

Maniac Magee

by Jerry Spinelli

When Jeffrey Magee arrives out of nowhere, runs everywhere at top speed, hits a home run off the best pitcher in the neighborhood, and undoes a knot no one else could untie, people laugh and call him “Maniac Magee.” But when he takes on Mars Bar, the toughest kid in town, people decide he really is a maniac.

THEMES

race relations, problem-solving, family, friendship, responsibility, courage

I. PRE-TEACHING

A. These terms should be defined and discussed:

legacy, trolley, trestle, musicale, smatter, scraggly, suspicious, suffice, cardinal (adj.), mirage, pandemonium, boulevard, intercepted, blemish, instincts, cringed, idling, converged, veering, hydrant, benched, glum, hibernating, incubating, contortions, opponent, terrorize, spectators, foresight, cunning, confetti, robust, gingerly, languished, stoic, solitary, satchel, desolation, gaunt, beseeching, bedeviled, lambasting, autopsy, carrion, nonchalantly, forlorn, ludicrous, marauding, chaotic, pavilion

B. Consider the following questions:

1. If you decided to run away, where would you go? Where would you sleep? What would you tell people at school?
2. Is your town segregated by race, nationality, or religion? How do you feel about going into the other part of town?
3. Do you have a nickname? Do you like your nickname? Why or why not?

II. PRESENTATION

A. Understanding the Story:

1. Begin with Part I: Why does Jeff stop running and say hi to Amanda? Where else was he been seen that day? What happens to Arnold Jones? What amazes the Pickwells about Jeff? What trick does John McNab play on Jeff? How does Jeff handle it? How does he get the name “Maniac Magee”? What “unthinkable” thing does he do? How does Amanda handle Mars Bar? How does Jeff get an address? What does he love about his new life? Why can't he hug Amanda or go back to her family?
2. Advance to Part II: What happens to Jeff at the zoo? Why hadn't Grayson made the Major Leagues? What's the one pitch Grayson can still do? How does Jeff react when Grayson reads a sentence? A whole book? How do Jeff and Grayson spend Thanksgiving? What does Jeff give Grayson for Christmas? What does Grayson give Jeff? What does Jeff do after he finds Grayson dead? What is wrong with Grayson's funeral?

3. Complete the story with Part III: What are the boys doing in the Valley Forge cabin? How does Jeff help John save face with his little brothers? Describe John's home life. What does Jeff do to get the boys to go to school? How does Mars Bar react when Jeff wins the race? What happens when Jeff invites Mars Bar to the party? Why does Jeff start sleeping on porches? What happens when Jeff and Mars Bar meet running in the morning? What happens at the trestle? Why does Amanda change Mars Bar's name? How does Amanda get Jeff to go home with her?

B. For Discussion:

1. Why do people start calling Jeff “Maniac Magee”? Why doesn't he like this name?
2. In what ways is Jeff “colorblind”? What causes him to begin to “see”? How does he integrate the town of Two Mills?
3. Find examples of humor in the story. How does the humor contrast with the serious undertones of the story?
4. How does Maniac help Grayson? How does Grayson help Maniac?
5. Why can't Maniac abandon the McNab boys? What in his nature makes him so persistent?
6. What does Jeff mean when he says he can't figure out why the people call themselves “black”? What does he notice about the color of their skin? Why do African Americans call themselves “black”?

III. EXTENDING THE LESSON

Give students the opportunity to work with partners, groups, the whole class, or alone.

A. Language Arts:

1. Have students put together a character list featuring the different traits of the main characters. What are Maniac's strengths? His weaknesses? How would you describe Mars Bar? Grayson? John? Amanda? Mrs. Beale?
2. Have students read the poem, “Death of the Hired Man” by Robert Frost. What is the definition of “home” in this poem? How does this apply to the story of Maniac Magee? Have students write an essay on what “home” means to them.

3. Have students put together a lesson plan to teach an adult to read. They might find books that these adults could read, or write one themselves.
4. Have students read Robert Cormier's short story, "My First Negro" and compare the experience of the main character in the story with the experiences of Maniac Magee.

B. Art and Music:

1. Assign a group to select records, tapes, or CDs from the library that serve as appropriate background music to some of the scenes. They might find rap music that's appropriate for Maniac's running, music from *West Side Story*, or eerie music like Moussorgsky's *Night on Bare Mountain* for the scene at the Finsterwald's.
2. Have students make a bulletin board. They might divide the board between the black section and the white section of Two Mills. Have them show Hector Street down the middle with the white kids on one side and the black kids, led by Mars Bar, on the other. Have them show Maniac running back and forth. They might add a damaged book, a complicated knot, and other items from the story.
3. Have students listen to scene where Arnold Jones is dumped in the Finsterwald's yard, and make up a song and dance about getting the "finsterwallies," possibly to the tune of "Dry Bones."

C. Social Studies:

1. Themes of homes and homelessness are important to the plot. Have the students define what they think home means to Jeffrey. What does it mean to them? Encourage a discussion about homelessness. Have students research homelessness in America beginning with the Great Depression to modern day.
2. Have students find out about "White Supremacy" groups. Why do they exist? How do they spread hate? How can we solve this problem?
3. Have students list the nicknames in the story. Why do we make up nicknames for people? For groups of people? What is wrong with using a nickname for someone or for a group?
4. Have students student find out about gangs. Why does someone join a gang? What things does a gang make them do?

5. The knot Maniac unties might be compared to the Gordian Knot that Alexander the Great untied. Have students learn about this. Was Alexander following the rules when he "untied" the knot? Why or why not?

D. Science and Math:

1. Have students find out the literacy rate in this country and compare it with other countries. What is being done to increase literacy in this country? In other countries?
2. Have a group of students tie a complicated knot out of rope and hold a contest at school to see who can untie it the quickest. They should keep notes as the knot is tied so they know how it can be untied.
3. Maniac Magee is said to have traveled two-hundred miles in fifty-two weeks. If you started walking today, how far could you get in that time? What if you ran? How much of a rest period would you need? Using a map, calculate how far you could get from your home in fifty-two weeks of walking or running, taking into account the need for sleep, rest, and food.

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