Luke doesn’t believe in ghosts . . . until he meets one.

BY KENNETH OPPEL

ADAPTED FROM “THE KLACK BROS. MUSEUM” BY KENNETH OPPEL, FIRST PUBLISHED IN GUYS READ: OTHER WORLDS, EDITED BY JON SCIESZKA, BY WALDEN POND PRESS AN IMPRINT OF HARCOURT COLLABORATIVE PUBLISHERS, COPYRIGHT 2013. REPRINTED BY PERMISSION OF THE AUTHOR.
Think about how the author uses real historical events in this story.

WHEN THE TRAIN ARRIVES IN MEADOWS, THE TOWN SEEMS TO LUKE TO BE JUST LIKE ALL THE OTHER FORLORN PLACES THEY'VE STOPPED AT ALONG THE WAY. OVER THE SPEAKER A WOMAN SAYS, “LADIES AND GENTLEMEN, DUE TO A DERAILLED TRAIN, OUR STOP AT THIS STATION WILL BE LONGER THAN SCHEDULED. WE'LL BE HERE ROUGHLY FIVE HOURS.”

“You’re loving this trip,” his father says.

“I’m going up there.” He jerks a thumb at the back of his truck, which is filled with plastic-wrapped cases of drinks and chocolate bars. “I supply their snack bar. It’s only a 15-minute drive.”

“You’re sure it’s no trouble?” Luke’s father asks.

“No trouble.”

Luke stares, silent with surprise. His father is not impulsive by nature, but lately he’s been doing uncharacteristic things. Long walks at night. Swimming. Teaching himself guitar. He says these things are meant to “unlock” himself.


“We’ve got five hours,” Dad replies. “You keep telling me how bored you are. Let’s go see something new.”

“They’ve got some interesting things up there,” says the driver. “You’ll want to start in the manor house.”

“Maybe there’s a cowboy hat you can buy,” Luke says as they walk in. “You’ll get your tickets in here.”

“Weirdest thing, isn’t it?” says the driver. “This is Uriah Klack, the man who owns the place.”

“I love it,” he murmurs. “Klack Brothers Museum. I wonder what kind of stuff they have there.”

“I can take you, if you like,” says the driver. “Klack Brothers Museum. I wonder what kind of stuff they have there.”

“You’re loving this trip,” his father says.

“If you say so.”

His father sighs and looks at him. “Not at all?”

Luke shrugs. Shrugging is very much a part of binoculars to his eyes.

“They walk to the edge of the parking lot. The road goes nowhere in both directions.

“What are we going to do for five hours?” asks Luke. A big tractor-trailer pulls out of the parking lot, revealing a white sign posted by the road.

LUKE FRITH/SHUTTERSTOCK.COM

“Klack Bros. Museum 15 Miles North”

His father inhales and frowns.

“How would we get back?” his father asks.

“I’ll be there a couple of hours. I’m coming back this way if you want to catch a ride with me.”

“Sounds perfect,” says Dad.

It rises from the empty prairie like a mirage, a perfect little village of stone buildings and fences and barns.

“Wierdest thing, isn’t it?” says their driver. “These two brothers, they came out from England about 140 years ago. They ran a circus for a while. Then they decided to build a village in the middle of nowhere. They built a big manor house for themselves and waited for people to come. But the railway built too far to the south and wouldn’t give them a spur line. So after a while, it became a ghost town. One of their relatives turned it into a museum about 15 years ago.”

Luke has a sinking feeling there will be old ladies in white caps and pleated dresses telling him how to churn butter. Odd, slow-talking men in barns will show him how rope is made. If he’s lucky, a blacksmith will bang on a horseshoe.


As his father and the driver make small talk, they pass through a gate and pull up outside a little cottage with a thatched roof. A sign says: Tickets Snacks Gifts.

There are only three other cars in the parking lot.

“You’ll get your tickets in here,” says the man. “I’ll be leaving about five o’clock.”


“Maybe there’s a cowboy hat you can buy,” Luke says as they walk in. His father gives him a withering look.

Inside is an elderly man behind the counter. “This is Uriah Klack,” says the driver. “He owns the place.”

“We’d like to see the museum,” Luke’s father says cheerfully.

“How old’s the boy?” Mr. Klack asks, staring hard at Luke.

“Fourteen.”

“Twenty dollars, please.”

Uriah Klack reminds Luke a bit of Grandpa: tall, like his bones are too big for his skin. His face is a bit sunken in, and his cheekbones stand out like knobs of shiny, polished wood. His knuckles bulge.

“You’ll want to start in the manor house,” says Mr. Klack. “Turn right out the doors.”

The manor house is an impressively large pile of stones. The lower floor is all trestle tables covered with little things. To Luke it looks like a school craft fair: miniature carts and horses, model farm buildings, and general stores with ancient tinned goods arranged around them. There are Native American dolls interspersed with Disney toys, an ancient cash register, a worker’s time clock.

Luke jerks a thumb.

“I’m going up there.”

Luke heads upstairs alone and meanders down the main hallway. He keeps checking the time on his phone. He doesn’t want to miss their ride back to the station. He passes only one other family, and the girl looks as bored as he does. They stare numbly at each other in mute sympathy.

When Luke enters the parlor, his eyebrows lift with interest. It’s set up like a circus sideshow, divided into many stalls with tattered but colorful posters over each one: “Cordelia the Human Snake!” and “The Cardiff Giant!” and “The Indestructible Heart!”
Eagerly, Luke moves from stall to stall. The human snake is a disappointment, just some big scraps of snakeskin crudely sewn together into a torso. The Cardiff Giant is more impressive—a huge body encased in a stone slab. **It reminds Luke of those fossilized people they recovered from Pompeii after the volcano erupted.**

The indestructible heart is the creepiest of all. It floats inside a big tank of murky water. It looks pretty real to Luke, plump and moist. **A little card underneath reads: “The heart of poet Percy Bysshe Shelley, which remained undamaged even after the body was cremated! Sometimes It gives a beat!”**

At the far end of the room is a windowless wooden shack. A sign over the door says: Ghost Boy. Luke tries the door and finds it locked.

“That’s extra,” says Mr. Klack, appearing suddenly to Luke’s right. **He smells like clean laundry and He says, winking at Luke.**

Luke looks over to see his dad approaching. **Luke’s father reaches out a hand.**

“His actual ashes are in there?” Luke asks.

“Why’s it tied to the wall?” Luke’s father wants to know.

“He tries to shake it off the shelf sometimes,” Mr. Klack remarks.


“Why are you talking like you believe this?” Luke demands.

When his father looks at him, Luke knows he’s not joking. Luke can’t stand it a second longer. He steps forward and puts his hand on the ghost boy’s shoulder. Cold numbs his fingers. He sees a mountain, feels its ice-cold breath. Workers with tools step toward a hole in the rock face, and a terrible sensation of dread wells from it. Luke pulls back, terrified.

“He was talking to you, wasn’t he?” says Mr. Klack, eyes shining with expectation.

“I . . . saw some pictures. People on a mountain.”

Luke wants a drink, something to wash the taste of soot and desolation from his mouth.

“He seems to like you,” says Mr. Klack. “He could use some friends. You see that handbill there?”

It’s not real,” Luke blurts out, a grunt. **He points to a small framed poster on the wall, advertising the Klack Bros. Circus. There’s so much text on the poster, it takes Luke a moment to find it:** "The Ghost Boy of Peking!"

“Told you,” Mr. Klack says.


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Luke looks for a projector on the ceiling or a dusty beam of light makes out a foreign language. **Luke thinks.**

“Hello,” Luke says to the ghost boy, curious to know the limits of this illusion.

“Doesn’t talk much,” says Mr. Klack. “Not since I’ve had him. My father says he used to talk sometimes. Probably got discouraged.”

*That’s convenient, Luke thinks. The ghost boy opens his mouth and says something, so softly Luke can’t hear.*

“See?” says Mr. Klack excitedly.

“I had a feeling he’d talk to you!”

The ghost boy’s lips part, and he makes out a foreign language.

“I don’t know what he said.” Luke thinks. **He points to a small framed poster on the wall, advertising the Klack Bros. Circus. There’s so much text on the poster, it takes Luke a moment to find it:** “The Ghost Boy of Peking!”

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“He seems to like you,” says Mr. Klack. “He could use some company. A boy his own age.”

“What?” Luke says, shaking his head. He has a swimmy feeling of unreality.

“He’s getting faint. I don’t want him fading away altogether,” says Mr. Klack.
Luke walks into his father’s study. His father seems distracted. They haven’t really said much about the Klack Bros. Museum. Already it seems far away, disappearing over the horizon like the train station they left an hour ago.

Mr. Klack smiles and all the anger and frustration and pity. “It’s not my fault you’re blocked,” Luke says angrily. “Think up your own stories.”

Luke stares straight ahead and sees the faint ghost boy in his peripheral vision, looking at him. “Why is he here?”

Luke looks around the dining car. No one else has noticed the ghost boy. He’s just a pale smudge, easily dismissed. “Maybe there is something he wants to tell you,” Dad says quietly.

**Luke can’t believe they’re talking like this. Like it’s all true and this is really happening.** He feels the presence of the ghost like a cold weight in his stomach. He puts down his fork.

“I don’t get it. How’s he here? Mr. Klack said he stays with his ashes, and his ashes are in the museum.”

His father says nothing. He reaches into his pocket and lifts out the slim jar of ashes. Luke stares, horrified. “Mr. Klack put it in your pocket?”

“I took it.”


His father’s reply is simple. “He’s got a story.”

“You stole the ghost!”

“No one else’ll ever have a story like this.”

“You stole—”

“How can you steal a ghost?” his father says impatiently. “It doesn’t belong to anybody. You can’t own a ghost. All I want is his story.”

“He can’t tell you his story!” “He’ll tell you. You had a rapport with him,” his father says.

Luke laughs. “How would you know? You know all about ghosts!”

“Are you even curious?”

His father sniffs dismissively.

“Or maybe you’re not interested in anything.”

He chews his lip. He looks out the window. Then he reaches out and puts his hand on the boy’s shoulder.

Luke eats some mashed potatoes hungrily in the dining car.

As he moves down the hallway, Luke is aware of Mr. Klack watching them, just standing there, staring. He wants to run, but his father is beside him, walking steady, though there’s a tense expression on his face. In movies, men like Mr. Klack unexpectedly reach into his pocket and lifts out the slim jar of ashes. Luke says, climbing into his own bunk.

Luke is looking for a place to sleep. He can’t sleep in the berth. He goes to the rear of the car. The window is a mountain and a work camp cut into the cliff. An old-fashioned locomotive steams impatiently at the end of the line while men unload steel rails. Luke feels himself moving toward a gash blasted into the side of the cliff, and then he’s inside, descending with a group of Chinese men.

Darkness squeezes him. At the end of the tunnel, these men drill holes, inserting explosives. Then the men all rush back and crouch behind barriers. There is a terrible sound, and smoke and grit boil past. Then the ground stops shaking. The smoke begins to clear. Men are standing. Without warning, a second explosion bowls them over, and a thunderclap comes from the rock above before it collapses.

Luke pulls his hand back and shakes it to get the circulation going. His heart is racing.

“You worked on the railroad,” he whispers to the ghost boy. Luke had studied it last year in school. They had to blast through the mountains to lay the tracks. Thousands of Chinese immigrants worked the most dangerous jobs. Many died.

“Is that what happened to you?” Luke asks. “You died in a blast?”

The ghost boy points excitedly out the window. “In the reflection, Luke sees something to the floor.”

Luke says. “From the corner of his eye, Luke sees the ghost boy smiling. Luke hursts the jar out the window. For a second it catches the moonlight as it curves toward the river, and then he can’t see it anymore.”

When Luke returns to the cabin, his father sits up in his bunk and looks at his son expectantly.

“ Invent your own stories,” Luke says, climbing into his own bunk. It takes him a long time to fall asleep. When he finally does, he’s thinking of the black river beside the tracks. The water would carry the ashes down through the mountains, through slow curves and surging gorges, to the sea.
This Railroad Changed America

150 years ago, the building of a railroad united a country torn apart by war

BY KRISTIN LEWIS

Promontory Summit, Utah, vibrates with activity. You and your dad join the throngs of giddy bystanders gathered around a slick-looking railroad track glittering in the sun. Men give speeches. Musicians blare their trumpets. Photographers set up giant cameras. You watch a man in a fancy suit lift a hammer and thump! He pounds a spike into the track.

The Transcontinental Railroad—one of the most impressive feats of engineering in American history—is complete. This means that for the first time, it is possible to take a train from New York all the way to California.


It’s hard to believe that the Civil War ended only a few years earlier. After all, this was wild, untamed frontier land.

Convenience and Safety

Before that exciting day in 1869, getting across the U.S. was a nightmarish journey that could take months. People mostly traveled in slow, uncomfortable horse-drawn wagons across parched deserts, windswept plains, and rocky mountains—battling starvation and disease along the way.

The Transcontinental Railroad changed all that. Now, you could get from one coast to the other in just 8 days—in the safety of a train car.

Two companies were responsible for building this railroad: the Central Pacific, which built eastward from Sacramento, California, and the Union Pacific, which built westward from Omaha, Nebraska. (There was already a railroad that connected Omaha to the east coast.) The U.S. government gave money to each company for every mile of track it laid. So the two companies competed to lay the most track in the shortest amount of time.

It wasn’t easy work. Food, water, and supplies had to be hauled along with the heavy materials for laying the track. Workers had to dig tunnels through mountains, which involved using dynamite to blast giant holes into the rock. Many died in accidental explosions. Workers also had to contend with avalanches in winter and scorching heat in summer.

After all, this was wild, untamed frontier land.

Difficult Conditions

The land wasn’t the only reason workers had it tough. To get the railroad built as fast and as cheaply as possible, the Central Pacific brought more than 10,000 men over from China. They were paid only $1 a day (about $17 in today’s money) to perform hard and dangerous tasks, and they were often mistreated. The Union Pacific didn’t treat its workers—most of whom were immigrants from Ireland and former Civil War soldiers—much better.

Sometimes construction was sabotaged by Native Americans, who were angry with the U.S. government. The Native Americans lived on the land the railroad companies were now building through—land that the government had promised not to encroach on.

A New Day

The building of the railroad certainly had a dark side. Still, the Transcontinental Railroad is one of the greatest accomplishments in American history. The engineers who made it happen had enormous vision—and guts.

What’s more, the railroad really did unite the country. Americans on opposite coasts could more easily visit each other. Newcomers arriving in New York could travel west and settle the frontier. Supplies could be loaded into railcars and shipped thousands of miles, enabling people in one state to buy things made in other states. The railroad made life easier and more comfortable.

Anything Seems Possible

So what about you, back at Promontory Summit?

After the crowd disperses, you stand transfixed, staring at that track stretching as far as you can see. Now, though, anything seems possible.

Consider the historical events described in “This Railroad Changed America.” How does author Kenneth Oppel use these events to develop the plot of The Ghost Boy? Answer this question in a well-organized essay. Use text evidence. Send your essay to RAILROAD CONTEST. Five winners will each get Kenneth Oppel’s The Boundless. See page 2 for details.