The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas – Year 9 Literary Essay

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Describe an interesting character from a text that you have studied. Explain why that character is so interesting.

In the novel, The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas, by John Boyne, Bruno is the most interesting character, because he is a nine-year old living through the Second World War ignorant of the events and horror that surrounds his childhood. Bruno is faced with the trauma of leaving Berlin and his three best friends, Daniel, Karl and Martin, when his father is promoted to Commandant of “Out-With” and the family move to their new home. Bruno is an interesting character because of the friendship he develops with Shmuel, a Jewish boy working at “Out With”; the way in which he directly disobeys his mother and deceives his family; and the way in which he changes from a naïve and innocent child to a more understanding and considerate friend.

The relationship that Bruno develops with Shmuel contributes to making Bruno an interesting character. In the beginning Bruno was unsure about why Shmuel was in the “Out With” camp, and unsure how to treat Shmuel. However, as they got to know each other, including discovering that they were exactly the same age with the same birth date, Bruno decided to visit him as often as he could, bringing him food and games. At one point Bruno’s father says to him "Those people... well, they're not people at all, Bruno." Yet Bruno’s experience was that Shmuel was a normal boy like him. Bruno almost destroys his friendship with Shmuel when he denies it, when talking to Lieutenant Kottler, as Shmuel is caught with some food that Bruno had given to him. However, Bruno contradicts Shmuel and says he saw Shmuel take the food. Despite this incident, the boys remain friends and Bruno apologises saying "I'm very sorry, Shmuel...I can't believe I didn't tell him the truth. I've never let a friend down like that before. Shmuel, I'm ashamed of myself."

One of the most interesting aspects of Bruno’s character is that his commitment to his friendship with Shmuel was so great he was prepared to lie to his mother about what he was doing. Soon after the family arrives at “Out With” Bruno wants to go exploring in his back yard area. His mother tells Bruno that he is prohibited from exploring there. As his boredom grows he decides that there is nothing else to do. During one of these explorations he meets Shmuel. Several meetings later he says to Shmuel that "It's so unfair. I don't see why I have to be stuck over here on this side of the fence where there's no one to talk to and no one to play with and you get to have dozens of friends and are probably playing for hours every day." Bruno quickly realises that he cannot tell his family about Shmuel. Though he meets with Shmuel frequently, he keeps his friendship a secret even telling his sister, Gretel, that he has an imaginary friend. At one point his mother approaches him and asks what he has in his satchel; it is filled with food and a chess board. Bruno tells his mother that it’s workbooks that Herr Liszt had given him for his studies. His mother worried about Herr Liszt teaching Bruno about the war, and asked if she could see what books he had. Bruno quickly tells her that they are adventure books. Fortunately, she is happy with his answer and doesn’t insist on looking at them.

Over the course of the novel, the change in Bruno’s character from a naïve and innocent child to an understanding and considerate friend, leads to what is the saddest moment in the book. He sets out to help Shmuel find his father in the camp. Throughout the time that the boys were searching for Shmuel’s father, intuition was telling Bruno to turn back and go home. However, the strength of his friendship with Shmuel overcame his increasing concerns about what was actually going on in the camp. Near the end of their search the boys found themselves in a cabin with other Jews. Suddenly a soldier shouts for everyone to get out. They are pushed by the crowd into a concrete room. Everything went dark and “Despite the chaos that followed, Bruno found that he was still holding Shmuel's hand in his own and nothing in the world would have persuaded him to let go.” This was an indication of just how much his friendship with Shmuel had changed Bruno.
As the central character, Bruno is the most interesting. He is a relatively naïve and innocent child whose world is turned upside-down when his family moves to “Out With” during the Second World War. Desperately bored and wanting friends, he disobeys his mother and goes exploring, meeting a young Jewish boy in the process. Despite their obvious difference in circumstance, they are typical nine year old boys and their similarities overcome their differences, allowing them to forge a strong friendship. For Bruno the friendship changes and moulds his character, giving him the strength to stand by Shmuel even as they face events that ultimately lead to their death.