



# [All the broken places]

By John Boyne

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## Genre and Subject

*Auschwitz (Concentration camp) -- Fiction*

*Children of Nazis -- Fiction*

*Friendship -- Fiction*

*Neighbors -- Fiction*

*Secrecy -- Fiction*

## Synopsis

Ninety-one-year-old Gretel Fernsby has lived in the same well-to-do mansion block in London for decades. She lives a quiet, comfortable life, despite her deeply disturbing, dark past. She doesn't talk about her escape from Nazi Germany at age 12. She doesn't talk about the grim post-war years in France with her mother. Most of all, she doesn't talk about her father, who was the commandant of one of the Reich's most notorious extermination camps.

Then, a new family moves into the apartment below her. In spite of herself, Gretel can't help but begin a friendship with the little boy, Henry, though his presence brings back memories she would rather forget. One night, she witnesses a disturbing, violent argument between Henry's beautiful mother and his arrogant father, one that threatens Gretel's hard-won, self-contained existence.

All The Broken Places moves back and forth in time between Gretel's girlhood in Germany to present-day London as a woman whose life has been haunted by the past. Now, Gretel faces a similar crossroads to one she encountered long ago. Back then, she denied her own complicity, but now, faced with a chance to interrogate her guilt, grief and remorse, she can choose to save a young boy. If she does, she will be forced to reveal the secrets she has spent a lifetime protecting. This time, she can make a different choice than before -- whatever the cost to herself...

## Author Biography

John Boyne was born in Ireland in 1971. He is the author of eleven novels for adults, six for younger readers and a collection of short stories. Perhaps best known for his 2006 multi-award-winning book *The Boy In The Striped Pyjamas*, John's other novels, notably *The Absolutist* and *A History of Loneliness*, have been widely praised and are international bestsellers. Most recently, *The Heart's Invisible Furies* was a Richard & Judy Bookclub word-of-mouth bestseller, and *A Ladder to the Sky* was shortlisted for the Kerry Group Irish Novel of the Year Award in association with Listowel Writers' Week.

## Discussion Starters

1. We see Gretel as a child in Germany, a teen in France, a young woman in Australia, and through many decades of life in London. What changes did you notice in Gretel's personality throughout the years?
2. How does Gretel as a mother compare to her own mother? What similarities do you notice? What differences? How do you think Gretel's feelings toward her own parents affected her ability to be a parent herself?
3. When Gretel and Kurt meet in Australia and talk about their lives since the war, Kurt says, "I don't remember making any conscious decisions about my life. It was all laid out for me so young" (250). What do you think of that statement? When do young people gain a responsibility for their own lives?
4. Kurt asks Gretel, "Why do you struggle to call things what they are?" (251) She refuses to say her brother's name or the name of her former residence in Germany. How do you think this affects the way Gretel processes her emotions? Can you relate?
5. Gretel insists to Kurt that she doesn't wish the Allies had lost the war, despite the personal advantages she would have gained. Kurt doesn't believe her: "You're lying. . . . You are. I can see it in your face. You need to tell yourself that you wouldn't so you can feel a sense of moral superiority, but I don't believe you for even a moment" (253). Do you believe Gretel? Later, when Alex Darcy-Witt suggests that Gretel wishes Germany had won the war, she responds, "No one wins a war" (355). Why do you think she answers differently this time?
6. In nearly every stage of her life, Gretel keeps her past a secret—both out of shame and out of fear for her own safety. If you were able to speak with Gretel at any point in her life, what would you say to her about her choice to stay silent? What would you say to her after she finally comes forward with the truth?
7. David never knows about the daughter he conceived with Gretel. What do you think of Gretel's decision not to tell him about her pregnancy?
8. When Alex confronts Gretel and tries to intimidate her following Madelyn's overdose, he tells her a bit about his abusive, alcoholic parents and his childhood in the foster system. How is pain passed through the generations in this novel? When and how do characters successfully end the cycle of inflicting harm on the next generation?
9. What did you think about how Gretel chose to end her story? Did you expect her to make such a drastic choice? Did that one choice change your perception of her character?

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