



The Book of Boy

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Boy has always been relegated to the outskirts of his small village. With a large hump on his back, a mysterious past, and a tendency to talk to animals, he is often mocked and abused by the other kids in his town. Until the arrival of a shadowy pilgrim named Secundus. Impressed with Boy's climbing and jumping abilities, Secundus engages Boy as his servant, pulling him into an expedition across Europe to gather the seven precious relics of Saint Peter. Boy quickly realizes this journey is not an innocent one. They are stealing the relics, and gaining dangerous enemies in the process. But Boy is determined to see this pilgrimage through until the end—for what if St. Peter can make Boy's hump go away?

This compelling, action-packed tale is full of bravery and daring, stars a terrific cast of secondary characters, and features an unlikely multigenerational friendship at its heart. Memorable and haunting, Catherine Gilbert Murdock's epic medieval adventure is just right for readers of Sara Pennypacker's *Pax*, Adam Gidwitz's *The Inquisitor's Tale*, and Pam Muñoz Ryan's *Echo*.

Features a map and black-and-white art throughout.

The Book of Boy Details

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From Reader Review The Book of Boy for online ebook

Betsy says

When you think about it, many authors of children must have something they're afraid to write. Some book or idea or concept that tempts them but that they wouldn't touch with a ten-foot-pole. Religion is probably right up there on some people's lists, regardless of the denomination. Is there a way to incorporate it seamlessly into a fantasy novel, retaining the parts you want, eschewing the rest? Is it wise to include at all? What constitutes religious writing at all? It's rare that a book written for kids between the ages of nine to twelve makes me raise such questions at all, but I think a lot of us would agree that *The Book of Boy* by Catherine Gilbert Murdock isn't just any old book. A skillful amalgamation of fantasy, religion, and just a hint of philosophy, Murdock eschews the old good vs. evil narrative for something, perhaps, more interesting: Truth vs. Delusion.

Everyone calls him Boy and he likes it that way. His is a simple life of tending the goats for the manor in the year 1350. He may be a hunchback and have to deal with the cruelty of kids his age, but life isn't so bad. That is, until a stranger comes to call. Ostensibly a pilgrim, the man calls himself Secundus. He is in dire need of a boy to help him carry his mysterious pack. That and . . . some other odd jobs, let's say. Boy doesn't want to go at first, but as he learns more about Secundus's quest, he begins to hope against hope. You see, Secundus seeks the relics of St. Peter so as to save his soul. Boy, on the other hand, wants his hump to go away. Could St. Peter help him with that? Or is there more to Boy than even he is willing to admit?

Generally speaking, Murdock has remained pretty squarely in the camp of the young adult novelist. Nothing wrong with that, of course. It's just meant that I haven't been able to read as many of her books as I'd like. I remember enjoying *Princess Ben* some years ago, of course. In this book for younger readers she scales back her text. Which, by extension, means reigning in character exposition as well. With the very first chapter we need to not only meet Boy but also love him. We also meet Secundus, and, like Boy, we don't know what to make of him. The chapter itself is no longer than seven pages. How do you establish character in so short an amount of time? In the case of Boy, Murdock opts to show us his kindness and joy. He loves his life, as you can clearly see, just as much as he loves his goats. Secundus is introduced as insulting and brash in the first chapter, but in the second he defends Boy from a bully. Even then, you don't know what to make of him. Excellent fodder for a story, don't you think?

We live in times when people create fantasy novels for children exceeding three hundred, four hundred, sometimes even five hundred pages or more. All this to bring them stories they haven't heard a hundred times before. It's given me a taste for brevity, if nothing else. My husband has a phrase he likes to use when he sees a film that's under two hours: "handsome". Well, in every sense of the word *The Book of Boy* is a "handsome" novel. Weighing in at 278 pages the book could easily have been little more than one hundred if it had been printed a different way. No expense has been spared in its production. The pages are thick and beveled. The original artist assigned to it was exchanged for Ian Schoenherr, a man capable of replicating a very specific woodblock style. It's a class act from start to finish, but even more than that it's a book that knows how to distill an adventure down to its most singular elements. There's not a word, a thought, or a concept out of place.

If kids complain about anything with this book, though, it'll probably concern how little additional information we receive about Boy throughout the text. Just as a warning, I'm going to spill the beans on the big reveal in this book, so if you're spoiler-averse I'd advise you to skip on down to the next paragraph. All set? Okay. So as I mentioned earlier, putting a big dollop of religion in your middle grade fantasy is by no means unheard of, it's just tricky to pull off. Adam Gidwitz gave it a good shot in *The Inquisitor's Tale* and received a Newbery Honor for his troubles. Murdock is traipsing along similar lines, but where Gidwitz is

loquacious, she's circumspect. Where he's effusive she's restrained. Both books involve angels, but where Gidwitz's is all-knowing, Murdock's could not be less well informed about, well, anything. We don't really learn anything about him that he himself didn't already know. Where he came from, why he's here, and what he's supposed to do . . . these are all left to the reader's interpretation. Murdock's giving you the dots, but you're going to have to connect them yourself. Nothing is done for the reader here.

I can only speak for myself, but the real lure of this book might not be the characters, the mysteries, the setting, or even the mysterious relics. The book has something a little more difficult to pin down, and even harder to attain. It's a sheer pleasure to read. I mean it. The chapters whiz on by, daring you to put the book down for even one iota of a second. Somehow Murdock has managed to write something simultaneously archaic in form and incredibly enticing to the modern eye. And it really doesn't matter if the Christianity here gels with your own religious beliefs or strikes you as 100% foreign. Boy is the kind of character you can't help but love. You want to go with him on this journey and, more to the point, you want him to see it to its end. If Boy is the living embodiment of kindness and joy, I can think of no better guide for young readers to encounter. We have a lot of dark, depressing, necessary books out there. Once, just once, let's enjoy the one unafraid to let a little light and laughter in.

For ages 9-12.

Sherry Guice says

I really loved this book--set in 1350 in France. Boy just wants to be a normal boy, not hunchbacked, as he joins a pilgrim making his way to Rome collecting relics. Great surprise plot twist and characters...not sure if students need background knowledge to follow the story. As Boy journey through France, he observes the devastation of the plague.

M. Lauritano says

The Book of Boy is an uncomplicated tale about a pilgrim, Secundus, and a hunchbacked boy, Boy, going on a quest to collect seven relics of Saint Peter in early fourteenth century France and Italy. Relics have no special hold on my imagination, but I am currently obsessed with the medieval period, so I jumped at a chance to read this one. Seeing comparisons to *The Inquisitor's Tale* (which now seem very much unmerited) piqued my interest even further. Unfortunately, the book did not live up to my expectations.

While early chapters painted an interesting portrait of going on a pilgrimage and the ways that relics shaped the lives of different kinds of people in society, the book did not offer much more of interest than that. One would think that stealing a series of guarded holy relics would make for a story that was exciting and fun, with some moral reflection adding a touch of richness. Imagine *National Treasure*, but a bit less ridiculous, with some historical and religious elements. That is not what this book is. The thefts, trades, and sometimes outright purchases of relics in the story happen quickly without too much conflict or surprises. More often than not, the pair is saved by an incredibly convenient key to hell that opens all locks OR Boy's fantastic ability to communicate telepathically with animals. The relic quest very quickly becomes repetitive, with the threat of capture feeling less real with every successful theft. And none of this is improved by Boy's clueless and naive narration.

Here is your big spoiler: Boy is an angel. Except it is not much of a spoiler because Murdock constantly hints

this from the start. Based on the other reviews I have read here, I might be in the minority of seeing this “twist” from the get-go, as well as Secundus being a natural opposite, coming from Hell. By the time the specifics of each character’s circumstances is revealed halfway through the novel, it adds little to the way we read the story. In fact, Boy’s angel-ness is a point of confusion. Where did he come from? How is he ignorant of his nature, especially when he is basically genderless and does not eat? Does he have a hump or is the hump made of crumpled wings? Were his wings stuck inside his hump, which shrinks as they grow? Why is he so ashamed and afraid to accept that he is an angel? In fact, he sees spreading his wings as some kind of unholy temptation. And despite the slow embrace of his identity, Boy still yearns to complete the relic quest in the hopes he will become a normal boy. All of this feels somewhat messy.

Secundus the pilgrim is equally murky, but in his case it at least feels more intentional. He has escaped hell with the surge of souls brought there by the plague. So many arriving that no one notices one man sneaking out. Apparently he also spent some time down there interviewing those who knew a thing or two about the relics of Saint Peter, because he has a whole book of tips to get them. He does this with the end goal of getting a chance to go to heaven and see his family again. A long lost son adds some complexity to his relationship with Boy. I wish he had been the narrator for this book, because his arc is more interesting and feels more complete by the end of the story. It is not clear if he actually makes it to heaven nor is it clear if he deserves to get there by stealing. It’s suggested he speaks through a dog in the denouement, but exactly what happened remains unknown. I suppose this is a bit of mystery that I feel okay with.

At the conclusion, Boy returns home with a newish (maybe more self aware?) goal to help people and wings that hide themselves more conveniently. He has changed, in being less ignorant than at the start, but I was left wondering why it was this quest that helped him to this point. I have no real takeaways from this story in terms of a message or even characters I got enough from to love. Angels are good and we should be too? Endeavor to help people both good and bad? Say what you will about Inquisitor’s Tale, it was more fun, more inclusive, more exciting, and asked interesting theological questions. For this reader, there is no comparison.

Czechgirl says

Loved the tale! Many reviews are comparing this to the Inquisitor’s Tale. I did not like The Inquisitor’s Tale. That story bored me. I liked this story much more. The book reminded me of Avi’s Crispin. I really liked the relationship build up of Secundus and Boy. In the end, they needed each other.

Sheila says

I was really looking forward to this book- a historical fiction middle level book that was not US history. This is also a fantasy book and the author does nothing to help readers understand the history and church practices in 1350. A student would not really understand the Black Death either. This book is not for children- it would be a rare middle schooler that would stick with this book. I wish it would have just been a historical fiction book. Hoping this is not the Newbery 2019 book- it is on some watch lists- have no idea why.

Kris Springer says

An entertaining, heartfelt read set in 1350’s France about a hunchback named Boy who goes on an adventure

with a pilgrim named Secundus. Thrills, spills, plus lots of animals and surprises. Boy is a great character to root for.

For readers 10 and older; best for those who enjoy both historical fiction and fantasy.

Brittany Du Pont says

I read this book out loud to my 9 & 11 year old sons. It was difficult to read out loud and consequently was a slow start. We were never quite sure if the book was historical or fantasy, and that was a difficult too. Plus, we are a Christian family, so the doctrine was difficult to sort out what was real and not. That said, my 11 year old loved the whole story. My 9 year old said it was good because of the end. WE LOVED THE END! It was heartwarming and beautiful with a clear positive message!

Heidi says

Well-written, but odd. And the medieval setting makes it unlikely that many kids will pick it up. The strong religious elements may create strong feelings as they did with me.

Ms. Yingling says

E ARC from Edelweiss Plus

Boy is a servant in the household of Sir Jacques. It used to be a decent position, especially for a hunchback, but once the lady of the manor and her children died of the plague and Sir Jacques was gravely injured, the former Cook ruled the roost. When Secundus, a pilgrim, happens by and decides that Boy could be useful in carrying his bag, he bargains with Cook and has Boy accompany him. Secundus is ill, and looking for seven relics of St. Peter's that might get him into heaven. Along the way, the two must steal, connive, and get into lots of scrapes before they can get all of the relics. Boy has a secret that Secundus guesses, and this motivates him to get Secundus to Rome so that he himself might be helped.

Strengths: There are good details about the medieval time period and information about pilgrimages and the religious ideas of the time. The E ARC did not include pictures, but the cover is lovely.

Weaknesses: Like Adam Gidwitz's *The Inquisitor's Tale*, this is a fantasy book and not strictly historical fiction. The 7th grade covers the middle ages, and I do have students ask for books on the topic, but I can't get anyone to check out the Gidwitz title.

What I really think: I will pass on purchase and stick to Cushman and Avi for realistic titles on this time period. The fantasy element makes this less than useful for my library.

Jessica says

I am lucky enough to count Jen Adams (author of the amazing *Babylit* board books and the *Edgar the Raven* books) as a good friend. Jen and I also have very similar tastes in books, so when she recommends

something, I listen! So when she told me, not once but several times, about The Book of Boy, I definitely paid attention. Also I was intrigued by the fact that she was rather cagey about it, only saying that it's about a boy in the Middle Ages . . . and then trailing off. Now I know why! And I will also be cagey about it, because you absolutely have to read this book, and saying ANYTHING else will spoil the wonderful surprises!

Kailey (BooksforMKs) says

A young hunchback goatherd named simply "Boy" is indentured as a servant to a shrewd pilgrim traveling through France in search of various relics of Saint Peter. As the two journey together, they boldly endure various adventures in their pursuit of the holy relics of Saint Peter, until they arrive at last within the holy city of Rome. Boy discovers that the pilgrim is hiding a dark past, and the pilgrim gradually reveals Boy's most closely guarded secret, his own true identity.

I really enjoyed the quickly moving plot, and the interesting medieval setting, but the best part of this book is Boy himself.

Boy is a shy, cowering young thing, afraid of being laughed at because of his hump. He is used to people throwing stones at him, calling him a monster, and making a sign of protection against him because his hump is considered bad luck. But as he learns to trust himself more, he discovers that the world can be a friendly place, and he stands up a little straighter, speaks more boldly, and acknowledges his true self. I loved his character development.

The plot really kept me engaged, interested in every page, because the story kept twisting and turning in new directions, with surprises around every corner.

I loved the history of the setting, and the medieval clothing, food, people, and culture. It all resonated and harmonized with Boy's journey and gave a richness and depth to the story.

I can't wait to read more from this author! I would recommend this book to readers from ages 9 to 90. Wonderful reading!

Disclaimer: I received a copy of this book from the publisher in exchange for a free and honest review. All the thoughts and opinions stated here are my own true thoughts, and are not influenced by anyone.

Jordan Henrichs says

Think Gidwitz's *The Inquisitor's Tale* and Whalen Turner's *The Thief*. Medieval setting, Mission Impossible-like quest for religious relics, and a few fun plot twists. Fun and original.

Leonard Kim says

Like others, I think Gidwitz's *The Inquisitor's Tale* is the obvious point of comparison. This book is much better written, often beautiful, but uncanny to the point that I wonder if some people will find this inaccessible, especially compared to Gidwitz.

Theresa Grissom says

Wow! I have to admit, I am not a huge fan of settings in the middles ages. So, for me, I had a bit of trouble starting out with this book. But, once I got to a certain point in the story, I was absolutely hooked and could not put this down! I had to see how this ended! Truly unique and utterly captivating, I will recommend this to people.

Katrina says

Soo good! The writing, the characters, the action-packed plot, the historical details. The ending let it down a tiny bit, but overall I just loved it and it's definitely my favorite of the year so far!
