

Written Comprehension: 'The Bad Seeds'

A. General Comprehension

1. Give the **date**, the **city**, the **specific location** and the **names** of the people involved.
2. Who were the two murderers? What age were they and what had they been doing when they came across the young boy?
3. Who was the victim? (*Name and age*). What was he doing and with whom when he met the two boys?
4. What did they force him to do?

B. Right or Wrong?

1. "The two murderers had been skipping classes when they met James."
(Justify by giving **2 quotations** from the text.)
2. "James Bulger's case gained international media coverage."
(Justify by giving **one quotation** from the text.)
3. "James's body was found on a Sunday on a railway track."
(Justify by giving **one quotation** from the text.)

C. The trial

1. What is "**the presumption of doli incapax**"?
2. What was the outcome of the trial?
3. Did the British authority reveal the two murderer's identities to the public?

D. The aftermath

1. What happened in 1994? Why? Did it become effective?
2. Who established the **Crime and Disorder Act 1998**? What is it and what did it set?
3. When was the two murderers released? Under which conditions?
4. What happened to the two murderers afterwards? Was their rehabilitation successful?

E. Analysis

- Why can we affirm that the James Bulger's case challenged the British legal system? (**Use your own words**).

The grainy CCTV footage of toddler James Bulger being led away to his death by two older boys has been seared into the memory of all who saw it. Now, 20 years after the two-year-old's murder, Jane Cornwell returns to Liverpool to see how some of those affected have fared.



It was Friday lunchtime in the strand shopping centre in Bootle, Merseyside, six kilometres from the heart of Liverpool. It wasn't as busy as on a Saturday, but it was crowded enough for two 10-year-old boys to skip school, wander about getting up to no good and arouse more irritation than suspicion. The Strand had more than 100 shops, set over two floors.

The pair of junior truants had been nicking stuff all morning: batteries, a clockwork soldier, some blue Humbrol model paint. At some point they decided to nick a toddler. It was a terrible dare shared by two damaged children with warped chemistry; it seems fair to say neither boy would have tried to take a child on his own. They managed to coax a youngster a few metres out of department store T. J. Hughes before his anxious mother ran out and scooped him up. Undeterred, they looked around the lower concourse - which still has the same beige tiles and strip lights - and saw little James Bulger standing in the doorway of A. R. Tyms.



Denise only turned her back for a minute. She'd taken out her purse, and the assistant had got the order mixed up. The next thing, James was gone.

It is now 20 years since blond, blue-eyed James Patrick Bulger was abducted from the Strand by Robert Thompson and Jon Venables. Twenty years since he was forced to walk four kilometres to a desolate stretch of railway line, where he was beaten, pelted with stones and had blue paint splattered in his eye before being bashed to death with an iron bar.

His little body was discovered on the tracks two days later on Valentine's Day. A group of boys had found the body - at first they thought it was a broken doll - and had rushed screaming down the overgrown embankment to Walton Lane police station, only a couple of hundred metres away.

"I've dealt with many murders but I've never seen the extent of the injuries that were inflicted on someone incapable of defending himself," says Albert Kirby, 67, who was then head of the Merseyside Police Serious Crime Squad. "You couldn't think the person responsible for this was a child."



News of the murder left Britain reeling. How could two 10-year-olds be capable of such an abhorrent deed? What possessed them to torture and kill a baby (in their

separate police interviews, both Thompson and Venables would refer to James as "the baby"), in the most brutal way, for no apparent reason? What kind of nation could allow this to happen? **"A nation in moral decay," said the then shadow home secretary, Tony Blair.**



Britain's tabloids labelled the boys "evil beasts" and "depraved monsters". Front pages and TV news programs from Amsterdam to Sydney featured that now iconic, blurry CCTV image of the trusting James being led from the Strand by the two older boys, his tiny legs hurrying to keep up. Then, as now, there were so many questions. Did the boys understand the seriousness of their actions? Were they capable of understanding?

"My son was the same age back then," says Jenny Johnson, 45, at Discount Fruits. "We all went out and bought them child reins; suddenly there were all these little kids on leads everywhere."

At that time, children between 10 and 14 could be tried for criminal behaviour in Great Britain only if the prosecution could prove the offender had known that what they were doing was seriously wrong - a rebuttal of the presumption of *doli incapax* (the incapability of criminal intent).

"They knew what they were doing was wicked," writes Ralph Bulger in *My James*. "Thompson and Venables had plenty of opportunities to walk away from James, to let him live, but they never showed an ounce of compassion or feeling for a tiny boy whose life had barely started."

Many police at the scene were traumatised by the extent of James's injuries (42 in all). Everyone involved - from the juror who recoiled when asked to hold the iron bar that killed James, to Ralph's brother Jimmy, who had the scarring task of identifying his nephew's remains - was psychologically affected.

"What we were faced with then was something none of us [in the police force] had ever faced before," Kirby says.

After being found guilty in November 1993, **Thompson and Venables became the youngest convicted murderers in Britain for almost 300 years**. "An act of unparalleled evil and barbarity," said Mr Justice Morland before sentencing **them to be detained at Her Majesty's pleasure for a minimum of eight years**, the normal substitute sentence for life imprisonment when the offender is a juvenile.

After agreeing that the two boys should be publicly identified, the judge set an order in place forbidding the disclosure of their whereabouts. Outside the court the crowd surged towards the police vans as Thompson and Venables left for their separate secure children's homes, never to see each other again.

In 1994, the home secretary, Michael Howard, increased the boys' minimum sentence to 15 years following a petition from James Bulger's family with signatures from 278,000 people who believed that the duo should never be released. **In 1999, the European Court of Human Rights** ruled that putting children on trial in such an environment was unfair, and reinstated the original minimum sentence.

It was under Blair's watch that the **Crime and Disorder Act 1998** set the age of criminal responsibility in England and Wales at 10 years old, making it one of the lowest in the Western world.

Tabloid stories about the boys enjoying special privileges including PlayStations, holiday camps and football matches while they were locked up underscored their belief that Thompson and Venables had got off scot-free.

"I am still full of hate," said Denise Bulger - now Denise Fergus - more than once. "I will do my best to hunt them down," said Ralph Bulger in 2000 when asked how he felt about the imminent release of Thompson and Venables.

In 2001, aged 18, Thompson and Venables were given new identities and released on a "life licence" which imposed strict conditions on what they could and couldn't do.

Thompson has allegedly done okay: there were rumours that he'd fathered a child, that he was living with his gay partner in Australia.

Venables has proved more problematic. At 17, while still inside the Red Bank secure children's unit, he'd been accused of having sex with a female care worker. For a while, once he was out, he appeared to be functioning. Then he started drinking, taking drugs. In 2008, aged 26, there was a scuffle outside a nightclub and an arrest for a small amount of cocaine. Then, in July 2010, he was returned to prison for two years after pleading guilty to downloading and distributing indecent images of children.

So what went wrong? was 18 too young to release a youth who'd been locked up during his formative years to then try and assume a new life under a new name, in a society where he could never tell anyone what he'd done?

"The whole episode was a huge embarrassment for the government and the legal system," writes Ralph Bulger. "They had tried to 'cure' a savage killer and had failed. I only hoped that lessons had been learnt to safeguard the protection of all children for the future."