



[Home](#) > The Road of Bones

The Road of Bones

Books Reviewed:

[The Road of Bones](#) [1]

Issue:

[166](#) [2]

Reviewer:

[Robert Dunbar](#) [3]

Editor's Choice:

off

Media type:

Book

BfK Rating:

5

When a man's youth has been kicked and starved out of him, it can't be put back. It is with this reflection that we leave Yuri at the end of Fine's superb novel, having followed him on a journey in which all innocence has had to be shed, even to the extent that now he wants to get away from my new self. While no specific countries or historical epochs are named, parallels between the boy's story and certain events of the 20th-century Soviet Union will strike some readers, but it is the wider, more allegorical, applications of that story that are really at the novel's centre. Here, employing the patterning of mythic quest stories, Fine's narrative reveals the manner in which brutalisation can easily topple into brutality; the oppressed threatens to become the oppressor. In Yuri's case the cycle starts as he listens, as a 12-year-old boy, to his grandmother's memories of state harassment and persecution and continues when, in an attempt to escape punishment for speaking out against the regime's totalitarianism, he runs away. In turn, this is the prelude to a trek across vast and unyielding landscapes in which he suffers almost unbearable hardship and degradation, frequently described in terms which some young readers may find harrowing. He eventually emerges from these experiences to tell his story but at a great personal price and still recalling, years afterwards, one of his grandmother's favourite proverbs: 'Only a fool cheers when the new prince rises.' At a time when too many children's novels are too easily complimented on being 'thought-provoking' it is a welcome change to encounter one which genuinely merits such praise.

Running Order:

22

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Links:

[1] <http://typo3.booksforkeeps.co.uk/childrens-books/the-road-of-bones>

[2] <http://typo3.booksforkeeps.co.uk/issue/166>

[3] <http://typo3.booksforkeeps.co.uk/member/robert-dunbar>