

St Mary's School Reading Group

Dear Parents,

Our last meeting of this year was held on 21st June. We discussed *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* by John Boyne and Beverley Naidoo's *The Other Side of Truth*.

The books have in common the theme of children (age range 10-13) becoming involved in two very different but equally traumatic historical episodes: the Nazi concentration camps and enforced exile from Nigeria. The books centre on the children's stories and how they try to make sense of and cope with these violent situations.

The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas is Bruno, whose father is a Wehrmacht officer sent to command the camp of 'Outwith' and who has the honour, in the eyes of Bruno's parents, of entertaining the 'Fury' to dinner. The names reflect the extent of 10-year-old Bruno's understanding of a situation which is never explained to him. There was some difference of opinion over whether the book was suitable reading for children of the age for which it seemed to have been written, because of the simplicity of the style, and whether it was a suitable subject for a younger age group. The discussion moved on to how much horror children are able actually to absorb and the possibility of having nightmares. No conclusion was reached, except that the book should probably not be recommended to Year 7, although some younger children had read it.

Beverley Naidoo's book is set in a much more contemporary situation, that of Nigeria under General Abacha in the 1990s, immediately after the assassination of Ken Saro-Wiwa. A young family is split up after the mother is killed on her doorstep by government assassins who had probably intended to target the father, a journalist who was trying to expose the corruption endemic in Nigeria at the time. The two young children are immediately smuggled out of the country in a traumatic episode which is described in careful detail to join their uncle in London. The book throws up many issues surrounding the reception of immigrants into this country. The story is told entirely from the point of view of the little girl who has to look after her younger brother, who reacts in his own way to the whole situation, in circumstances unimaginable to anyone who would never have to experience them. Everyone was very moved by this book and we in school had the additional pleasure of meeting the author when she came to spend a day with Year 9 to lead discussions and workshops on this book. We are looking forward to her new book, which is set in Kenya, coming out next year.

We have enjoyed the meetings this year, and we are aware that there are several of you who would like to have attended but have been unable to because of the time. We are therefore going to send out in the first mailing in September a letter to all parents inviting people to join the group next year and asking your opinion about the most suitable time and day to meet. We shall include the suggestions that were made during our recent meeting, and we hope that we shall be able to increase the size of the group next year.

Thank you to all of you who have taken an interest this year; it's been interesting and fun and we hope to see you all next term.

With best wishes for a happy summer holiday,
Yours sincerely,

C. Cooksey
Librarian

H. Garrett
Head of English