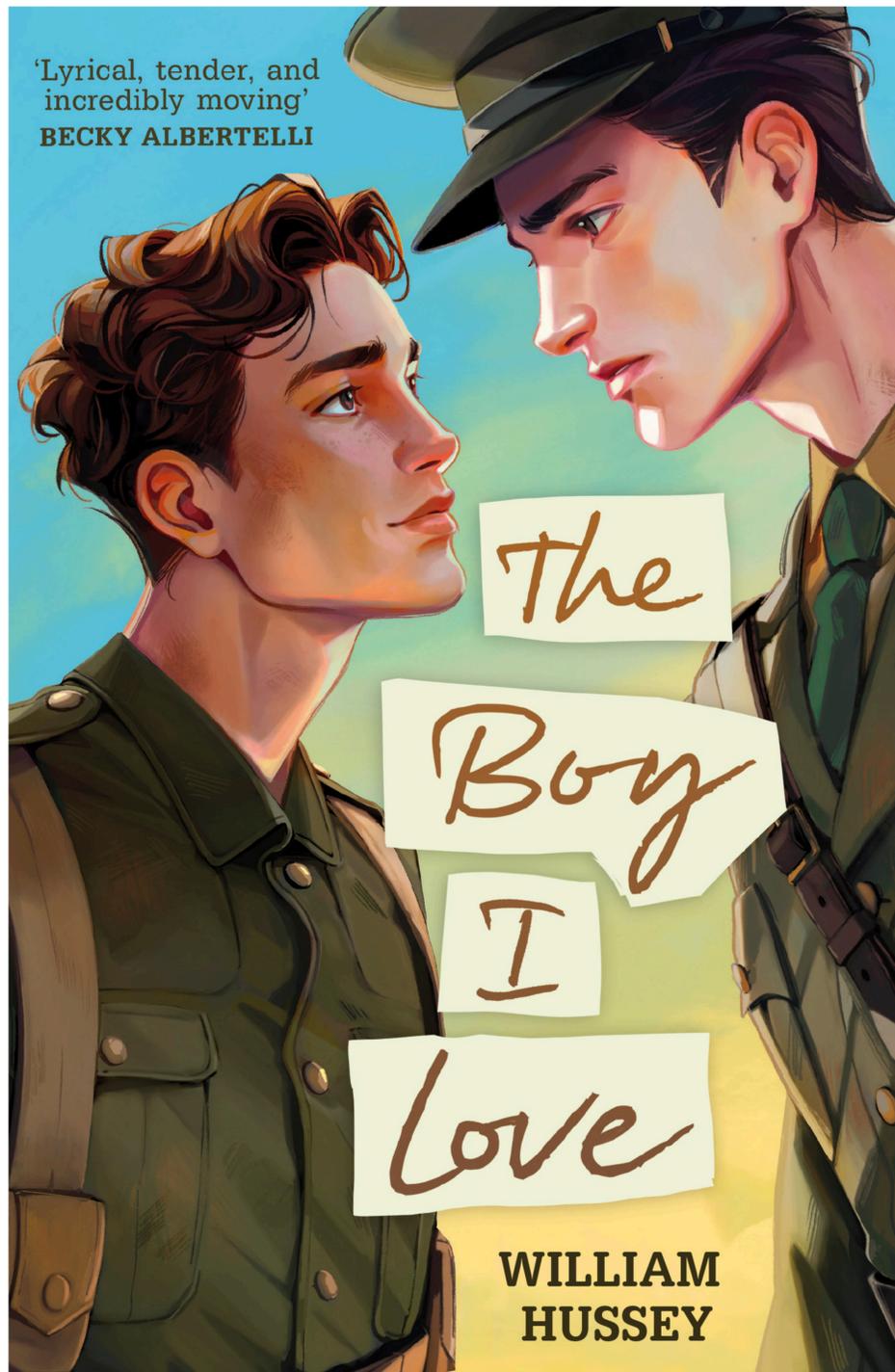


The Carnegies



The Carnegie Shortlist 2026 Shadowing Resources



The Boy I Love

Carnegie Medal for Writing

Author: William Hussey

Age range: 14+

Description:

The scale and tragedy of World War One is juxtaposed with an intimate relationship between Stephen and Danny in the trenches. The bleakness of the war is realised tremendously well and there's a real sense of tension as the novel develops. A looming sense of foreboding colours this character-led novel which encourages reflections on history.

Themes:

- History (WWI)
- LGBTQ+
- Romance
- Empathy
- Identity
- Discrimination
- Social class
- Wellbeing

Shadowing Ideas:

1. The title of *The Boy I Love* is taken from a popular music hall song, "The Boy I Love is Up in the Gallery", written in 1885. Listen to a recording on YouTube (there are plenty, including videos of singers in music hall costume) and then discuss why music halls, vaudeville and other similar forms of entertainment might have been so popular in the early years of the 20th century (re-read Chapter 32 for some insight).
2. Towards the end of *The Boy I Love*, Stephen describes the horror of the Battle of the Somme and compares it to a Franz Marc painting: "Arcs and starburst, bright and bold" (p. 251). Look at some of Franz Marc's paintings and discuss Stephen's comparison. Franz Marc died in 1916, a few months before the Battle of the Somme; how do you think he would have depicted the conflict if he had been alive to paint it? Create your own impression, in either sketch, painting or collage form.
3. The First World War produced some powerful poetry and writing, including the letters and poems of Wilfred Owen, the work of Welsh poets Hedd Wyn and Edward Thomas, the writing of Siegfried Sassoon (who survived the war and became a pacifist) and the novel *All Quiet on the Western Front* by Erich Maria Remarque, published in 1928. Choose a wartime poem that affects you and discuss it with your shadowing group. Create a short group bibliography if you have time.

For Students

About these Resources

All of these resources are designed to be completed in small discussion groups, ideally your school's Carnegie Medal for Writing Shadowing Group. However, they can easily be done individually. Instead of talking about the tasks, you can write down and keep a record of your ideas.

Before Reading

- Discuss what you think *The Boy I Love* will be about, based on these extracts. You should structure your discussion around the questions below.
 - What other novels do you think it will be like?
 - What genre of novel do you think it will be?
 - What sense do you get of where and when it will be set?
 - If you had to identify three likely themes, what would they be?

Spend 10-20 minutes on this activity.

1. He holds out his hand. He has clear blue eyes with little violet flecks at their edges. I notice this as he leans down, his hand unshaken, and picks up something from the floor. My drawing.

2. Right now, it was still a game to them, their enemy impersonal. No more real than that tattered target or the bloodless dummies they plunged their bayonets into. It's easy to kill a man when all he amounts to is paper and straw.

3. After two hours, my already-exhausted platoon is given the order to form up. Danny helps me get the boys into place and, before I start us going, I glance back down the length of the forest road. It's incredible. Hundreds of men continue unloading the train while in the shadows thrown by the tall trees, horses and pack mules shuffle under their deadly cargo.

4. 'Please, no,' he choked. 'I've changed my mind. I don't want to go.'
He sounded so pathetic; I felt angry and sorry for him, both at the same time.
'Get up, Private,' I shouted over the storm. 'That's an order.'

5. I really don't know if Danny has any similar feelings for me. From little words and gestures, I think it's possible. But it is always dangerous to make assumptions...

During Reading

Warning: Don't read the questions before reading each section.

Read up to the page number listed and then answer the questions. You will probably need to spend about 5-10 minutes answering each set of questions.

The page numbers are based on the Andersen Press edition of the book, first published in the UK in 2025.

Read to the end of Chapter 3

- Where is Stephen at the beginning of the chapter?
- What clues suggest Stephen is hiding something?

Read to the end of Chapter 4

- How does the historical setting influence Stephen's feelings about his identity and his fears?
- How does Stephen behave differently in public compared to his private thoughts?
- What builds suspense in this section? For example, what risks are hinted at?

Read to the end of Chapter 7

- How does Hussey present the moment of intimacy and closeness in Chapter 7?
- What do you think might happen next?

Read Chapter 14

- How does the tone in this chapter seem a little different from the tone of the novel so far?

Read to the end of Chapter 17

- How do the consequences of earlier events play out?
- How has Stephen changed since the beginning of the novel?

Read to the end of Chapter 19

- What do you think about the way Jackson deals with the complaint about how Murray was treated?

Read to the end of the novel

- How does Hussey help the reader to imagine what life was like for the soldiers just before the 'final push'?
- How does Hussey portray the consequences of repression in this final section?

After Reading

Initial thoughts

Spend 10-15 minutes discussing the questions below.

- What are your overall impressions of this novel?
- Which moments stick most in your memory and why?
- Which characters do you like best and why?
- Which other novels does it remind you of and why?
- How gripping did you find the story?
- What are your thoughts about how the book was written?
- Based on reading *The Boy I Love*, how likely are you to read other novels by William Hussey?

What's *The Boy I Love* about?

- Spend one or two minutes writing down a single sentence that begins: '*The Boy I Love* is about ...'
- If you are working in a group, share your different sentences and discuss.

Exploring the Novel Further

The ending

Here are opinions about the ending from three readers on Storygraph:

A. This book somehow leads to nowhere, to a dead end, to wasted potential, and yet that is the point. Why fight for a world that doesn't see you? The last chapter though made the whole story worth it. I held my breath until the last page.

B. I read the story quickly, it does draw you in. That being said, the last scenes and the ending left much to be desired for me.

C. I really liked the acceptance of circumstances in the epilogue. A lot of historical fiction like this has an unrealistically happy ending. I'm glad the author doesn't gloss over the reality of life at that time.

- Write a few sentences explaining how you felt about the ending and whether you thought it was the right ending for the book.

Spend 15-20 minutes on this activity.

Public and private identities

- Brainstorm the following:
 - Ways his fellow soldiers might describe Stephen
 - Ways Danny might describe Stephen
 - Ways Stephen might describe himself.
- Draw a Venn diagram with three circles. Add your descriptions to your Venn diagram (adding any further thoughts you have), thinking about where Stephen's identities overlap and which parts of him remain private, sometimes even from Danny.
- Reflect on Stephen's different identities using the prompts below to help you if you wish:
 - The effect on Stephen of having to keep a part of himself secret
 - Ideas at the time about masculinity, for example what a soldier was supposed to be like, how men were expected to deal with their emotions
 - Attitudes and the law around homosexuality at this time
 - How Stephen deals with his inner conflict in wanting to both be with and to protect Danny
 - How far you think you have different identities in different situations.

Spend 20-30 minutes on this activity.

The death of Ollie Murray

The novel is told in the voice of Stephen. He is also the main character. There are several other characters who play a significant role in the novel.

- Think about the incidents which lead up to the death of Ollie Murray and what happens afterwards (chapters 13, 16, 17 and 19). Choose two or three of the characters, below, and write a few sentences in their voice, expressing their thoughts and feelings about what happened.
 - Captain Beddowes
 - Private Morse
 - Danny
 - The chaplain who says 'Perhaps, in a way, it's a blessing'
 - Captain Jackson

Spend 15-20 minutes on this activity.

Love in a time of war

The Boy I Love deals with the difficult topic of homophobia, not just through its main characters but in the context of the First World War.

- Look back at some key moments where Hussey contrasts the tender care Stephen and Danny have for each other with the brutality that surrounds them. For example: pages 126-127, pages 142-143, pages 155-156, pages 178-179.
- Either have a discussion with a partner or do a short piece of writing about why you think Hussey chose this setting.

Spend 15-20 minutes on this activity.

Reading the reviews

The extracts, below, are all from reviews of *The Boy I Love*.

- Read all the reviews and discuss which comes closest to your own view of the book.
- Working individually, write your own paragraph expressing your views.
- If possible, share your reviews with others.

You can submit your reviews to the Carnegie Shadowing Scheme website. This can be accessed at:

carnegies.co.uk/writing-shortlist-2026/

Give yourself 30-60 minutes to complete this activity.

A.

William Hussey has fast become one of my favourite authors of all time, writing with passion and truth. The characters are believable and well-rounded with dreams and faults. The horrors of the trenches are vividly described and in absolute contrast to those moments of light and beauty found in the blossoming relationship of two young men.

Books like this are so important in sharing stories that have often gone untold and forgotten. Books which I so wished had been around when I was a teenager. Such a beautiful book.

Princeling on www.amazon.co.uk

B.

There must have been so many gay men caught up in that all-consuming catastrophe. How many were able, like Stephen and Danny, to share moments of happiness in or behind the trenches we will never know. Nor can I judge the plausibility of true love across the officer/lower ranks dividing line. Yet all of that is within the author's proper imaginative scope, and William Hussey succeeds in creating a most poignant and tender account of the love that dared not, then and for so many years to come, speak its name.

One minor criticism is that I think the author exaggerates, to the point of caricature, the stupidity of the commanding officer and his sidekick. The senior command in that war were, for the most part, deeply unimaginative and the failure of the Somme bombardment is notorious. If we could put the clock back, we would do things differently, for sure. However, the idea that they were simply careless of their men's lives is wrong. The 'Black Day' of the British Army seared all who were caught up in it.

David R on www.amazon.co.uk

C.

Some aspects of the book just seemed unrealistic, and it's fairly clear William Hussey isn't too concerned with exploring the setting too deeply. Yes, the war is important, but it sort of feels like an afterthought – particularly when it came to the end of Stephen's story. Hussey just seemed keen to get it over with.

With regards to the romance, I also think this felt a bit thin. I understand the need to get everything going quite quickly and not having the time for a realistic slow burn. However, Danny and Stephen know each other for only a matter of days or weeks. It's all a big rush. I never completely bought into their romance because it feels so superficial. It doesn't help that Stephen supposedly lost his first love so close to meeting Danny. He moves on way too quickly.

<https://motherbookerblog.com>

D.

Set against the harrowing backdrop of the Battle of the Somme, *The Boy I Love* is a deeply moving and powerful novel that explores love, hope, sacrifice, and brotherhood in the most unimaginable of circumstances. William Hussey tells the story of Stephen and Danny, two young men whose love for each other blossoms amidst the horrors of war—a love that, at the time, could cost them everything. As they face the brutality of battle and the suffocating societal expectations of 1916, their relationship is a testament to the resilience of the human spirit and the enduring power of love. This wasn't an easy read, nor should it be. Hussey doesn't shy away from the grim realities of war, nor the oppression faced by queer men of the time. The fear, the secrecy, the knowledge that loving the wrong person could lead to ruin—it all makes for an emotionally charged and devastatingly realistic novel. And yet, despite the darkness, there is such beauty in these pages. The tender moments between Stephen and Danny, the stolen glances, the whispered words of affection, the unwavering bond of brotherhood among the soldiers – it's these moments that shine through the bleakness, offering a glimmer of hope in a world that seeks to deny them happiness. As a gay man, reading this book was a deeply personal experience. I feel lucky to live in a time where we have more freedom, even though injustice and bigotry still exist. To live in fear, being unable to love freely, or to be who you are – it's simply unimaginable. Hussey captures this struggle with such honesty and poignancy, and his words in the acknowledgements will stay with me forever: 'These boys were fighting for a country that despised them.'

Nick on <https://www.foyles.co.uk/reviews>

Writing Activities

On your own, or with a partner, complete one or more of these writing activities to help you develop your thoughts about *The Boy I Love* further.

You will need 30-60 minutes for each activity.

- Write a short story which uses the sentence 'There can be no happy ending for us, I know that' in your final paragraph.
- Write a short speech to give in assembly about something you feel passionately about that is related to the book. Some ideas to get you started:
 - Prejudice
 - Social rejection
 - The impact of war
 - The importance of representation in books written for young adults.
- It is often said that 'A secret is something you tell one other person'. Use this idea as a starting point for a poem or a story.
- Write a letter to the author, William Hussey, explaining how his book affected you and why you are glad he wrote it.