

Kestrel for a Knave, Barry Hines (1968)

Session 1

Resources:

Free download of the book: https://kupdf.net/download/barry-hines-a-kestrel-for-a-knave_5a118630e2b6f5126c511a32_pdf

Looking for Kes: www.youtube.com/watch?v=7w3VccLdEpM (1 hr)

Kes (1969) - film.

Title - What does it mean?

Kestrel: Our most familiar and common **falcon**, the **Kestrel** is famous as the 'motorway **hawk**', often seen hovering over roadside verges. It is the only commonly occurring **falcon** in Britain that habitually hovers, although Lesser **Kestrel** and Red-footed **Falcon** in Europe also use this hunting technique. (<https://hawkandowltrust.org/about-birds-of-prey/kestrel>)

The title is a quotation from the 15th century Boke of St. Albans, which pairs appropriate birds with social ranks from "An Eagle for an Emperor, a Gyrfalcon for a King..." to "a Kestrel for a Knave" meaning that the kestrel is the bird appropriate to the common man or, in this case, to the common boy.

A Kestrel for a Knave

'An Eagle for an Emperor, a Gyrfalcon for a King:
a Peregrine for a Prince, & a Saker for a Knight,
a Merlin for a lady, a Goshawk for a Yeoman,
a Sparrowhawk for a Priest, & a Kestrel for a Knave.'

-- Selected from the boke of St Albans, 1486, and a Harleian manuscript.

1. Knave, rascal, rogue, scoundrel are disparaging terms applied to persons considered base, dishonest, or worthless. Knave, which formerly meant merely a boy or servant, in modern use emphasises baseness of nature and intention: a dishonest and swindling knave. (<https://www.dictionary.com/browse/knave>)

Story Recap:

(* & Pink writing = actual violence or threat of violence)

Before School

- Wakes up with Jud → **hits him** and takes his bike
- Goes to do his paper round → Steals breakfast
Mr Porter **has a go at him**

'You know what they said when I took you on, don't you?'... 'They said, you'll have to keep your eyes open now, you know, 'cos they're all alike off that estate. They'll take your breath if you're not careful.'

'I've never taken owt o' yours, have I?'

'I've never given you chance, that's why.' (p12)

- Back to home → Mam has had a man (stranger to Billy) staying over
Mam **has a go at him**

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'You'll be more than late, unless you do as you're yelled.' 'He said I'd get t'stick next time.' 'That's nowt to what you'll get if I catch you.' (p20)

Throws eggs at his own house

Told to put a bet on for Jud

Takes comfort in Kes.

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"There's allus someone after me." (p21)

Flashback

- Goes nesting → Jud **threatens him** (Billy ate his sandwich)

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'I'll bloody murder thee when I get home.' (P23)

Tibby & Mac (MacDowall) not up - so goes alone - monastery farm

Farmer **has a go at him** 'Well bugger off then!' (p29), but eases up

when he realises Billy means no harm and is just in love with nature. 'Go on, mister, I've never found a hawk's nest before.' 'Come on, then.' (p30)

Finds out about getting books on falconry

- Library → The librarian is **short with him**. More concerned with rules than fostering enthusiasm for reading. 'NO! Now go on home and get that form signed.' (p33)

- Bookshop → Steals the falconry book.

- Home → Jud **has another go at Billy**, bullying him over the book and wanting to keep a kestrel.

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'He rushed over to the settee and jumped astride Billy, pushing his face into the cushions and forcing one arm up his back in a half-nelson.' (p36)

Mam and Jud go out for the evening

Jud comes home drunk - Billy shouts insults at him

Billy runs away and gets Kes.

School - morning

- **Mr Crossley** → **has a go at him** after Billy shouts out the shipping forecast during the register 'Well SIT DOWN THEN.' (p45)
- **Mr Gryce** → **Has a go at everyone** about singing
Billy falls asleep in assembly...

Flashback

- Socialising Kes

... **caning** (mini climax)

- **Mr Farthing** → to start with **has a go at him** ...

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'Casper! Tibbut! You'll both be asleep in a minute. I'll knock you to sleep! The rest of you - QUIET.' (P62)

'There's always someone to spoil it. There's always someone you can't suit, who has to be awkward, who refuses to be interested in anything, someone like you, Casper.'

... but changes tune when Billy tells everyone about Kes.

Fight with MacDowell

- **Mr Sugden** → has a go at him. Bullies, humiliates and finally physically abuses him with a **freezing shower**. (mini climax)

Lunch

- Back to home → Kes training
- Betting shop → spends Jud's money on chips (sets up for the ultimate climax)

School - afternoon

- School → Late
Sees Jud, * realises why he is there and hides. *
Late for employment officer

'When they reached their classroom Gryce was standing at the door. When he saw Billy he batted him twice around the ears, forehand left ear, backhand right.'

Afterschool

- Back to home → Kes missing

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'Have you seen our Jud?'...

'I can see you haven't, else you wouldn't be in one piece now.' (p142)

Fights Jud and finds Kes dead in the dustbin

- Goes to old cinema → Thinks about how things were when his dad was about.
- Back to home → Buries Kes and goes to bed.

Discussion

First impressions:

- How do you feel about the book and/or film?
- What do you think the story is about?
- How would you sum Billy's life up?
- Why do you think the book and film were so popular when they were released? Very few books giving the voice of the working class by the working class - non-romanticised or reflected the working class as innately criminal, reflected the social concerns of the day - particularly with regard to schooling, lots of people would be able to relate to the characters.
- Why do you think it is still so popular today?
- What part does language play in the book?

(“If I was writing it today I wouldn't use dialect. It can be irritating to the reader and whatever methods you try, you don't capture the voice on the page. I think the best solution is to use dialect words to give the flavour of the region, but trying to reproduce northern working-class speech with the glottal stop as in 'Going to t'cinema' doesn't work at all. The answer of course is to write about middle-class characters who are 'Going to the cinema'. I didn't have this problem when I was adapting the novel into the film script. I wrote it in standard English and the actors translated it back.” **(Barry Hines, Afterword Penguin books 1999)**)

- Is it still a relevant piece of literature?

A closer look:

- How does the book start? In bed
- How does it end? Going to bed
- What is the significance of this? Nothing changes/life goes on/no way out of the cycle of poverty

Read: Billy's 'tall story' from handout (p73/160).

Does he want things to be different, as it still starts and finishes in bed, so what is the difference between Billy's tall story and Billy's everyday story?

- What troubles Billy?
 - Constant threat of violence
 - Fear of having his life mapped out like Jud and every other young man in the area (work in mine, earn to drink any the weekends, possibly produce a child who will live the same life as you, die young),
 - Being mocked and bullied for his family background: MacDowall 'I've heard that's got more uncles than any kid in this city.' (p75/160 fight behind school)
 - Not having enough to eat
 - Being cold and not clothed properly
 - Not being loved/being neglected by his mother and father

- How does the kestrel fill these holes in Billy's life?

- He feeds off the freedom the bird, even though he can't have freedom himself
- The bird that responds to Billy's need to love and care for something - the more Billy puts into the bird, the more the bird thrives
- It is something beautiful, graceful and powerful in Billy's world, which is otherwise grimy, bleak and powerless
- It offers hope, despite the hopeless situation Billy finds himself in - something to look up to, something to aspire to be

"Is it tame?" Is it heck tame, it's trained that's all. It's fierce, an' it's wild, an' it's not bothered about anybody, not even me right. And that's why it's great.' (p118/160)

- It gives Billy a sense of self-respect that people never gave him - he was proud of what he could do with a bird that could never be tamed.

- How does the Kestrel change Billy's life?

'I've reformed, Sir.'

Mr Fathing smiled at him. But Billy was serious.

'It's right, Sir, I haven't done owt for ages now! That's one o' t'reasons why MacDowall's all's pickin' on me, 'cos I don't knock about wi' their gang any more. An' it's since I stopped goin' wi' them that I stopped gettin' into trouble.'

'What happened, did you have an argument or something?'

'No, Sir, it wa' when I got my hawk. I got that interested in it that it seemed to take all my time up. It wa' summer then, you see, and I used to take it down our fields at nights. Then when t'dark nights came back, I never got back in wi' 'em. I wasn't bothered any more.' (p83/160)

- Is he really reformed?

- Throws eggs at own home
- Steals eggs, chocolate, juice etc.

- Why does he throw eggs at his own house?

- He hates his own family, at least how they are not meeting his needs - deep-seated anger and resentment.
- You don't respect where you live if no one respects you.
- You repeat the behaviour you have been shown - people treat you with disrespect, you learn to treat others the same way.
- Protesting everything he has to live with - particularly his mother - a mother is meant to protect you, Billy's doesn't.

Why does he start shouting names at Jud when he is in a drunken sleep?

- The only time he can get his own back without physical repercussions
- Dysfunctional family
- Billy suffers neglect, emotional abuse and physical abuse at home

Why does Jud treat Billy so badly?

- Jealous - Had to share his ma with Billy/Billy's dad, his bed and other basics with Billy
 - Saw Billy being parented by Billy's dad (cinema trip) - he too wanted love and protection from a mother and father, he wanted to belong.
- Taking out his own life frustrations on someone smaller

Read: Extract from the fight at the table, after Billy retrieves Kes from the bin, on handout (p151/160).

- What are your thoughts on this?
- What is Mam feeling? Why?
- What is Jud feeling? Why?
- What is Billy feeling? Why?
- They all value the bird differently. Do you have any sympathy with Mam's or Jud's viewpoints?

Read: Chris Packham article on handout

- What are the similarities between Chris Packham and Billy, based on the information in the article?
- If you have ever lost a pet/animal in your life, how did it make you feel?
- Do you think it is common to have more affection for an animal than a person?

Read: Final lines of book, on handout:

'When he arrived home there was no one in. He buried the hawk in the field just behind the shed; went in, and went to bed.' (p160/160)

- What do you think of that as an ending?
- Does it fit the rest of the book?
- Chris said that his bird 'defined the rest of my life', how do you think Kes would impact on the rest of Billy's life?
- What do you think Billy would go on to do? The coal mine? A desk job?

'Where are tha goin' to work, then?'... 'I don't know; but I'm not goin' to work down t'pit.' (P22/160)

Read: Extract from the Barry Hines' Afterword, from Penguin books 1999, on handout:

'...Over the years I have received many rewarding letters from readers, saying how much they enjoyed the novel and in some cases how it has actually changed their lives. For example, a young man from Manchester uses A Kestrel for a Knave in his work with young offenders and is setting up an appreciation society for the novel. I received a letter from a man with a similar background to Billy Casper, who wrote that the book made him realise it was possible to achieve something in life however difficult the circumstances. He later went on to become a lecturer. He said that the question 'What's tha mean Germans bite?' has become a catch phrase between him and his brother. I think the general appreciation of the book is best summed up by a man who wrote, 'I read A Kestrel for a Knave when I was 12 or 13 and was haunted by it. I knew a few Billy Caspers - I was very nearly a Billy Casper myself. I found the love of music as my escape... 'Kes' mirrored some of the things that were going on around me. Billy's hawk was my music' He went on to say that he became a musician and enclosed with his letter his first CD entitled. For a Knave.' (Barry Hines, Afterword Penguin books 1999)

- Do you think this is a positive or a negative book?
- What lasting impressions has it left on you?