal connections? **2**

In the novel, some characters use the fact that they are wearing a uniform to avoid responsibility for their actions. Can you think of a moment in the story where this happens? Can you think of other situations where people avoid responsibility because they wear a uniform or are in a position of authority?

Personal connections? **3**

Some people in the novel warn Pieter not to follow the adults around him blindly. What actions show that he follows others without thinking of the consequences? Have you ever followed someone blindly without thinking about the consequences?

Personal connections? **4**

As the story continues, Pieter starts making decisions that hurt other people. Which decision do you think is the worst? Why? Have you ever seen someone change in a negative way because of the people around them?

Personal connections? **5**

At the end of the war, Pieter finds it extremely difficult to leave the Berghof behind and stays there until the Allies arrive. Why do you think it is so hard for him to leave? Why do you think a place to call home is so important?

Personal connections? **6**

In the last chapter, the story briefly shifts to Anshel's perspective. How did this change the way you see Pieter? If you were Anshel, how would you feel about what Pieter has done?



Personal connections?

3

Personal connections?

2

Personal connections?

1

Personal connections?

6

Personal connections?

5

Personal connections?

4



Food for thought? 1

Pieter has to change his name when he arrives in Germany. What does this change represent for his identity? Why do you think it changes how he sees himself and how others treat him?

Food for thought? 2

Food is often seen as a source of comfort. However, in the novel food is also connected to cruelty. Can you give examples from the novel where food is used to humiliate or hurt someone? Why is food important for the plot?

Food for thought? 3

Violence is an important theme in Pieter's life, starting with his abusive father in Paris. Where else in the novel do we see this theme? How does Pieter respond to the violence around him?

Food for thought? 4

Katarina does not like Pieter, even though he really likes her. Why do you think she dislikes him, and how does she show this? What consequences does this have later in the novel?

Food for thought? 5

We follow Pieter as he grows from a young boy into an adult. What are the most important moments in Pieter's life that shape him as a character? Which relationships and friendships influence who he becomes?

Food for thought? 6

In the end, Anshel decides to forgive Pieter. Why is this important for Pieter? Do you think he deserves to be forgiven?



Food for thought?

3

Food for thought?

2

Food for thought?

1

Food for thought?

6

Food for thought?

5

Food for thought?

4