



Guantanamo: the agony and the courage of Prisoner No.256

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James Watson pays tribute to a remarkable new novel.

The torture of a 15-year-old boy by personnel of the greatest democracy on earth? ? outrageous. Except that, as Anna Perera, the author of **Guantanamo Boy**, tells us: ?Although **Guantanamo Boy** is a work of fiction, it is inspired by real events. It remains a fact that children have been abducted and abused and held without charge in the name of justice in Guantanamo Bay and many secret prisons around the world.? **James Watson** pays tribute to a remarkable new novel.

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?What?s going on in the world that this can happen??

Anna Perera spares us no horrors. In a rational world, the story she tells in **Guantanamo Boy** would be incredible. At the very least, such a book would invite criticism for what sceptics might regard as sensationalist invention. The torture of a 15-year-old boy by personnel of the greatest democracy on earth? ? outrageous. Alas, the post-9/11 world, the ?war on terror?, the invasion and occupation of Iraq and now the blitzkrieg of Gaza render all things, all abuses possible and all too credible.

A keen supporter of Rochdale, his local soccer team, Khalid Ahmed, like most teenagers, is frequently at odds with family life, embarrassed by his conventional dad and anxious mum. He?s not doing badly at school but not particularly well. Suddenly his life is transformed. A family visit to Pakistan is, by unforeseen circumstances, turned into a living hell; for Khalid, abduction, captivity, beating up and torture.

By being in the wrong place at the wrong time, Khalid is imprisoned without explanation, first in Karachi, then Kandahar, and finally cast into a wire kennel in Guantanamo. Khalid perceives himself as ?holed up in someone else?s nightmare?.

Throughout, the reader is forced to ask: how could this be happening? Equally, at what point will Anna Perera as it were ?relent?, draw back from the horrors to which Khalid is subjected? The answer is, she doesn?t; nor should she. Her focus is unrelentingly on Khalid?s day-to-day experience as prisoner and suspected terrorist. Cast in the present tense, the story is terrifyingly immediate. We live through Khalid?s sufferings but we also occupy his thoughts, and it is here where the power of the story resides.

Staying sane

Khalid is no pushover. Yes, he despairs, he weeps as he suffers the beatings, the solitary confinement, the sleep deprivation, the eternal cuff-links and shackles, and most horrific of all, subjection to waterboarding, the mode of torture that leaves no scars but is intended to choke the victim to death ? almost. He is forced into a ludicrous confession which

has already been printed out in readiness for his signature.

Beaten, Khalid might be, but he is never defeated: 'I'm not going to let them win.' In the face of despair, anger upholds him, a fury at the injustice he is being subjected to. In the heads of the interrogators there is only one definition of this Muslim boy: he is guilty of plotting city bombings; he has links with al-Qaeda: and what evidence is there? 'he's been computer gaming with his cousin Tariq who has invented a game with the fateful title of Bomber One. Today, gamers young and old understand the risks involved in such seemingly harmless on-line activities; and would be aware of the reach of Big Brother surveillance into their lives. Khalid and Tariq are innocents before the Fall.

The reader is likely to be constantly shocked by the author's scrupulous eye for detail. Perera's descriptions burn off the page. Yet all the while Khalid is emerging as a person to be reckoned with. When he is kitted out with his lurid orange prison garb and the guard clicks the cuffs tight shut, he manages to joke, 'Too loose, mate!' But his captors 'don't laugh. They never laugh.' Asked which cities he planned to bomb, he cites Burnley, Barnsley, Bolton, Accrington and Todmorden; after which he cannot stop laughing 'until he is nearly beaten to death.

Khalid's greatest challenge throughout his two-year captivity is to stay sane. He does this by holding on to what he values most ' his life back in Rochdale, his family, his friends and Niamh, the girl he fancies. They become more and more precious to him; his weapon of survival. He challenges his interrogators: if he is guilty of terrorism as they are so certain he is, 'Where's the judge who found me guilty, then? Go on, where, tell me??

Torture in teen fiction?

Years ago my novel **Talking in Whispers**, set in Chile as the military junta seized power, came in for some flak as a result of a scene in which the young hero, Andres, is subjected to torture. The issue of how far the author of stories for Young Adults should push reality was later discussed at a schools conference in Birmingham. The panel of authors was cautious, but the large audience of teenagers was adamant: no censorship; muted or tailored truth they unanimously regarded as patronising.

It could be argued that, despite the allurements of consumerism and celebrity in contemporary society, young people's regard for the challenging and the serious still holds good. If Anna Perera has had the nerve to reconstruct for her readers the experience suffered in real life by hundreds at Guantanamo or in renditions throughout the world, her efforts should be widely applauded, her grim scene-setting welcomed.

Anna Perera's is a considerable feat of authorial research and imagination. **Guantanamo Boy** is a terrifying read, but its humanity is evident and inspiring. School librarians and teachers will see it as a vital text posing many questions for discussion and debate. It would be a pity, however, to confine this novel solely to the wire kennel of teen fiction. It is an illuminating story for all of us, reminding us that for every fictional prisoner of Guantanamo, there are hundreds of victims whose stories will never be told.

During his captivity Khalid is driven by anger, but later he admits, 'I suppose the main thing I've learnt is that hatred changes nothing. It just adds to the hatred that's already there.'

[image:James Watson - 2009.jpg:left]

James Watson's latest book is **Fair Game: The Steps of Odessa** (Spire Publishing). He is also the author of **The Freedom Tree, No Surrender, Ticket to Prague, Justice of the Dagger** and two plays for school and youth theatre production, **Banned! Tom Paine, This Was Your Life** and **Gotcha! Wars-R-Us.com**.

Guantanamo Boy by Anna Perera is published by Puffin (978 0 14 132607 8) at £6.99.



[Guantanamo Bay.jpg](#) [3]



[James Watson - 2009.jpg](#) [4]

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