Reading notes and discussion ideas for exploring River Boy by Tim Bowler

Jess’s Grandpa is dying but is determined to finish his last painting ‘River Boy.’ Jess helps him and gets involved in this mysterious painting. Then she meets the river boy himself and has to take up a challenge of her own.

‘River Boy’ has all the makings of a classic—it deepens with re-reading, and takes the reader on a journey. You are not the same person at the end of this book. Carnegie Medal judges

Nor did I know that . . . the story was going to take me on a journey too, like Jess. But I’m glad I made that journey. Tim Bowler, author of River Boy (p173)

Did you feel as if you had been on a journey when you read this book? Did it give you a deeper understanding or change your thoughts and feelings about something?—about being old, for example, or looking at pictures, or a personal challenge or experience of your own?

A classic book is one which is of lasting worth and has a timeless quality. You can return to it and get increased or different understandings from it, as your life experiences change. Does River Boy have the makings of a classic for you?

About the author

Tim Bowler is one of the UK’s most compelling and original writers for young people. He was born in Leigh-on-Sea and after studying Swedish at university, he worked in forestry, the timber trade, teaching, and translating before becoming a full-time writer.

Tim has written over twenty books and won fifteen awards, including the prestigious Carnegie Medal for River Boy. He has been described by The Sunday Telegraph as ‘the master of the psychological thriller’ and by the Independent as ‘one of the truly individual voices in British teenage fiction’. His books have sold over a million copies worldwide.

You can find out more about Tim on his website: www.timbowler.co.uk
Rivers

‘Like seeing a whole life,’ he said . . . ‘The life of the river . . . it’s born here and it runs its allotted distance, sometimes fast, sometimes slow, sometimes straight, sometimes twisting, sometimes calm, sometimes turbulent, and it keeps on running until it reaches its end in the sea.’ (p136)

Look at the conversation between Jess and the river boy as they sit together at the source of the river. (See pages 136-137).

What does this tell you about Jess’s feelings and understanding about her grandfather’s dying?

Think about the comparisons that can be made between the stages of a river and the stages of life—from the river’s birth at its source, through its initial force and energy, to its slower pace in ‘old age’ and its meeting with the sea.

You could draw a picture of the path of a real or imaginary river from its source, through different terrain and landscapes, and through towns and villages; then annotate it, linking each part of it to the stages of life.

And the river opened and took her into itself. (p147)

You could also draw a picture of the river in River Boy, and annotate it so that it works as a storyboard describing Jess’s swim, from where Grandpa had finished his painting, all the way to the sea. Here are some details from the story you could use:

- For the first three hours: Banks slipped by, and rocks, and eddies that pushed and pulled at her . . . (148)
- Four more hours: The more she swam, the more time ceased to matter. (p149)
- . . . the verdant banks and sloping fields of an unknown land . . . (p151)
- The banks were still densely wooded but the valley sides had receded with the miles and fields now climbed away on either side, broken by hedgerows and stone walls. The river itself was widening all the time. (p151)
- Two to three hours later: To her surprise she found herself in the middle of a small estuary. Just ahead were boats on moorings . . . a rugby pitch, and the remains of an old fort . . . a sea wall and slipways, and buildings. (p153)
- They had indeed reached the sea. Close by was . . . the sea wall and, behind it, kiosks, shops, amusement arcades, a café, a chip shop; and houses. (p155)
- She saw a slipway . . . and hauled herself out of the water . . . (p156)

Do you have a favourite river? Do you live near a river?

Write a description of it, perhaps as a poem—or create your own imaginary river to write about. Think of the places it might pass on its way to the sea, the nature and wild life living in it and beside it, the boats which travel on it and the people who enjoy it.

For inspiration, as well as River Boy, look for poems about rivers, such as Tennyson’s The Brook, or listen to songs and music, such as Old Man River and Smetana’s Vltava which describes the course of a river past castles and palaces, and dances and a wedding.
The spiritual, almost supernatural

‘Nor did I know that the river was going to become a spiritual metaphor...’
Tim Bowler (p173)

...the presence of the absent boy seemed to grow. (p14)

As you got involved in the story and as Jess became aware of the river boy, who did you first think he might be? A ghost? Someone in Jess’s imagination? A real boy?

By the end of the book what did the river boy come to mean to you?

Characters in the story

A review of River Boy refers to its ‘credible and courageous characters’.

Think about each of the characters in the book and the different ways this description suits them: Jess, Grandpa, Dad, Mum and Alfred.

What is it about each of them which makes them come to life for you?

And what are the ways in which each of them shows courage in what they think and do?

Family affection

The only thing she still yearned for was to see him show love to Dad. But love could not be fashioned just by the asking. (p129)

Jess’s family clearly all care about each other. Think of the different relationships within the family and how they are shown in the story (the love, spoken and unspoken): - her parents’ love and affection for each other and for Jess; Jess’s close connection with her grandfather; the communication difficulties between her grandfather and her father; and the fondness people feel for Alfred, however annoying he may seem at times!

‘And there was me thinking you always knew what was in my mind.’ (p92)

Jess and Grandpa do seem to know, or to feel, much of what is in each other’s mind. Talk about the different ways this is shown in the story. Would you describe the link between them as telepathic? And how is this link pivotal to the story?

Describe a special person who is or has been in your life. What is s/he like?

How do you connect and why are you important to each other?

Personal challenges

‘This river will have its battles on the way but it’ll keep on running because it has to. And even when it reaches the end, it’ll already have started renewing itself here. I find that comforting, too.’ (p137)

‘... the striving of the individual to express the full measure of the self.’
Tim Bowler (p173)

How are Grandpa and Jess each striving in this way to express themselves, and how do they each achieve it? Think of the physical, mental and spiritual aspects of their personal challenges.

‘...it’s the biggest challenge of my life...’ (p113: the river boy)

...pushed on by the current and by the tide of her will. (p148: Jess)

Consider the other characters too and how we also learn something of their needs and self-awareness and how they face up to them.

Do you have personal challenges? When you’ve achieved something has it made a difference for your life? What do you think her swim has given to Jess?
PICTURES AND WORDS

A work of art

In his introduction to River Boy David Almond describes it as ‘a book that is unashamedly about art. It has a work of art at its centre and it is a work of art itself.’ In what ways does River Boy seem a work of art to you?

Painting pictures—with words

In River Boy the author describes the countryside and the river so that we can picture it and believe we are actually there.

Find a favourite picture and imagine you are describing it to someone who hasn’t seen it or can’t see it. Write a paragraph with your words ‘painting’ the picture so that they can visualise it.

This painting of pictures with words is often called audio-description and is used to make art and theatre accessible to people who have visual impairment.

Painting pictures—from words

Read the description, on pages 28-29, of the setting of the holiday cottage where Jess and her family are staying, and then have a go at painting a picture of it. All the detail is there for you—its place in a clearing at the base of the hill, the river, the trees, the lane, the car, and the valley beyond.

It was so different from his usual work . . . (p11)

She stared back at the picture and suddenly saw it as if for the first time. (p147)

Look at these descriptions of Grandpa’s painting—in its early stage and when it is finished. From these words could you now paint your version of the painting?

Reading pictures

Jess talks with her mother about how Grandpa says that ‘it’s not up to the artist to explain a painting because each picture has its own life and its own language, just like a poem, and we either understand it or we don’t.’ (p12)

Do you agree with Grandpa?

What sort of pictures do you like and why do you like them? What might attract you to a picture? Is it the colours, the subject, or the style of the painting, or the meaning it has for you and the way it makes you think of things?

When you look at pictures in a gallery, how long do you spend looking at each one? Some research has shown that the average time adults spend looking at each picture in an exhibition is only 30 seconds. Think about Grandpa’s river painting and how it was only gradually, and with Alfred’s suggestion, that Jess realised that it was a painting not only of a river but of a boy.

Poetry

‘Written in quiet, non-poetic prose—but it’s a poem’ Susan Cooper.

What do you think of this description of River Boy? Why does she say it’s a poem?

We often think that poems are mainly about rhyme and rhythm but they are as much about getting across experiences, ideas or emotions in a vivid and imaginative way. With this in mind, think about the imagery that is used in River Boy, especially the metaphor of the river portraying life, and a journey, and the challenges represented by Grandpa’s painting and Jess’s swim.

Above all there is the river boy himself and the reflections and experiences, feelings and emotions, all bound up in this image.
MORE TO THINK ABOUT AND DISCUSS

‘Everything changes, Jess. Everything. Nothing stays the same. Nothing lasts for ever.’ (p26)

Grandpa says this when he realises how different his old home feels from what he remembers. Is this your experience too?—especially when returning to something after a long time. He’s telling Jess that change needs to be accepted; what sayings do we use to help us to do this and make the most of change?

At the same time he thinks that his old friend Alfred will have stayed the same. Think of people and things that you know where this is the case; are you glad, or would it be better if they did change?

It was one of those rituals she treasured . . . (p37)

Jess loves fetching Grandpa’s painting things for him and has done this since she was small. Why do you think she treasured this ritual? A familiar pattern maybe, or something shared?

What rituals do you have in your life—and why do you have them? It may only be small things like setting the table for tea, or taking a particular path, but they are often very important to us.

. . . the only reality was now . . . the past and future were merely brigands that stole from the present and gave nothing back. (p58)

What do you think Grandpa means here? Do you agree with him on this?

. . . she knew she would never come back to this place. (p168)

Jess wants to leave untouched in her memory the spell of these river boy days. Have you had experiences which you want to keep like this? Where the memory is so magical that you don’t want to risk losing it?

After death

. . . all that he had been. And somehow still was. (p169)

Jess realises that although Grandpa has died he will still be in her mind and her life. Think of the ways in which we remember people when they have gone—for example in our memories of them and things they said which have stayed with us; things they have made or written; and in physical, maybe treasured, objects which they have left for us.
## MORE READING

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