



Credit: Chris Close

John Boyne

Building Empathy and Understanding Through Stories

I caught up with John Boyne via Skype, the day before he was due to fly out to New Zealand. He began by telling me that he'd always felt he would be a writer. As a child he'd read and written a great deal. He would take characters from stories he read and write new stories about them. His first story was published in a newspaper at 21 and this helped him believe he could become a writer. After graduating from Trinity College, Dublin he took his MA at University of East Anglia, where Malcolm Bradbury taught. He subsequently went back to work on his unpublished writing, and eventually his first novel *Thief of Time* was published.

John writes every day, taking Malcolm Bradbury's advice "Write every day, even Christmas Day" to heart, and has an office-style structure to his writing day. If he's travelling, he has his latest book on his laptop and can happily work on trains and planes.

His primary influence has been John Irving, "I've enjoyed him as a writer since I was a teenager. I love the way he tells people's lives from start to finish, through those big epic storytelling novels and the humanity within them." Growing up in the 1980s he was also influenced by the generation of brilliant Irish writers, like Roddy Doyle, who all won prizes and reached international significance. They inspired him, making him feel that perhaps he could achieve his writing dream.

He wants young people to gain a sense of bravery and confidence about themselves from his books. He wants the children to be the heroes of their own stories, to learn that they can deal with the situations and challenges in which they might find themselves, like the death of a parent, or a transgender sibling. He wants his readers to develop that sense of being able to empathise and stand up for others.

His new novel, *My Brother's Name is Jessica*, deals with a family's journey to understand the revelation that their 17-year-old sibling / child wants to transition from male to female. Jessica, previously known to her family as Jason, has been struggling with her gender identity for a long time, but with parents who are very much in the national political spotlight, they don't really want to face this. The story is narrated by Jessica's younger brother, Sam, who adores his 'brother' Jason. Jason has always been Sam's protector against bullies and has supported his learning disability. Sam hasn't got a clue what it might mean for him to have a sister Jessica and doesn't know how to deal with it.

John knows what it's like to grow up feeling different. He became interested in the issue of transgender especially as one

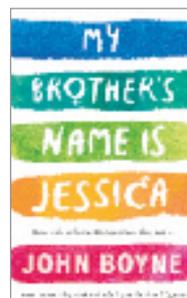
of his friends was transitioning from male to female. He did a lot of research surrounding the subject, and the novel came out of this. Just as he told the story of *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas*, through the naïve voice of Bruno, John wanted to tell Jessica's story from Sam's point of view. Sam tries to figure it all out by asking questions and making comments that are, at times, naïve or insensitive, but that's his way of learning and developing the empathy and understanding that he needs.

Although the theme of the book may divide opinions, John has written a powerful story that encourages readers to think about their own responses and to develop their own understanding. It is a book which aims to support transgender children, their families and friends. He hopes the book will help young readers show empathy and understanding if they have transgender friends or classmates.

John doesn't really know where his ideas come from, believing that, "The imagination is like a muscle", and "if you always engage it in activity, then you are always open to ideas and they will arrive out of nowhere." He feels that a good story for young people makes the reader care about the character. It puts the reader in a situation that may be outside their experience but where they can work through it themselves, rather than needing an adult to do it for them. Wherever possible, he tries to offer a happy or hopeful ending so that, whether the character has gone on some kind of journey or has grown to accept themselves or others for who they are, the reader ends up feeling that the world is a more empathetic place.

As a reader I've always found John Boyne's books challenge my thinking and perceptions, make me care deeply for the characters, lead me to question and take me on an emotional journey, as well as giving me a thoughtful, thought-provoking and meaningful reading experience. He has certainly done this again with *My Brother's Name is Jessica*.

Annie Everall



Bibliography:

My Brother's Name is Jessica Puffin £12.99
ISBN: 978-0241376133

The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas (10th Anniversary edition)
Doubleday £14.99 ISBN: 978-0857533937

The Boy at the Top of the Mountain Corgi £7.99
ISBN: 978-0552573504