

Boy



“Powerful and moving... Hanley’s brilliance is to shock us whatever our level of sophistication... The reader’s consciousness is seared by the experience.”

The Evening Standard

“Painfully honest and direct... the horror of the situation grips from cover to cover.”

The Financial Times

“*Boy* has retained the capacity to disturb... not as pornography, but as a period piece of angry realism... its horrors stay with the reader.”

Zoë Heller

“This novel has retained its power to shock... it is, quite simply, one of the bleakest books ever written... the raw power of Hanley’s language prohibits the entry of even one small ray of light... *Boy* is unbearably affecting.”

Nick Hornby

“The story is quite shattering in its impact.”

The Independent

“A message in a dirty bottle from the days when it was brave to be dirty.”

Literary Review

“A powerful account of a working-class boy’s loss of moral and sexual innocence.”

The London Review of Books

“A cry of protest against the degradation
of the human spirit.”

The Scotsman

“A work of remarkable power.”

The Spectator

“There could be few more shocking accounts
of the brutality of life.”

The Daily Telegraph

“A novel of great power.”

The Sunday Telegraph

“There is nothing cooked about the novel, nothing artful
or schematic... the story... is nerve-rackingly vital,
and an uncomfortable read.”

The Times

“A fiercely accusing report on juvenile maltreatment...
which has a blistering directness that shrivels
decorous veilings of ugly facts.”

The Sunday Times

ONEWORLD CLASSICS

Boy

James Hanley



ONEWORLD
CLASSICS

ONEWORLD CLASSICS LTD
London House
243-253 Lower Mortlake Road
Richmond
Surrey TW9 2LL
United Kingdom
www.oneworldclassics.com

Boy first published in 1931

© Liam Hanley 1931

James Hanley asserts his moral right to be identified as the author of this work in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988

Anthony Burgess's introduction to *Boy* © the Estate of Anthony Burgess, 1990
Liam Hanley's preface to *Boy* © Liam Hanley, 1990
Extra material © Chris Gostick, 2007

This edition first published by Oneworld Classics Limited in 2007
Printed in Great Britain by TJ International, Padstow, Cornwall

ISBN-13: 978-1-84749-006-3

ISBN-10: 1-84749-006-9

All the pictures in this volume are reprinted with permission or presumed to be in the public domain. Every effort has been made to ascertain and acknowledge their copyright status, but should there have been any unwitting oversight on our part, we would be happy to rectify the error in subsequent printings.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in or introduced into a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means (electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise), without the prior written permission of the publisher. This book is sold subject to the condition that it shall not be resold, lent, hired out or otherwise circulated without the express prior consent of the publisher.

The Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) is an international, non-governmental organization dedicated to promoting responsible management of the world's forests. FSC operates a system of forest certification and product labelling that allows consumers to identify wood and wood-based products from well-managed forests. For more information about the FSC, please visit the website at www.fsc-uk.org.

1

“FEARON! WHAT IS THE MATTER with you, boy?”

For the third time that morning Mr Jackson, the teacher, had had occasion to call the boy out and chastise him for inattention to his lessons. And now he had caught him out during the history lesson. The boy stood in the middle of the floor, his back to the class, his eyes staring up at the angry face of the teacher, who now fingered his cane with a determination that made the boy really frightened for the first time in his life. Quite often he had had the cane, but had thought little of it. In a few minutes the pain wore off and he forgot the incident until the next occasion. But now there was something other than the thought of the temporary pain inflicted. There was humiliation. He would not have experienced this so much had it not been for the circumstances under which he was suffering. Each time he had stood before the class. The teacher had asked him the same question. To each question he had given the same answer. The other boys in the class appeared to be quite amused by this new entertainment on the part of one of their own class. Mr Jackson towered over the boy.

“What is the matter with you this morning? Each time I look up you are the same, your eyes glaring at the wall opposite. What is the matter? Is there something on the wall that amuses or interests you? Tell me now. You used to be such a good boy. Lately you seem to have gone off your head. I won’t stand for it, boy. I’ll flog you each time you disobey me, and it appears you are dead set on doing so. Don’t try my temper too much.”

Fearon stood staring at the teacher, his tongue clinging to the roof of his mouth, fear like a great gust of wind circling about his heart. The teacher had not been satisfied with the explanations he had

given for his conduct. He felt that he must get to the bottom of this. It seemed so mysterious. Suddenly he roared into Fearon's ear:

"Well! Are you dumb as well as stubborn? You ignorant boy. Tell me, before I make a thorough example of you before the whole class. I will stand this no longer. The best part of a week wasted and examinations coming on..." To himself the teacher said: "If half the class are like this fellow, the inspector's report won't be any credit to me. Damn the boy anyhow."

"Well! Have you nothing to say? Can't you tell me what is wrong with you?" "There is nothing wrong with me, sir," replied the boy at last. It seemed to have been a great effort on his part to utter even these few words.

"Yes. You said the same thing before, not an hour ago, the same thing yesterday. I think you had better remain behind at dinner time and I will take you to Mr Sweeney's office. Perhaps he will get out of you what I can't. Go back to your seat. I won't punish you again. You are beyond me."

The boy with bent head returned to his seat. He was on the verge of tears. He blushed, the blood mounted to his head. He could not sit still, he continually fidgeted with his fingers, drumming them upon the desk. He dared not look either way. He was filled with a sense of shame. He dared not look up.

"Fearon! Did you hear what I said? Open your book please and get on with your work."

With trembling hands the boy opened his Oxford and Cambridge history book and endeavoured in spite of increasing agitation to study Wat Tyler and his short-lived insurrection.* But his thoughts were chaotic. He could not settle down to the work. He made a pretence at it and some twenty minutes later essayed to look around him in a furtive manner. Everybody seemed occupied. The heads were bent to the books, the teacher was busy making corrections in the exercise books on his desk. A strange silence filled the room, periodically punctuated by the scratch of the teacher's pen as he initialled each book. Once he did cast a glance at the bench where the boy sat, saw that he was not occupying himself with the lesson, but this time decided to save his

breath and his energy. The boy was beyond him and that was the end of it. When dinner time came the boys filed out of the benches. Only Fearon and the teacher remained in the room. And now that the others had departed, the room took on a desolate air, it seemed to have grown bigger, whilst to the boy staring before him the walls seemed further off and the teacher himself had become reduced in size. But when his name was called the illusion vanished and Mr Jackson appeared to tower above him more than ever. He called the boy to come right up to his desk. Fearon approached with his head down.

“I said I would take you to the headmaster, but on reflection I have decided not to bother. It appears to me that you are not worth bothering about. When you first came here you were a good boy, attentive to your lessons, and even showed an intelligence superior to the others in the class. But whatever has come over you in the last week I do not know, and have gone beyond wondering about it; I have finished with you. You may do as you like. If you cut a bad figure at the examinations you have yourself and nobody else to blame. You may go home now.”

Apparently Fearon had not heard this order, for he still remained standing there, and had even raised his head to look into the teacher’s face.

“Are you deaf?” he shouted to the boy.

“No, sir.”

“Then go. Get out of my sight. You worry me. You bore me.”

The boy burst into tears. They welled from his eyes, poured down his pale cheeks; his two hands shook under the emotion he was experiencing. This was something new for Mr Jackson. And as he stood there looking upon Fearon’s face, streaming with tears, a kind of mute appeal in the brown eyes, he felt a change coming over him. Momentarily he was afraid of this change. It seemed as though he would be extending pity to this boy very soon. He said in rather a thick voice:

“Go home. I told you to go away.”

The boy never moved. Then the teacher got down from his desk and placed a hand upon his shoulder, saying in almost a whisper:

“Fearon, why can’t you be manly like the rest of my boys and tell me what is wrong? There is something troubling you and you are ashamed to say what it is. Listen now! I want you to tell me everything, just as though I were your own father...” On the mention of the word “father” Fearon shuddered, an action which made Mr Jackson bend down and peer into the boy’s face. He felt this pity stirring in him. He took Fearon’s hand and led him to the front desk, where they both sat down.

“Don’t be afraid,” began the teacher. “There is only myself here and what you say is only to me. Come now. Be a man like the rest of the boys. Have courage. Be honourable. Out with it. Get it off your chest.”

Mr Jackson even smiled, though the boy did not respond. At last he spoke.

“I’m frightened,” he began – suddenly paused, and continued: “I don’t want to leave school. I don’t want to go away. No. No. I don’t want to go away.”

“Explain everything,” urged the teacher.

With difficulty the boy stammered through his explanation. He said that he would be thirteen on the twelfth of March, and that on that date his father was getting him exempt from school. His mother was anxious that he should go to work. She had told him that other boys had had to leave school at that early age in order to help their parents.

“And have you no brothers or sisters older than yourself?” asked Mr Jackson.

“No sir! At least I had one brother and sister. Both died during the war, sir.”

“Oh! I see. Well?...”

“I don’t want to go away, sir. I don’t want to leave the school. But my father and mother are determined to get me away. And I was afraid, sir. I wanted to go in for a scholarship. I wanted to study. I wanted to be a chemist, sir. But it’s no use now. I have to leave next week.”

“What!” To the teacher it appeared like an ultimatum. “But surely...”

“My mother has already been to see Mr Sweeney, sir. She has also been to the Education Committee. I have to go to their office one day next week, and if I pass the examination for them I’ll be able to leave school.”

“And do you want to pass this exam?” asked Mr Jackson.

“No sir,” replied the boy. “I don’t.”

And receiving this answer Mr Jackson began a long interrogation, asking a hundred and one questions that flustered and worried the boy more than ever. What was his father? Did his mother go out to work? Did his father drink? Were they able to pay their rent? Were they good people, attending to their chapel? Did they go to the pawnshop ever? How old was his father? His mother? Had they lived in the town very long?

And all these questions Fearon endeavoured to answer with the best of his ability, whilst also trying to save his parents and himself from any humiliation, and especially in the case of his parents, he was afraid that the teacher himself might start talking. Already Fearon saw this man as being sympathetic. That was what the boy was afraid of. They did not want any sympathy. Besides he thought it might give the teacher licence to chatter amongst the other teachers about the home life of one of his pupils. He told the teacher that his father was a rigger at the dock. Yes, his father drank, but not heavily. His mother went out to work for the wife of the boss, who superintended the riggers at the Leyland branch in the Huskisson shed. No, his mother had never been in a pawnshop, so far as he knew, though sometimes she was behind with her rent. No. He did not know whether she pawned his father’s clothes over weekends. Yes, his mother and father were hard-working and good-living people. In reply to a further question, the boy said that his father had always worked at the docks. Had been a dock man all his life. He was sixty-one years old. His mother he thought was about two years older than him.

Mr Jackson leant his head on his hand and stared at the desk in front of him. He tried to visualize the home life of this boy, and looked into the future and saw this same boy ten years hence. He

remembered also that on the word "father" the boy had shuddered. This made him think deeply. Why had he shuddered? "God!" he thought. "Something queer about the Fearon family all right." Suddenly he pulled out his watch and discovered he had a bare half-hour left him for his dinner. He immediately got up, saying as he crossed to his desk: "Very well boy. You may go home now. Try and pay attention to your work in future. It reflects upon this class, and I like to feel proud of my boys. I'll see what can be done about you in the mean time."

Fearon brightened up. He stammered out with a "Thank you, sir. Thank you very much, sir," though Mr Jackson hardly heard it as he was already halfway through the door and rushing down the stone steps. He turned down the street and made for the café he always patronized. Over his coffee and cake he thought the matter out. He tried to look at it from every angle. Then with a sudden shake of the head he dismissed it from his mind. And he knew also that it would never trouble him again. After all, he told himself, what is this affair? One of hundreds, one of thousands, perhaps millions. He smiled. What was the use? None at all. Hopeless. Futile. Finished. There was a time in his career when he would have applied sympathy and energy and sense to such problems, but now things were different. He was tired. He was fed up. It was useless to help, useless to try to help. Fearon was only one more to add to the roll of thousands. Mr Jackson sadly shook his head as he waited for his bill. "No. No," he kept repeating under his breath.

He had been a teacher too long amongst the poor children of the town not to know how useless things were. Not to know that futility laughed at and mocked efforts, human endeavour was like a stricken giant. A trick. That's all life was. A mean trick. Mr Jackson paid his bill and left the café. Again he looked at his watch. He had ten minutes to spare. He went to the garden of the church adjoining the school and sat there staring through the branches of a tree at the ceaseless tide of humanity as it streamed past in the midday hour. He had not sat there but two minutes when the bell commenced to ring and he immediately got up from the bench and walked to the

schoolyard. There he assembled his class and marched them up to their room. That afternoon the boys gave him no trouble at all and he felt more hopeful of the coming examination. A visit from the headmaster himself took up twenty minutes of his time, and before Mr Sweeney left, he remarked that Fearon must be sent to his office at four o'clock, that the matter was important. Mrs Fearon had been to see him again. In a few words he explained to Mr Jackson that things weren't so good in the Fearon home. The father it seemed had only just returned to his work at the dock after being on strike for seven months. The boy was to leave the school on the following Friday, should he pass the examination on the morrow.

"Tomorrow?" exclaimed the teacher.

"Yes," replied Mr Sweeney. "He will not attend here tomorrow, but will go down to the Education Offices first thing in the morning." It would not be a long exam, nor indeed a very difficult one. It was a question of summing up just the amount of intelligence the boy had. Yes that was all.

Mr Jackson stood staring at the lank figure of the headmaster as he walked down the long room. Then he turned to his class and announced loudly:

"Turn to page seventy-eight. The Reign of the House of Tudor."

There was a series of shufflings as the pages of the history books were hastily turned over. Then a moment's silence. The boys looked to the teacher. Mr Jackson said in a slow drawling voice: "I want you to read the chapter to yourselves, meditate upon it for twenty minutes, after which I will question each of you in turn. Proceed."

The forest of heads bent as one, there was a series of shufflings and whisperings. Fearon like the rest had opened his book at that period in history which explained the Tudors. To the boy himself it seemed rather flat, boring and uninteresting. Beneath the desk, and hidden between two exercise books, was a volume of Scott called *Rob Roy*. In that moment, the boy felt that *Rob Roy* was much more interesting than the matter contained in the Oxford and Cambridge history book. From time to time he glanced slyly up and around. The other boys were hard at work. He felt ashamed again that he could

not concentrate like them. Mr Jackson was busy writing at his own desk. Fearon fell to studying his teacher's well-polished brown boots and wished he had a pair like that himself. He became so absorbed in the boots that he failed to hear Mr Jackson calling to him to pay some attention to his work, adding, "even if you are leaving the school next week."

Immediately the words were uttered, a tide of whisperings swept across the benches; they seemed to fill the whole room, criss-crossing, sweeping up and down. A veritable bubble of sound above which Mr Jackson found it hard to make himself heard. The bubble increased, the whisperings became more noisy, and every head in the class was turned towards the boy Fearon. But he did not return their stares. He merely sat there very quiet, very still, his head resting on his elbows, his eyes glued down on page seventy-eight, though his thoughts were far from that period in history. His mind was elsewhere indeed. He was already sitting in the office in the town before a bespectacled person who reminded him of the undertaker whose factory was situated in the street he lived in. And this bespectacled person was now deluging him with questions which he could not answer. His father appeared on the scene then, and when he heard that his son had failed to pass the examination he had gone wild with rage.

"What! What's that? You couldn't pass a simple little examination like that. God blast you for an ignorant little swine anyhow."

He replied to his father: "I couldn't help it. It wasn't my fault anyway." He stood cowering before his father, who seemed ready to rain down blows upon him, when suddenly a voice brought him back to reality.

"Fearon! You have to see Mr Sweeney before you leave school this afternoon."

"Yes, sir."

"Very well," said Mr Jackson. "But don't stare at me in that manner, boy."

"No, sir. Of course not, sir. I'm sorry."

And the boy tried to concentrate once more upon the history book. Sitting there in the bench, he appeared small, insignificant, for