

## Kestrel for a Knave, Barry Hines (1968)

### Session 2

#### Resources:

Free download of the book: [https://kupdf.net/download/barry-hines-a-kestrel-for-a-knave\\_5a118630e2b6f5126c511a32\\_pdf](https://kupdf.net/download/barry-hines-a-kestrel-for-a-knave_5a118630e2b6f5126c511a32_pdf)

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

Kes (1969) - film.

#### CONTEXT

##### When and where is the book set?

Barnsley, South Yorkshire - a mining town right on the edge of countryside

##### Watch:

[www.youtube.com/watch?v=9CVq8x6pyVU](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9CVq8x6pyVU)

**Barnsley - a portrait of the town and its people - part 1** (0.40 - 3.25, 5.45 - 6.19)

[www.youtube.com/watch?v=JkFm8c0OGD4](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JkFm8c0OGD4)

**Barnsley - a portrait of the town and its people - part 2** (0 - 1.30, 3.40 - 5.46)

[www.youtube.com/watch?v=EOcWuxdUVHc](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EOcWuxdUVHc)

**Barnsley - a portrait of the town and its people - part 3** (2.35 - 3.30, 4.35 - 5.10)

Late 1960s.

**Baby-boomers** - a significant-sized generation who were coming into adulthood, with a louder voice and more money than the generations before them. This had a major impact on philosophical thinking, arts and social change. People expected more from life than what their parents had had.

**Technology and communications** were advancing,

**Education** - more people gaining higher qualifications (Open University started in 1969), philosophy of teaching was changing, as was our understanding of human nature

**Society was becoming more permissive** - contraceptive pill became available for unmarried women, abortion was legalised, as was homosexuality (for over 21s), women could file for divorce without the need for their husbands to be having an affair, etc.

**The world was questioning patriarchal authority** - demonstrations, equal pay act, married women could work, trade unions increasing in power and politics,

**Swinging Sixties** - British Art, music, film, literature and fashion were suddenly surging forward - particularly on the international scene.

**Watch:** [www.youtube.com/watch?v=C4pJru-L\\_GQ](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C4pJru-L_GQ) Review of the sixties (6.25mins)

## What do you think this book is about?

- Living your dream
- Making your passions a reality
- Fighting the system
- Taking control over your own life
- Being an individual in a world that wants you to just do as you are expected to do
- Deprivation in 1960s Britain
- The unfairness of the school/social system in 1960s Britain
- The failings and cruelty of corporal punishment
- The poverty trap
- A day in the life of Billy Casper

### Watch: The Beatles, A Day in the Life

[www.youtube.com/watch?v=usNsCeOV4GM](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=usNsCeOV4GM)

### Read: A Day in the Life, on handout

The **zeitgeist** (spirit/mood/social fashion of a particular time) of the 1960s was very much about rejecting the status quo of everything that had come before. Mundanity was something to be associated with the old. The young wanted new, exciting and embraced a whole new way of thinking.

A Kestrel for a Knave and A Day in the Life were both written at the end of the 60s, and both reflect on the idea of a grey world - doing the same thing over and over again - while looking into other people's worlds/new worlds where everything is happening, and seeing opportunity for change if you can only just access those worlds.

#### Peeking into other worlds

K4aK: looking at the houses in the posh part of town (as emphasised in a Tall Story)  
ADintheL: reading the newspaper (heir's son dies in car crash, potholes opening up in Blackburn)

#### Opportunities

K4aK: finding out about keeping a kestrel.  
ADintheL: people turning from the old war time films, presumably to something new

#### Escapism

K4aK: Kes  
ADintheL: drug taking - smoking on bus

#### From a depressing, mundane, repetitive world

K4aK: violence, school, neglect, poverty.  
ADintheL: daily drudgery of life

## **THEME: poverty**

**Poverty was still being felt after effect of 2nd world war.**

**Show:** <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/gallery/2014/oct/01/below-the-poverty-line-slum-britain-in-the-1960s-in-pictures>

abject poverty/extreme poverty

**Absolute poverty:** unable to pay for basic necessities - e.g. water, heating, food, clothing, electricity.

**Relative poverty:** a certain percentage below average incomes - roughly 60% - so changes depending in which society you live.

**Watch:** [www.youtube.com/watch?v=oMCsRd3Rfgg](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oMCsRd3Rfgg)

What is poverty? | 1960s UK | 1960s Nottingham | St Ann's | Documentary Report | 1969 (6.45mins)

**Does Billy live in poverty?** Sharing a bed, freezing house, steals breakfast, working a paper round to pay a fine, mother securing skirt with a safety pin as not the right size, owe money to the corner shop, can't afford 'luxuries' like books, Billy wears plimsolls all year round, hasn't got the clothing for PE, Billy is constantly hungry, Billy doesn't have underwear, Billy's zip is broken on his coat and he won't be getting a new one etc.

**What is Billy's family's socio-economic group [social class, income, education etc.]?**

Poor. Very poor. Single parent household - divorcee, with children from two separate fathers, and regular male 'visitors'.

**Poverty trap:** where people are stuck in position of poverty that they cannot get out of. It can be over generations, and not only includes lack of money, but also lack of access to things like education and healthcare.

**Tell me about Billy's mother...**

**Low education:** can't teach/support her own children's learning, not so good at parenting, lack of employability, unaware of supplying a balanced diet to her growing child

**Low pay:** due to lack of education, lack of job opportunities with promotions etc. in the area, being female.

**Social stigma:** Looked down on by others of the same class in the town. No husband to support her, as a result, society is less likely to support her and her children.

**Practical problems:** hard to bring up a family on her own,

**Poor parenting:** paying little attention to Billy, hence delinquent behaviour - petty crime. Not interested in Billy's education, no future aspirations for him, happy for him to be late, won't buy correct kit. Is indifferent to him smoking etc. and physical abuse from brother. Doesn't supply him with a balanced diet.

**Escapism:** she escapes her life by going out at the weekends and meeting up with boyfriends.

### **Why did Billy do so badly in school?**

Billy's distractions and failings are taken as disinterest/laziness

- no parental support = in with a 'bad crowd'
- social group getting into trouble = fine
- fine means no money
- works a part time job to pay for past misdemeanours = falls asleep in class
- falls asleep in class = caning
- caning = distracted in lesson
- no money = no PE kit
- no PE kit = bullying from teacher
- bullying from teacher = late for Kes
- Late for Kes = no lunch
- no food and no money = steal Jud's money
- Jud after him = not able to concentrate in employment office
- not able to concentrate at employment office... could have change rest of life

### **What might keep Billy in a cycle of poverty?**

- Billy losing the only thing that brings him joy could push him back to old friends and petty crime
- Not making it to employment office could lead to fewer job opportunities
- Unlikely to get good references from teachers
- Low pay, long hours, bad-for-health jobs continues cycle of deprivation.

### **Tell me about Billy:**

lives in deprivation

doesn't want to go down the mine

loves nature

was in with a bad crowd, had been a petty criminal

a bird has turned his life around, but still steals

keeps fighting back against the system, authority, the unfairness of it all

he is less than everyone, yet at the same time is greater than everyone

### **How does Barry Hines create sympathy for the character Billy Casper?**

### **How does Kes affect Billy's life, both positively and negatively?**

### **How would the story have been different if Billy had any friends in the book?**

Many people like books that give a universal truth and hope: there will always be an under dog, but while they keep fighting back, there is hope for us all; bad things happen, it is how you deal with that that makes the difference between a Jud and a Billy.

**Watch: 'the fight'** - [www.youtube.com/watch?v=sldmRM187\\_E](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sldmRM187_E) (5min44)

**Read: Extract 1**

[Mr Farthing] "I don't know, you always seem to cop it, don't you, Casper?"... "I wonder why? Why do you think it is?" (p80/160)

**Why does Billy keep 'copping it'?** Social stigma. Been written off by society, and even within his own social circles, he is seen as less due to being the child of a poor, single mother and having previously been in trouble with the police.

**Read: Extract 2**

[Mr Farthing] "What about the police? Have you been in trouble with them lately?"

[Billy] "No, sir."

"Because you've reformed? Or because you haven't been caught?"

"I've reformed, Sir." (P82-3/160)

**Does Billy know right from wrong?**

**Does Billy worry about moral decisions?**

**Is he a 'good' boy?** Very caring and takes his responsibility seriously, but doesn't fuss too much about pushing back against authority - be it school, his Mam, or his employer - as he doesn't respect them.

**Does he have ambition?** Not academically, but he does with animals, wanting to train them etc. Not wanting to go down the pit is an ambition to do something else.

Does he have dreams? A Tall Story.

**What do you think he will go on to do?**

**Why do you think Barry Hines wanted to write about a character like this?** Using literature as a social commentary. Showing the people and place he came from. Giving voice to those who never get heard.

## **THEME: violence**

### **There is a lot of violence in Billy's world. Can you think of any examples?**

As a result, he assumes he is going to get hurt and constantly behaves accordingly:

- stays just out of reach of the mother when first back from his job
- maintains distance between himself and the farmer.

The farmer started to walk across to the ruins. The little girl ran to keep up with him, and Billy backed off, keeping the same distance between them all the time. (p30)

Hitting children and boys in particular really wasn't that uncommon in 1960s Britain. In fact, it was actively encouraged - 'Spare the rod, spoil the child'.

Corporal punishment was only banned in UK state schools in 1986, and English and Welsh private schools in 1998 (N.I 2003, Scotland 2000).

### **Read: Mr Gryce's lecture**

#### **How did reading that passage make you feel?**

#### **What difference did corporal punishment make to the school and the students within the school?**

### **Read: Extract from James O'Brien Interview**

James O'Brien, author of How Not to be Wrong - <https://www.penguin.co.uk/articles/2020/october/james-o-brien-how-not-to-be-wrong-interview.html>

"The first part is you admit that you're afraid and then you work out why," he says. "So since the age of 10, when I first started getting beaten by my headmaster at prep school, I have not been afraid of anything. That was my cradle, that's who I thought I was, the boy who got beaten more than any other in the history of the school - hell yeah!

"And I spent 30 years of my life saying: 'It didn't do me any harm' and arguing on the telly and on the radio about why corporal punishment, if it was used sparingly and intelligently, was a wonderful way of disciplining young children.

"[But] I was really scared. I was broken. I'd get myself off somewhere alone at the age of 10, 11, 12 and I'd howl and I'd cry, and no one ever saw it. Then I'd march back in again and I was Jimbo, the boy that got beaten a lot."

#### **Any thoughts?**

**What do you think Barry Hines is trying to say through Mr Gryce's lecture?** social commentary

**How do you think people at the time would have responded to this aspect of the book?**