

The Pigman by Paul Zindel

Book Information

Paul Zindel, The Pigman
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John and Lorraine are two high school sophomores who befriend Mr. Pignati, a lonely old man with an awful secret.

Award: ALA Notable/Best Books; Boston Globe/Horn Book Award/Honors; Margaret A. Edwards Award; Misc./Other; SLJ Best Book

Topics: Biographies/Autobiographies, Biographies/Autobiographies (All); Interpersonal Relationships, Friendship; Mysteries, Secrets; READNOW - Demco Media Turtleback Books, Demco Media - Read Now Grades 9+

Main Characters

John Conlan a high school student who likes to play jokes on others and wants to become an actor
Lorraine Jensen a close friend of John who has low self-esteem and tries to psychoanalyze people
Mr. Pignati a lonely older man who John and Lorraine meet through a phone game
Norton Kelly a fellow high school classmate who causes trouble for John and Lorraine

Vocabulary

infantile childish
maladjusted not well adjusted to the circumstances of one's life or environment
prevarications lies
subliminally in a way that is outside the consciousness of a person

Synopsis

John and Lorraine are high school sophomores who

entertain themselves by playing a phone game. As part of the phone game, they place calls to people whose names they randomly choose from the phone book. One day Lorraine dials Mr. Pignati and talks to him for an extended period of time, all the while pretending to be collecting money for a charity. John eventually interrupts the phone call and tells Mr. Pignati he and Lorraine will be over the next day to collect the money. Though Lorraine is happy to let the matter end there, John insists on going to the man's house. In an ironic twist the three begin to become friends and they affectionately dub him the Pigman.

John and Lorraine's friendship with the Pigman develops as the three of them take trips to the zoo to see the Pigman's friend, Bobo, a baboon, and spend time together in Mr. Pignati's home. John and Lorraine come to enjoy their visits with Mr. Pignati since he is so kind and accepting of them. They often skip school to visit him and take little outings.

Eventually, John and Lorraine's guilt overwhelms them, and they admit to the Pigman that they are not charity workers. Moved by their honesty, the Pigman admits that his wife is not on a trip to California, but rather she has died. Uneasy with Mr. Pignati's grief, John reverts to playfulness and puts on a pair of rollerskates in the house. Mr. Pignati joins in the game, and during the chase that ensues, he suffers a heart attack and is taken to the hospital. During the Pigman's stay in the hospital, John and Lorraine continue to spend time at his house.

One night John decides to have a party at the Pigman's house. The party gets out of hand when Norton, a classmate of John, finds out about it and crashes the party. Norton rummages through the house stealing and breaking things. John tries to stop him but is unsuccessful. Just as he is trying to deal with Norton, Mr. Pignati arrives. The police also arrive and escort John and Lorraine to their homes. Racked with guilt, John tries to make contact with Mr. Pignati, finally getting him to agree to meet Lorraine and him at the zoo. While they are visiting the zoo they find out Bobo has died. In his grief, Mr. Pignati suffers another heart attack and dies.

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Through the Pigman's death, John is able to realize that his future is in his own hands.

Open-Ended Questions

Use these open-ended questions as the basis for class discussions, student presentations, or extended writing assignments.

Initial Understanding

What reason does Lorraine give for why John is able to get away with being such a joker? Is this a fair assessment?

She says it is because he is so handsome. She contends that people would treat an uglier boy harsher. Most people would agree that there is some validity to the assertion that better looking people are given more leniency in society, and it does appear that it may be true in John's case. It may also be a bit of jealousy that makes Lorraine feel this way.

Literary Analysis

John describes the story he and Lorraine have written as a "memorial epic." Is this an accurate label?

The adjective "memorial" is appropriate because it relates to the memory of Mr. Pignati; however, the term "epic" seems to be misused. An epic is usually used to refer to a type of poetry that tells the life and feats of a hero. In this sense it seems an inaccurate label. If students can show that Mr. Pignati has characteristics of an epic hero, then they may be able to make an argument about the validity of the term "memorial epic."

Inferential Comprehension

What occupations do John and Lorraine dream of having as adults? Why do you think they chose these professions?

John wants to be an actor, perhaps because he sees it as a way to escape his own life and express himself. Lorraine wants to be a writer, seemingly as a way for her to work through her life problems and also express herself.

Constructing Meaning

A few times in the story Lorraine is torn between the thrill of accepting Mr. Pignati's gifts and offers and the guilt from believing she may just be using the sad old man. Describe a time when you were torn between accepting a gift from someone and the uneasiness of doing so.

Possible answers may be an experience in which students accepted a gift from someone they did not like, or from a grandparent who gives them gifts for no special reason.

Teachable Skills

Understanding Characterization It appears that the author chose to have John and Lorraine share the job of telling this story in order to reveal more about their own personalities. Write a personality description of John and Lorraine.

Making Predictions In the end, John learns that his life is going to be what he makes of it. There is no one else to blame for it, nor is there anywhere to hide from it. In light of this lesson, have the students write a synopsis of what they believe John does with his life after the story ends.

Recognizing Cause and Effect John grew up as the child of an alcoholic and, even though his father stopped drinking at one point, the effects of his addiction clearly affected the members of his family. Research the dynamics of the families of alcoholics, and define the role each member (John, Kenny, and the mother) played in his family.

Identifying Reasons Lorraine's mother takes food from the pantries and cupboards of the clients she works for because she feels she is not paid enough for the work she does. Hold a class discussion or have students write position papers on whether she was justified to do this. Point out the factors that possibly affected her thought process, i.e. poverty, abandonment, jealousy, etc.