

School Library Pack 2014: Future Classics

The Terrible Thing that Happened to Barnaby Brocket by John Boyne

A Guide for Reading Groups



About John Boyne

John Boyne was born in Dublin. He is the author of books for adults and also novels for children. His first children's book was *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* which has been adapted into a film. John Boyne's books for children also include *Noah Barleywater* and *Stay Where You Are and Then Leave*. John enjoys playing the guitar and listening to music to relax.

About *The Terrible Thing that Happened to Barnaby Brocket*

Alistair and Eleanor Brocket pride themselves on being perfectly normal. They have normal jobs, a normal house, and turn their noses up at anything remotely strange or out of the ordinary. Even their children, Henry and Melanie are normal. Then their third child, Barnaby Brocket, is born. Barnaby defies the laws of gravity. Instead of standing on the ground, he floats. Barnaby's parents are shocked and horrified at having such an abnormal child and eventually decide that Barnaby has to go.

Characters

- **Eleanor Brocket** – Eleanor is Barnaby's mother. She is very keen to appear normal and wants to find a husband with a surname beginning with B as she has a collection of handkerchiefs embroidered with EB. Eleanor works at a firm of solicitors called Bother and Blastitt.
- **Alistair Brocket** – Alistair is Barnaby's father. Like his wife Eleanor, Alistair is very keen to appear normal. He works at the same firm of solicitors as his wife. Alistair finds it very difficult having a son like Barnaby.
- **Barnaby Brocket** – Barnaby is son to Eleanor and Alistair. Shortly after he was born he floated to the ceiling. The rest of his family are all normal which makes Barnaby's floating seem all the more unusual.
- **Liam McGonagall** – Liam and Barnaby become firm friends when they are at the Graveling Academy for Unwanted Children. Liam has two hooks as he was born without hands. Liam saves Barnaby's life when there is a fire at the school.

Questions for discussion

1. Barnaby's parents are described as 'two people who were so afraid of anyone who was different that they did a terrible thing that would have the most appalling consequences for everyone they loved.' (p1)

What were the appalling consequences for everyone they loved that arose from the thing Barnaby's parents did?

You may find it useful to think about:

- The effects their actions had upon one another
- How Barnaby's brother Henry and his sister Melanie react and feel
- What impact has this had upon Barnaby himself
- How you think you might feel if your parents behaved in this way

2. Can you think of any good that arises from the terrible thing that Barnaby's parents did? Who does this effect and in what ways, if any, does this help them?
3. Marjorie says, 'just because your version of normal isn't the same as someone else's version doesn't mean there's anything wrong with you.' (p92)

Who do you think in the novel has different versions of 'normal'? How and why do you think those differ?

4. Bravery is a very important theme in the book. Do you think it takes bravery in order to simply be different? Are there ways that the courageous choices some of the characters make are influenced by their difference?

You might find it useful to think about:

- How Liam saves Barnaby from the fire
- The graffiti that Vincente paints on the side of buildings
- Barnaby's trip into space and the way he saves Naoki Takahasi

5. A lot of the characters have difficult relationships with their parents. Why do you think this is? Do you feel that parents in the book always recognise who their children are and what their skills and talents may be?

You might find it useful to think about:

- Barnaby's parents Alistair and Eleanor, do you think their relationship with their own parents has influenced who they are?
- The newspaper critic, Charles Etheridge
- The daredevil, Stanley Grout
- The astronauts
- Barnaby himself

6. Captain Hoseason recognises and accepts difference in his show 'Freakitude'. Does this feel a positive or a negative way to accept difference? How do you think he treats people unfairly and why might the demonstrators feel angry about 'Freakitude'?
7. Reading is very important to Barnaby. Discuss with the people in your group what reading means to you. Why do you think it is so special for Barnaby? There are lots of references to famous books and authors in the novel, how many can you find?
8. Were you surprised when Barnaby decides to float away at the end of the book? Do you think he is likely to live a happy life? What is the reason for your answer? Do you think Barnaby has generally been a happy boy through the book?

Extension activity

Design a missing poster for Barnaby Brocket. How will your picture and your wording show what Barnaby looks like and what his interests are? Given that Barnaby floats, where do you think good places to put the posters might be?

Further Reading

If you have enjoyed reading about Barnaby why not celebrate difference with these other extraordinary stories?

The Boy Who Swam with Piranhas by David Almond

Wonder by R J Palacio

Freak the Mighty by Rodman Philbrick

The Invention of Hugo Cabret by Rodman Philbrick

Liar and Spy by Rebecca Stead