

**Danny Miller in Pat Barker's *Border Crossing* -
a study in manipulation**

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Abstract

In my essay I discuss the character Danny Miller in Pat Barker's *Border Crossing* (2001). I argue that he does not change in the novel, even though he goes through rehabilitation, after murdering Lizzie Parks, his elderly neighbour. Firstly, I write about real-life cases of similar child murderers and consider whether Danny is representative of these cases or not. Also, I write about whether Danny's family and background play a part in why he murders the old lady or if he simply has an "evil nature." Furthermore, I bring up the question that the novel raises about the existence of evil and the innocence of children. Danny's personality and skills in manipulation are also important aspects of this essay. Lastly, the name *Border Crossing* is very suitable for this novel and in this essay I will discuss why.

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Introduction

Danny Miller is a very interesting character in a very interesting novel. When you read *Border Crossing* (2001) by Pat Barker, which is my primary source for this essay, you sometimes feel sorry for him and other times you are afraid of him and what he is capable of doing. Memory and the idea of “evil” play a big part in the novel and the fact that Danny believes his own story even though it is inaccurate. *Border Crossing* is a novel that makes you think about what humans, and especially children, are capable of and if the idea that children are born innocent is actually true.

Danny is a young man of 23 years with a troublesome background. At the beginning of the novel he has recently got out from rehabilitation which he has been in since he was ten, when he murdered an old lady. One day he decides to throw himself into the river, but he is saved by his old psychologist Tom Seymour. Whether this is a major coincidence or not, we do not know until later on in the book. Together they start to unveil Danny's past and discover the truth about the murder.

My goal for this essay is to determine whether Danny changes or if he has the same personality and dark mind as he had as a ten-year-old boy throughout the whole novel. *Border Crossing* is a very dark novel but it also feels realistic. This essay discusses if Danny's rehabilitation has worked and if he has benefited from it, or if it has been a waste of time, only seeming to help but in reality not doing so. The debate about whether Danny is evil, and if there is such a thing as “being evil” or if there simply are good people doing evil deeds is considered in this essay. Do Danny's family and background play a part in the murder or is it all his own doing; is he the only one to blame? This is another issue that is discussed in this essay, not only in the case of Danny but in similar cases.

My argument for this essay is that Danny does not change. In *Border Crossing*, Pat Barker examines whether the idea that children are born innocent and cannot perform evil deeds themselves or without something affecting them to do it is correct. This debate about the moral nature of children is something that will be brought up in this essay. Barker looks at this point of

view with scepticism and brings up the fact that we might all be capable of murder. A situation in the book that shows this is the one that Tom found himself in when he was a young boy and he and his friend were looking after another child, and the day almost ended in a tragedy. This will be further discussed later on in the essay. Also, some research has been done on the disease “borderline personality disorder”, and my research into this concludes that Danny has some of the symptoms of this but not all of them, and therefore he is not a clear case. This will be looked into in the essay.

When I use the term “being evil” I mean a person that intentionally does evil things in order to hurt or harm someone else, or does something evil to work things in his or her own favour. A good person doing evil things might be a victim of circumstances or might do something evil without really meaning it, or might not understand what he or she is doing. As it says in the IEP (*Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*), “evil” is a very complex conception to explain. Something is evil if it involves for example “some harm (whether it be minor or great) being done to the physical and/or psychological well-being of a sentient creature” or “a person doing that which is morally wrong.”

The essay also examines similar real life cases of child murderers and the possibility that Pat Barker has drawn inspiration from them while writing *Border Crossing*. The fact that the novel can be connected with realistic events is one of the main reasons why I have chosen to write an essay on this topic. It is interesting to see the similarities between the cases but also the differences. It is also an interesting coincidence that at the same time as the release of the novel, there was another release, the release of two child murderers in England that drew big headlines. The real life cases do not only have similarities with Danny, but also with the psychologist Tom Seymour, and some events that happened in his life that we get to read about in the novel.

Chapter one will contain research on the real life cases of child murderers that influenced Barker while writing the novel. It will bring up similarities between these cases and Danny's case,

but also differences. The examination about whether Danny is representative of these child murderers or not is also included in the first chapter. Chapter two will be about Danny in the novel and whether he has been rehabilitated or not. The questions that have been posed about Danny and his mental health will be answered. The issue of whether or not there is such a thing as “being evil” will be answered from my point of view. The role of Danny's family and background will also be examined in this chapter. Danny's possible borderline personality symptoms are discussed in this chapter. This is mainly a psychological essay, examining Danny's mind and the way it functions, but also other similar cases from real life. Barker's way of writing draws you into the plot and to the characters.

Chapter One: Real-life cases of child murderers

When writing the novel *Border Crossing*, Pat Barker was clearly influenced by real-life cases of child murderers. An interesting coincidence is that when *Border Crossing* was published there were similar real-life cases making headlines in both England and America. The interview with Pat Barker, *Little Devils* by Maria Russo at the website Salon.com mentions both cases. It is important to discuss the real-life cases of child murderers in this essay because of the similarities and differences that they have with Danny's case. There is also the question of whether Danny is representative of these real-life child murderers or not. This will be looked into in this chapter.

As the interview by Russo explains, the case in America concerned Lionel Tate, a boy of twelve years who killed a six-year-old girl in Florida. Lionel himself said that it was a re-enactment of wrestling moves, but was still sentenced for first-degree murder, at the age of fourteen in 2001. The sentence was life in prison without parole. There were many objections to this sentence because of the fact that the boy was only twelve years old at the time of the crime. People claimed that he was not yet fully developed and could not be judged as an adult. However, another article, "Sentence of Life Without Parole For Boy, 14, in Murder of Girl, 6" by Dana Canedy from *The New York Times*, quotes the judge that convicted Tate, Judge Joel T. Lazarus. He said: "The acts of Lionel Tate were not the playful acts of a child. The acts of Lionel Tate were cold, callous and indescribably cruel." He also said that "the evidence of Lionel Tate's guilt is clear, obvious and indisputable." A similar controversy is dealt with in *Border Crossing*. Should Danny have been treated as an adult in court, or did he not understand what death was and what he had done? A difference between the case of Lionel Tate and the case of Danny Miller is that Tate, according to the article in *The New York Times*, cried when he heard his sentence, showing emotions. On the other hand, Danny, in the courtroom, is very composed and together, "the sort of boy you'd be proud to introduce as your nephew" (*Border Crossing*, 96). And Danny himself says that in the courtroom he remembered "just being bored" (94).

Tate's sentence was changed in 2004. A compromise was reached, saying that, if Tate pleaded guilty to second-degree murder, he would be given a sentence of 10 years with probation, and this is what happened. But he violated his probation with gun possession and was again sentenced to prison, this time for 30 years.

The second case that the interview *Little Devils* mentions was the one in England regarding Robert Thompson and Jon Venables. At the time of the publication of *Border Crossing*, these two young men were released. They were released from custody at nineteen years of age, having spent time in a juvenile detention home after they abducted and killed two-year-old James Bulger, when they were only eleven, in 1993. Although they were released, they were still sentenced to lifelong parole.

The two eleven-year-old boys were seen in a shopping district the day of the murder, where they appeared to be observing children. Later on, it was said that they were picking out a victim. The article "Young know what is wrong" by Stephen Blease in the *North West Evening Mail*, mentions that the boys were planning to abduct a child and then bring him to a busy road and push him in front of traffic. James Bulger and his mother were also at this shopping district that day. The two boys saw James, took him by the hand and led him outside while James' mother was placing an order at a butcher shop. This was caught on tape by a CCTV camera. They then tortured and hit him until he died. Afterwards, they placed the body on a railway, hoping to make it seem like an accident. Blease also writes that "You don't cover up a crime if you don't realise that it is one." This is different from Danny's case. He did not cover up the crime. He was just scared when Lizzie was not breathing and went home. But then again, he did not tell anyone about it either (*Border Crossing*, 239). This might indicate that he in fact knew that what he did was wrong.

The case of James Bulger also has a lot of similarities with Tom Seymour's, the psychologist's, experience that we get to read about in *Border Crossing*. When he and a friend were babysitting Neil, a small child that Tom and his friend Jeff were told to play with, they took him to

the pond and they started to throw rocks at him; Neil walked further and further out into the water. Tom himself says in the novel that had it not been for a by-passer on a bus he himself, like Danny, could also have been a killer. But it might not have been so. We could never know if Tom and his friend would have come to their senses and stopped or if they would have carried on. Tom feels as though “it was his good fortune not to know” (63).

Even though Robert Thompson and Jon Venables were released from the juvenile detention home, both of them are not free today. Jon Venables returned to prison in 2010. In July the same year, he pleaded guilty of downloading and spreading child pornography. He is currently serving a sentence of two years. This could have a connection with the case of James Bulger since the pathologist report said that Bulger's foreskin had been manipulated and the charged eleven-year-olds were not too keen to answer any questions about it.

In the interview *Little Devils* Barker says that she knew that Thompson and Venables might be released but she did not know that it would be at the same time as the novel was published. She further states that because of this, *Border Crossing* has been one of her best received books in England. It is also discussed in the interview whether Danny's new identity at the end of the novel could be held secret for a longer period of time than his previous one, Ian Wilkinson. The same question was asked regarding the new identities of Robert Thompson and Jon Venables. Barker answered that because everybody in the British Isles is not bound to secrecy on this matter, and with the Internet enabling people to read foreign newspapers, it would be very difficult to keep their identities secret.

It is clear that Barker was influenced by these cases when writing the novel *Border Crossing*. There are a lot of similarities, but also a lot of differences. The novel is very psychological and examines the psychology of a child murderer. Whether Danny is representative of this group of young criminals or not is an interesting question. A common belief is that child murderers have had a bad upbringing and troublesome childhood. This fits the description of

Danny's childhood, though he himself, at first, does not think that he was abused (122). The troublesome childhood matches the upbringing of Robert Thompson and Jon Venables according to the article in the *North West Evening Mail*. It also matches another case of a child murderer called Mary Bell who was sentenced to life in prison and that you can read about in the online article "Mary Bell" by Shirley Lynn Scott. Mary's mother was a prostitute that sometimes used Mary to please her customers. Even in the Lionel Tate case, the attorney blamed the upbringing. We can see that this is a common pattern but it is not always so, at least not in a visible way. In the interview *Little Devils*, Barker mentions the high-school shootings in Columbine, where the ones guilty of the crime came from good families and had a nice upbringing. They had to have another reason for doing what they did. Therefore you cannot really say that Danny is representative of child murderers since there is no element in their lives that accords with all of them, although a bad upbringing seems to be fairly common in these cases.

Chapter Two: Danny and his rehabilitation in *Border Crossing*

This chapter will be divided into two parts, the first part will put focus on Danny's background and personality. Danny's background is important to bring up for the purpose of my thesis. The title of the novel and how it captures the essence of the novel will also be brought up in this part. The second part of this chapter brings up the question whether Danny is rehabilitated or if he cannot change. The issue of “being evil”, and the question that Pat Barker raises about this in the novel will also be discussed in the second part.

Part One

Danny murders an old lady when he is just ten years old. He goes through rehabilitation for many years before he is let out, but what is the result? When you read the novel you understand that Danny is a very special child and now has become a very special adult. All his life he uses his manipulative skills to get people to do what he wants, but in a way so they would think that they themselves had made the decision to do it.

It would be easy to say that Danny's background is to blame for him murdering the old woman because Danny did not have the easiest childhood. His father was absent for a long period of time when he was in the army, and then, when he finally came home, things really did not get any better. When Danny talks about his father and the things he did, he identifies with him completely. Tom thinks that “Danny had slipped into being his father” (*Border Crossing*, 119). When reading the novel you see that Danny clearly was abused. He himself says that he was not, but he also says that there were beatings that left marks and bruises. After talking about it with Tom he changes his mind and says that he was “slightly” abused but that it could have been so much worse (123). This might be true, but still he was abused. Then when his father left he blamed his mother. The day before the murder of Lizzie, he swung his mother around and made her crash into a wall. In the essay “Memory, Sibling Rivalry, and the Nation in *Border Crossing* and *Another World*” (2005), Eluned Summers-Bremner claims that the family in *Border Crossing*, Danny's family, is

“dysfunctional” and that the crime that is committed is “caused by the dynamics of the family” (267). But I would like to argue that there are a lot of children with troublesome backgrounds that do not go out and kill people. Sure, the abusive family background could have played a part in it. Had Danny had a good childhood with “normal” parents, his emotions and reactions might not have been triggered, but there is no way of knowing for sure. Since Danny was clearly a child with mental difficulties it is my belief that sooner or later something tragic would have happened. The fact that he became obsessed with fire, starting fires and felt “Marvellous. Fantastic” about it is a good example of his mental problems (*Border Crossing*, 180). After he started fires he just sat there and stared at them, almost mesmerized by the flames. He also says that he felt “powerful” when starting fires. At one point in the book he mentions that when playing war with his friends, he did not separate the game from reality. When the others stopped playing he was still in the game, except that it was not a game to him. When he started fires and stealing from people and houses he said that it was “part of the game. Setting fire to enemy buildings. Living of the land” (*Border Crossing*, 182). This clearly shows that Danny had trouble separating imagination from reality.

The novel repeatedly brings up the mental and psychological problems that Danny has, since it is such a big part of the plot. Eluned Summers-Bremner discusses how the way Danny turns to Tom for help is similar to the way the hysteric turned to Freud in “the primal scene of psychoanalysis.” Summers-Bremner continues that this was how the science of memory was born. She explains that “hysteria is a disturbance of memory that opens onto the field of trauma”, and that physical symptoms that cannot be explained create difficulties in social life that cannot be solved (268). This relates to what was mentioned earlier about Danny showing some symptoms of having a borderline personality. Hysteria and borderline personality have basically the same symptoms and are variations of the same disease but, according to Summers-Bremner, borderline personality is the more modern term. Further evidence that Danny has mental problems is when he talks about when he was inside Lizzie's house, looked in a mirror and saw a face that did not look like his (235). He

did not even recognize himself and what he was doing. Danny clearly has some traumatic memories which he recovers with the help of Tom. The difficulties that Danny has with his fire obsession create troubles in his social life, but only when he is caught off guard and not concentrating on appearing normal. However, when he thinks about how he acts, he shows no signs of having a borderline personality. But one of the features of borderline personality disorder is that the individual is emotionally unstable and this concurs with Danny, even though his skill in hiding his real self is unusual. An example of what happens when people get too close to him is what happens with his English teacher Angus MacDonald. Danny and Angus get pretty close to one another and Angus gets Danny to write about the murder. Danny feels scared that they are becoming too close and he accuses Angus for sexually abusing him. This later shows to be a lie and just something Danny made up.

As the examples show Danny Miller is a master of manipulation. He manipulates almost everyone that crosses his path. Sometimes, people know it but they let it happen anyway, the reason being that Danny is so skilled at what he does. From the very beginning of the novel we can see examples of this. Apparently, when Danny throws himself into the river he has already planned that Tom will save him, even though Tom thinks that it is his own idea. When he finds out that it was Danny that he saved he does not know what to believe. He argues that “when confronted by a number of disturbing events, the human mind insists on finding a pattern. We can't wait to thread the black beads on to a single string. But some events are, simply, random” (27). We can see that he is questioning his own thoughts, as a result of Danny's careful planning. This scene begins on the very first page of the novel. Then when Tom visits Danny in the hospital, without knowing that it is actually Danny that he is visiting, Danny acts as though he is surprised to see Tom. When Tom walks in the room Danny “stared at Tom, the colour draining from his face” (20). Then he was “hauling himself up the bed as if his first impulse were to escape” (21). I believe that this is a part of Danny's quest for manipulating Tom into believing that their meeting was not planned by him, but

that it was a coincidence that was meant to be.

The name *Border Crossing* is a very suitable title of the novel since Danny makes people cross borders, and he crosses a few of them himself. The obvious border that is crossed is when he kills the old woman. An example of how the borders are crossed for Danny is when he stays at the secure rehabilitation unit Long Garth. Here, he called the staff by their first name and this was not allowed. Another example from Long Garth is that the staff were never supposed to be alone with any of the children, and during private tutorials the door always had to be open. However, when the teachers taught Danny it was not (*Border Crossing*, 167). Danny's skills in manipulating people is one of the main reasons why he gets special treatment. Also, when Danny felt that his personal borders were being crossed by someone else, and they got too close to him, he retreated. Also, the border between a psychiatrist and his patient is being crossed. Danny gets himself into Tom's life in a way that Tom is not comfortable with. An example of this is the scene where Danny is inside Tom's house together with Tom's wife and "Tom was aware of a line being crossed. Danny was inside, now" (213). Finally, there are small borders that Danny crosses all the time, and other people let him. The fact that at the end of the novel he calls Tom by his first name makes Tom feel a bit uneasy (*Border Crossing*, 215) and when Tom offers Danny a drink he crosses another psychiatrist-patient border. Tom thinks that "normally he never offered clients alcohol, but this wasn't a proper session" (*Border Crossing*, 251). In the book *Pat Barker and the Mediation of Social Reality* (2009) David Waterman says that borders that otherwise seem clear seem blurred in *Border Crossing*. He further states that it is the borders "between guilt and innocence, child and adult, justice and rehabilitation, past and present, doctor and patient, and fantasy and reality" (115).

Part Two

Could Danny distinguish between fantasy and reality? Did he understand that killing was wrong? Did he understand that death is a permanent state?

Was he, in short, capable of standing trial, on a charge of murder, in an adult

court? And to all these questions Tom had answered , Yes. Not without doubt, not without qualification, not without many hours of soul searching, but, in the end, *Yes. (Border Crossing, 48)*

These are Tom's own thoughts on how he perceived Danny as just a 10-year-old boy, accused of murder. The question now is, as Danny himself puts it, “can people change?” (68). I believe that some people can, but not all. Danny, as discussed earlier, shows signs of having a borderline personality and as a result, it should be harder for him to change. His constant manipulation of people also indicates that throughout the novel he does not change after “rehabilitation”. He still needs to be in control, does not like people coming too close to him, and does still have moments where he does not know what he is doing. The fact that he is still obsessed with fire, and still is not able to control what he is doing in certain situations is another sign that he is not rehabilitated. It seems as though Danny can never be normal. David Waterman states that “memory may change over time, reflecting a desire to protect oneself from feelings of guilt” (116). This is what Danny means when he says that he “believed his own story” (*Border Crossing, 94*). In his memory, he had gone to Lizzie's house to look at her kittens and when he got there, he found her dead. Based on Danny's personality and the events that take place in the novel, my conclusion is that he has not been rehabilitated.

The question of evil and of the innocence of children is something that Barker brings up in the novel and is connected with the fact that Danny does not change. When we look at Danny's case and the real-life cases of child murderers we can see that children are not at all as innocent as we might have thought at first. The fact is that Danny did murder Lizzie, and that he has what appears to be an evil nature. His background plays a part in his personality, with his father saying that sometimes it is justifiable to kill people and so on. With that said, not all children with harmful backgrounds murder people. That is why you could say that some children, and adults also, have a

personality that makes them more likely to commit acts of violence and to take it too far, and Danny is one of these people. That is why he could never be rehabilitated. Waterman quotes an interview with Barker where she talks about psychotherapy and claims that in *Border Crossing* she “refuses to represent it as a panacea for society's ills. Rather, the social pathologies in which we discover the seeds of evil are scrutinized, alongside psychotherapy” (118). When Tom interviews Danny for the first time, when he is ten years old, he asks him if there is any difference between killing a person and killing a rabbit and Danny answers “yes”. Then when Tom asks what the difference is Danny says: “Rabbits run faster” (*Border Crossing*, 43). This is one of the things Danny says that shows that he has an “evil nature”. And Danny himself believes that there is such a thing as evil. In *Little Devils* Pat Barker talks about Tom not thinking that evil is a “metaphysical reality”, but that Danny think it is. She further states that evil is something that “just happens”, but that she herself agrees with Tom's views about it, but the novel does not; it leaves the problem of evil open.

Circumstances also play a part in Danny's case. Had Lizzie not gone back home so soon, she might not have been murdered. But there is no way of us knowing this. If she had in fact done what she went out to do and had then gone home, and had Danny still been there, the situation might have been just the same. The event that was discussed earlier in this essay, Tom's childhood experience, where he and his friend threw rocks at a small child, forcing him further out in the water is another example of how circumstances play a part. Tom says that if the man had not stepped off the bus in order to stop them, things might have ended badly (*Border Crossing*, 62-63). Again, there is no way that we can know this. Tom and his friend might have recovered their senses and stopped what they were doing, even without an adult interfering. Through this situation, Barker shows that children are not as innocent as they seem, and that anyone could get themselves into a situation of violence. However, I believe that not all people can cross that line between violence and murder, though it is a fine line. Again Waterman quotes Barker from an interview where she says that “some children push it all the way, and then you have a tragic outcome, but the minor forms of bullying are very,

very common... And yet those children who would become killers were not necessarily very different” (122). In the interview *Little Devils*, Barker discusses that children today are living “couch-potato lives” and that since they are not out playing with other children on the street, they will not learn the rules and limits of what you can and cannot do.

At the end of the novel, when Danny spends the night at Tom's house, he again experiences the psychosis that he experienced when he was alone in Lizzie's house. He gets completely absorbed in the fire and is not aware of what is going on (*Border Crossing*, 259). When his parole officer Martha comes and picks him up after that, she asks “Tom, are you saying he needs to be in a secure hospital facility?” (266), and Tom answers “No.' he said. 'I'm not saying that” (267). A couple of days later, Tom realises that he, as many others before him had done, had bent the rules for Danny. The answer to Martha's question should have been “yes”, and he knows that if Danny some day would set another fire, and it would end badly with someone getting killed “his silence on that night would return to haunt him” (274). The reason why he does not tell Martha the truth is that he can not, because Danny is looking at him. This is the final evidence that Danny has not been rehabilitated and that he works and manipulates the people around him to do what he wants them to do. The novel has an open ending where you are not sure what will happen to Danny in the future, and that is one of the reasons why it is so captivating.

Conclusion

This essay has been about Danny Miller in *Border Crossing* by Pat Barker. Two chapters have been written. The first one is concerned with real life cases of child murderers, and also compares these cases with the case of Danny. The conclusion of this is that there are both similarities and differences. It seems to be common that child murderers come from a troublesome background but it is not necessarily so. It is clear that Pat Barker drew inspiration from these real life cases and that is partly why *Border Crossing* has been so well received.

The second chapter of this essay was divided into two parts. The first part dealt with Danny's personality and background. Danny does have a troublesome background and he has mental problems. He shows some signs of having a borderline personality disorder, and a big part of his personality is that he is very skilled at manipulating people. There was also a discussion about why the name *Border Crossing* was so suitable for this novel. Danny crosses a lot of borders in the novel, but he also gets other people to cross borders for him, as a result of his manipulation.

The second part of the second chapter discusses the issue of being evil and if there is such a thing, or if there are only people doing evil deeds. All people can find themselves in situations of violence and be victims of circumstances, but not all people could cross that line and kill someone. Children who go too far and children who do not can be very similar to one another but there are slight differences that make some push it to the extreme. This section also discusses whether Danny is rehabilitated or if he cannot change. The conclusion after examining his mental issues and the fact that late in the novel he experiences a similar psychosis to the one he did when he was in Lizzie's house is that he cannot change and has not been rehabilitated. He has that personality that makes him dangerous, both for himself and other people. It might not always show, but it will always be there.

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