

The Road of Bones by Anne Fine

Notes by Anne Faundez

The Road of Bones is a powerful work of fiction, stark in its realism and bleak in its conclusion, which demands the reader's total involvement through its compelling storytelling and the issues it raises.

By tracing the story of one young man caught up in a nightmare world of violence and repression, it forces the reader to reflect on important truths –the role of politics and ideology, the manipulation of beliefs and the way tyrants are created. Its contents make it ideally suited to classroom debate intended to develop young people's awareness of political systems and to explore their personal responses to politics.

The Road of Bones follows the trajectory of one person whose life is shaped by the brutal society in which he lives. A study of totalitarianism, based loosely on Russia's history under Stalin during the 1930s, the story is a stark reminder of what happens to a society when citizens lose their rights.

Yuri lives with his parents and grandmother in an overcrowded apartment block in a small town. Fear has fallen over the country, and everywhere there is silence and suspicion. There are show trials and purges as one leader usurps another in a struggle for power.

Yuri's parents avoid all talk of politics for fear of being overheard, while his grandmother, who experienced life under the czars, talks mainly in metaphors and proverbs. Yuri is puzzled, unable to piece together the jigsaw of beliefs that he hears and observes within the family.

The day soon comes when Yuri's school is closed and the pupils ordered to report to the work commissar in accordance with the Great Economic Plan. They're sent to a building site where they work under conditions of slavery from five in the morning until late at night, with little food and no break. It is here that he watches his best friend die – and learns his first political lesson – that the individual counts for nothing in a system that glorifies the state. Shortly after, he is on the run, escaping from the dreaded men in uniform – the secret police – whose silver badge of a coiled serpent is the symbol of ruthlessness. And Yuri's crime? He allowed the grief he felt at his friend's death to be heard by his comrades, one of whom was an informer.

He makes his escape – and so begins a journey, trodden by so many, that eventually takes him to the forced labour camps, or *gulags*, of Siberia and the frozen north. But Yuri is a fighter and the instinct for survival carries him through the horrors of what he is forced to endure.

By the end of the book, his political education is complete, and he is ready to fight back in the only way he knows – through violence and intimidation. And so the vicious wheel is complete.

The child that began the journey is now a man, ready and capable of inflicting the same merciless savagery that he once suffered.

Responding to the text

- Judging by the title, and not having read the book, what do you expect the book to be about?
- What is the meaning of Grandmother's proverb, 'Only a fool cheers when the new prince rises'?

- Why do you suppose the author chose to write this book as a first-person narrative? What effect does this have on the reader?
- Prepare a chart of the events that were to shape the sort of person that Yuri becomes by the end of the book.
- What are some of Yuri's personality traits that show him to be a complex character?
- Does Yuri's behaviour towards Maria and Igor show that he has conflicting feelings for them? Justify your answer with reference to the text.
- How would you interpret the character, Nikolai? Do you think that he was forced to change because of his experiences during the course of the story or that Yuri's initial assessment of him as a friend and a rebel was wrong?
- Descriptions of place and weather conditions play an important part in this book. What is their purpose? Do they reinforce mood?

Setting the story in a political context

The book sets the story in its political and historic context by offering different ideological viewpoints expressed within one family and through three generations. There is Grandmother, who looks back with nostalgia at life under czarism, an era when religion was tolerated. Then there is Yuri's mother, who supported the glorious revolution, believing it would establish a just and equitable society. Finally, there is Yuri, whose political views are gradually shaped by the atrocities he experiences and witnesses at the hands of a tyrannical regime that turned the revolution into a lie.

Learning about politics

In presenting political truths in the guise of fiction, **The Road of Bones** helps to inform young people about the nature of politics and its effects on the ordinary citizen. Used as a starting point for discussion, the book allows young people to:

- Learn about the nature of totalitarian regimes
- Understand the impact of totalitarianism on the life of ordinary citizens
- Find out how people respond to state institutions in an undemocratic context
- Understand the importance of having strong democratic institutions
- Appreciate the value of political opposition and public debate
- Learn how to identify abuse of power in democratic and undemocratic contexts.

Totalitarianism

Essential features of a totalitarian state are in place in this book:

- The suppression of the individual under collectivism
- The subordination of human rights to the needs of a single party
- The outlawing of free speech and freedom of the press
- Annexation of lands and subjugation of peoples
- Constant propaganda and indoctrination
- Glorification of the leader

Discussion points

A discussion of issues raised in the book will develop young people's awareness of politics and provide them with insights and ideas that they can then relate to their own experiences.

People's behaviour under totalitarianism

The book offers many examples of the way people act under totalitarianism.

- How would you answer Yuri's question to old Maria, 'How can whole villages full of people allow themselves be tormented by so few'?
- Early on in the story, Yuri's mother states that people who have been arrested must have done something wrong. Do you agree with this view?
- In Chapter Three, Yuri's father warns him to keep his eyes down and his ears closed, explaining that the only way to stay alive is to mind one's own business and pretend not to hear or see anything. Is this attitude reasonable or morally justifiable?
- If, like Maria, you only had a few chicken eggs to keep you alive, would you have kept them hidden from Yuri?

Love of country

- In Chapter Two, Grandmother, in referring to her childhood, describes the people's love of their country. What incidences in the book show that this love of country has been distorted and manipulated by the leaders of the regime?
- At what moment would you say that love of country turns into nationalism?

Famine

Central to the story is the issue of famine, and the way that its causes are often man-made. While fleeing from the secret police, Yuri boards a train bound for the next province, where he overhears the two brothers Maxim and Misha discussing the fate of agrarian communities. Throughout the book there are further passages that describe how rich and fertile land can be turned into waste through ignorance, ineptitude and deliberate policy-making.

- Can you list some of the human factors that are responsible for bringing about famine?

Requisitioning of property

Much of the book centres on the fate of the peasants as the country sets in motion a policy to grow its industrial base. The old couple, Igor and Maria, live in poverty, their land requisitioned, or forcefully removed, and given to the state.

Under Stalin, requisitioning of land took place on a large scale. Peasants were forcefully removed from their holdings and sent to labour camps or the large industrial cities.

- Why is the forceful removal of people from their land unjust, even if it is carried out in order to achieve national prosperity?
- In your opinion, is the forceful removal of people from their land likely to achieve the objective of national prosperity?

Yuri's response to totalitarianism

- Why, at the end of the book, does Yuri decide to rebel against the system? Was he a victim and therefore had no other choice? Would you have reasoned as he did?
- By the end of the book, Yuri believes that the only way to respond to the regime's atrocities is through force. Derailing a train, for example, is something that he justifies. Is his behaviour questionable? If you were in his position what would you do?

Widening political horizons

- What is meant by the phrase 'the end justifies the means'? Can you find examples of the way some governments use this phrase to justify their policies?
- Why do you suppose that people are passive and indifferent under totalitarianism? Is it a question of fear or the wish to remain uninvolved or, even, to conform?
- In your opinion, what are the social and economic factors that pave the way towards totalitarianism?

- At the end of the book, Yuri justifies his argument for tyranny with the words, ‘So everyone must join the struggle, and those who weren’t with us ... might as well be against us.’

Do you agree with his reasoning, that if you don’t embrace a cause, you are against it?

- How does **The Road of Bones** help us to understand that we are not born with an innate value system, and that good citizenship is something that we learn from experience – our own and that of others?

Bringing politics closer to home

- Look at the difference between someone like Yuri, whose youth is taken up with political issues, and a young person in the UK, whose concerns are more likely to involve school, sports and leisure activities. Does the political regime we live under determine the way we grow up?

- Can you imagine a situation in our democracy when the government would be justified in requisitioning people’s property? Would war or any other national emergency justify this policy?

- The following institutions were lacking in Yuri’s country:

Free press

Political parties

Parliament

Courts of law.

Had these institutions been place, what difference would they have made?

- Given the absence of the institutions listed above, would you say that Yuri’s approach to politics is justifiable? If not, how would you advise him to respond to the brutalities of the regime?

- What do you know about peaceful disobedience? Would it have been feasible to think about peaceful disobedience in Yuri's country?
- Politics is forbidden under a totalitarian regime, yet everything an individual does has political consequences, usually devastating for that person. Yuri is sentenced to ten years' hard labour after giving an incorrect answer to a question during Study Circle. Would you expect punishment for giving a wrong answer to a question?
- Would you agree that Yuri's reflections on his parents and their behaviour are determined by political events, and that he judges his parents by their response to the government? Can you imagine this ever happening in your family circumstances?
- 'No one's arrested for no reason at all', is Yuri's mother's initial reaction to the wave of arrests. Is arrest a confirmation of guilt? Are there countries today where this assumption is considered valid?
- What happens to a judicial system when the defence lawyers are too terrified to argue against the prosecution?
- After reading the book, would you say that the use of repression and doing away with civil liberties are likely to achieve a government's aims?
- Does the story leave you with an interest in becoming politically involved? If so, how? Would you wish to ensure that democratic institutions remain healthy?
- Do you believe that you can make a difference to the politics of your country?