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English 308-02
February 14, 2012 (Presentation Date)

Title of book: Maniac Magee
Author: Jerry Spinelli, www.jerryspinelli.com/
Publisher and Copyright date: Little, Brown and Company (Hachette Book Group), 1990
ISBN: 0-316-80906-3
Genre: Young Adult Fiction (Juvenile Fiction) - Racism, Homelessness/Poverty

Summary:

Jeffrey Lionel Magee, a.k.a. Maniac Magee, is orphaned after a tragic car accident in which both parents are killed. Maniac is sent to live with his aunt and uncle, who don't talk to each other and "share" him. On the night of a spring musicale at his school, Maniac points to his aunt and uncle, "bellowing out from the midst of the chorus: 'Talk! Talk, will ya! Talk! Talk! Talk!'" (page 7). He runs from his spot on the risers and doesn't stop running for a full year.

This begins a journey that mostly takes place in the racially divided town, Two Mills. Maniac's reputation as a legend buds when he hits every ball John McNab throws to him, including the "fastfrog," which he bunts and scores an "inside-the-park home-run" (page 26). His legend is cemented when he loosens the infamous Cobble's Knot: "You could barely make out the individual strands. It was grimy, moldy, crusted over. Here and there a loop stuck out... pitiful testimony to the challengers who had tried and failed" (page 70).

Since Maniac is a runaway, he spends his nights a sort of nomad: "What he did have was the deer shed at the Elmwood Park Zoo, which is where he spent his first few nights in town" (page 29). He is shown hospitality some nights by families in the East End, who you learn later are African American (Maniac is Caucasian), but he mostly spends his nights at the park, where he can find warmth and shelter.

He is soon befriended by the old Black groundskeeper, Grayson, who offers Maniac food and better shelter than what the animal pens were providing. The two become fast-friends and their relationship is the focus of a large part of the story; pages 79-118 are wholly devoted to it. Grayson offers wisdom and fatherly love while Maniac acts as a reading and writing teacher for the illiterate old man.

Two Mills is racially divided by a physical boundary; "Hector Street was the boundary between the East and West Ends. Or, to put it another way, between the blacks and whites...People did cross the line now and then... But nighttime, forget it" (page 32). The tension of the story is tied to this boundary. Maniac passes freely at first, not really understanding the purpose of the boundary. He has a sort of innocent naivety about racism.

The book's gripping ending is a congruence of happy and sad emotions ('happy' and 'sad' just can't do it justice) that is sure to enrapture your heart and secure this piece as one of the best available for young adults. I won't spoil it for you, but will give you just a taste in hope that you read this wonderful title for yourself: "Maniac said nothing... He knew that finally, truly, at long last, someone was calling him home" (page 184).

Creative Classroom Extensions:

Before Reading

Class Discussion: What is Racism?

Teacher mediates class discussion while asking questions to keep it going: "Can you give me an example of racism that you've seen, read or heard about? Have you ever been looked down upon for meaningless reasons? e.g. Because of your age or gender? How did it make you feel? Have you ever found yourself judging others because of their differences?" (ask for examples if students are willing to share and write them on the board). "Is this fair? Explain why or why not."

Vocabulary

Before each section of the book (Parts I, II, and III), the teacher needs to scan and take note of certain words he thinks the students will have trouble identifying. Introduce the words several times in class *before* the reading containing them is introduced, making sure students have a firm grasp on the definitions. This way, when the children come to the words in the text, they'll feel a sense of accomplishment. They'll feel smart (because they are!).

**Side Note: Ask students to keep a journal as they read to make note of specific pages they enjoy or have questions about. They'll need this information when we finish the book (see activity for 'After Reading').*

While Reading

The Legend of Maniac

As students read through the novel, ask them to identify the feats and other actions that make Jeffrey Lionel Magee a 'Legend.' There will be obvious events, like the *fastfrog* in-the-park home-run, the race win against Mars Bar, Cobbler's Knot, etc. However, try to encourage students to look at the way Maniac is blind to racism that set him apart. This is the meat of the story. "Usually, a character becomes a hero through some kind of extraordinary transformation. What are some things you read about that make Maniac a hero in your eyes? Does he ever really transform? Or, is he a hero from the very beginning of the book who transforms *others*?" (save the last question for the end, as a rhetorical question. Use it as a *writing prompt*).

Who is Your Grayson?

Look at Part II of the book in isolation and ask students to share about the “Graysons” in their lives: “What role does Grayson play for Maniac? Is it a ‘bigger’ role than Maniac plays for Grayson?” Explore why they both need each other for different reasons and see if the students can figure those reasons out in small groups. Identify the purpose of their encounter and discuss the relevance of destiny; “Is destiny real? Can you think of an event in your own life where you didn’t understand its magnitude until much later?” The teacher should offer an example from his own life to help students understand the question.

Chapter 17: It’s Hyperbole, *not* Hyper-bowl (inspired by www.sandtpublications.com)

“The author Jerry Spinelli describes a hot August day to begin chapter 17. He does this by using a literary technique called *hyperbole*: exaggerated statements or claims not meant to be taken literally. Check it out:

It was a hot day in August.

It was so hot, if you stood still too long in the vacant lot, the sun bouncing off a chunk of broken glass or metal could fry a patch on your hide.

So hot, if you were packing candy, you had soup in your pocket by two o’clock. So hot, the dogs were tripping on their own tongues. And so hot, the fire hydrant at Green and Chestnut was gushing like Niagara Falls

(courtesy of somebody wrenching off the cap) (page 59).

I want us to try using hyperbole. Let’s create a paragraph describing a cold day in Michigan. I’ll start us:

It was a cold day in January...”

Let the students take over from here. The class will collaborate to create its own paragraph, then the students will be tasked of creating a paragraph on their own as homework.

After Reading

Compare and Contrast

Choose scenes (or the whole movie if there’s time) from Nickelodeon’s film adaptation, “Maniac Magee,” and lead a class discussion to compare the book to the movie: “What did you like better? Was the movie too soft? Or, do you think it did a good job of addressing the issues of racism in Two Mills?” After the class discussion, ask students to choose a character and write a short essay comparing and contrasting the book and movie versions. The conclusion should answer why they chose that character. -OR- Students that were deeply moved by the book may write a short essay to explain how the story challenged them to change and why they loved it. No matter their choice, students need to include examples from the text with page numbers.

Jerry Spinelli Bibliography:

Space Station Seventh Grade, 1982
Who Put That Hair on my Toothbrush, 1984
Jason and Marceline, 1986
Maniac Magee (Newbery Award), 1990
The Bathwater Gang, 1990
Dump Days, 1991
Fourth Grade Rats, 1991
Report to the Principal's Office, 1991
There's a Girl in My Hammerlock, 1991
Do the Funky Pickle, 1992
Who Ran My Underwear Up the Flagpole?, 1992
Picklemania, 1993
Crash, 1996
Tooter Pepperday, 1996
The Library Card, 1997
Wringer (Newbery Honor), 1997
Blue Ribbon Blues: A Tooter Tale, 1998
Knots in My Yo-Yo String, 1998
Stargirl, 2000
Loser, 2002
Milkweed, 2003
My Daddy and Me, 2006
Love, Stargirl, 2007
Eggs, 2007
Smiles to Go, 2009
Today I Will, 2009
I Can Be Anything!, 2010
Jake and Lily, 2012
Third Grade Angels, 2012

*I gathered information from several different websites in order to build this list. I did my best to double check the dates on all books, but some may be wrong. I also may be missing some books.

Jerry Spinelli Accolades:

Boston Globe/Horn Book Award, 1990, Newbery Medal, American Library Association (ALA), and Carolyn Field Award, both 1991, and Dorothy Canfield Fisher Award, Indian Paintbrush Award, Rhode Island Children's Book Award, Flicker Tale Award, Charlotte Award, Mark Twain Award, and Nevada Young Readers' Award, all 1992, and William Allen White Award, Pacific Northwest Award, Massachusetts Children's Book Award, Rebecca Caudhill Award, West Virginia Children's Book Award, Buckeye Children's Book Award, Land of Enchantment Award, all 1993, all for Maniac Magee; South Carolina Children's Book Award, 1993, for Fourth Grade Rats; California Young Readers' Medal, 1993, for There's a Girl in My Hammerlock; Best Book for Young Adults, ALA, and Best Books, School Library Journal, both 1996, both for Crash; Best Books, School Library Journal, 1997, Newbery Honor Book, 1998, Carolyn Field Award, and Josette Frank Award, all for Wringer; Golden Kite Award for fiction, Society of Children's Book Writers and Illustrators, and Carolyn Field Award co-winner, both 2003, both for Milkweed; Dorothy Canfield Fisher Award, 2004, for Loser; Children's Literature Citation, Drexel University, and Milner Award (Atlanta, GA), both for body of work.

FROM: <http://biography.jrank.org/pages/1468/Spinelli-Jerry-1941-Awards-Honors.html>