On My Honor
by Marion Dane Bauer

Joel is more cautious than his daredevil friend Tony, but if Tony dares him to do something, he feels he has no choice. On a bicycle trip to the state park, a place where Tony would likely climb the dangerous cliffs, Joel is glad he wants to swim in the river instead. Then something happens to change Joel's life forever.

THEMES
peer pressure, friendship, parents, responsibility, dealing with loss, guilt

I. PRE-TEACHING
A. Have the class define and discuss these terms:
tinged, sheer, bluffs, municipal, squinted, tow, hovering, sparse, dense, redeemed, jubilant, jaunt, betrayed, exuberance, taunt, haphazardly, flailing, thrashing, chlorine, clenching, glowing, spewing, eddied, indistinct, deceptively, barrage, murky, skulked, convulsed, erratic, forlorn, shear (v.), nonchalance, obscured, supplication, giddily, stench, vapor, inflection, loomed, reckless

B. Before beginning the story, discuss with the class the following questions:
1. Do you have a close friend? What are some fun things you do together?
2. Has anyone ever dared you to do something dangerous? Did you do it? Why or why not?
3. Do your parents often tell you not to do something because it's dangerous? How do you feel when they do this?
4. Have you known anyone who has passed away? How did you deal with this loss?

II. PRESENTATION
A. Understanding the Story:
1. Begin with Chapters 1-4: What does Tony want to do that day? Why does Joel ask his father for permission? Why does his father hesitate? What does his father ask him? Why is Joel mad when his father gives permission? Why does he feel trapped? What does Joel wish were different about Tony? What idea does Tony get next? What has Joel's father said about the river? How does Joel try to talk Tony out of going in? How does Tony get him to join him? What does Joel wonder about Tony's swimming? What challenge does Joel throw out to him? Why does Tony say he doesn't want to work out at the pool? What does Joel remember about Tony? How does Joel feel as he swims? What does he see when he looks back? What makes him realize what's happened?
2. Advance to Chapters 5-8: How does Joel try to find Tony? What will he do to Tony if he's been fooling around? What makes Joel sure it's no trick? How does he try to get help? What does he promise the teenager he'll do? What worries him about going to the police? Why does he decide to go to the park instead of going home? What does he decide he could do? What else does he think of doing? What makes him decide to turn around and go home? What story does he make up as he pedals home? Why does he stop at the river again? What does he do all afternoon? Why does he want his father to hit him? Why does he tell his father? What does he smell?

3. Complete the story with Chapters 9-12: How does Joel feel as he goes on his paper route? What memories of Tony does he have? How does he feel about Bobby? What does Mrs. Zabrinsky tell Joel that surprises him? Why can't Joel tell the truth now? What have the police found? Why is Joel mad at his father? Why does he blame himself for Tony's death? What does he wish his father would say? What does he say? How does his father comfort him? What does his father say when Joel asks him if Tony is in heaven? Why does he ask his father to stay with him?

B. For Discussion:
1. In what ways are Joel and Tony different? Why is Joel influenced by Tony? How does this cause the tragedy?
2. Why does Joel suffer guilt over Tony's death? Was it his fault? Why or why not?
3. Why does Joel feel anger toward his father?
4. Why did the author choose On My Honor for the title?
5. What kind of parent would you say Joel's father is? Why does he give permission to go to the park? How does he handle Joel after Tony's death?

III. EXTENDING THE LESSON
Give wide leeway in working with partners, groups, the whole class, or alone.

INTERDISCIPLINARY CONNECTIONS:
A. Language Arts:
1. Have students listen again to the opening paragraph. How does it foreshadow what's going to happen? In what ways is what happens unexpected?
2. Have students write about a time when someone dared them to do something dangerous. What happened? Did they take the dare? Would they do it again? Why or why not?

3. Have students listen to the chapter endings. How do they make the reader want to go on to the next chapter? Have students write cliffhanging sentences that might end the chapter of a book.

4. Have students listen to the author’s use of similes and metaphors, like “The sky was an inverted china bowl...”; “...her hands fluttering in front of her like large moths” and “The five faces bent toward him were like pale moons.” How do these comparisons make the scenes more vivid? Have students make up some similes and metaphors of their own.

B. Art and Music:
1. Have students select background music that might be appropriate to some of the scenes. They might find the song “Old Man River” by Jerome Kern for when Tony is talking about the river, the theme from the film Breaking Away for when they are biking, selections from La Mer for when Tony drowns.

2. Have students make a bulletin board about the story. They might find photos of two boys like Joel and Tony to put in the center, cut tissue paper or plastic to form a river, add pictures of bikes, and make a mockup of a newspaper account of Tony’s drowning.

C. Social Studies:
1. Like Joel, many youngsters are pressured by other kids to do things that are dangerous. Have students talk about peer pressure. Why do we sometimes do things we wouldn’t do by ourselves? What are some ways to avoid being influenced by others?

2. The Vermillion River is polluted. Have students learn more about water pollution. What is being done to clean up our rivers and streams?

3. The rock Tony and Joel are heading toward is called “Starved Rock” because Indians were once made to starve there. Have students learn about other atrocities regarding Native Americans. What was the attitude toward them in the nineteenth and early twentieth century? Has this attitude changed? Why or why not?

4. Have students learn about the stages of grief and how people cope with it. Why are we sometimes angry when someone dies? Who are we angry at? How do we deal with this anger? What other stages do people go through? Does religious belief help? Why or why not?

D. Science and Math:
1. Tony jokes that alligators live in the river. Have students find out about alligators. Where do they live? Why are they dangerous?

2. Have students find out how someone drowns. What happens? How long does it take? What can we do to help someone who nearly drowns?

3. Joel continues to smell the stench of the river even after he showers. Have students find out why smells evoke strong memories.

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