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Maniac Magee

BY

Jerry Spinelli

Summary.....	2
About the Author.....	3
Book Reviews.....	5
Discussion Questions.....	6
Author Interview.....	8
Further Reading.....	9





SUMMARY

He wasn't born with the name Maniac Magee. He came into this world named Jeffrey Lionel Magee, but when his parents died and his life changed, so did his name. And Maniac Magee became a legend. Even today kids talk about how fast he could run; about how he hit an inside-the-park "frog" homer; how no knot, no matter how snarled, would stay that way once he began to untie it. But the thing Maniac Magee is best known for is what he did for the kids from the East Side and those from the West Side. He was special all right, and this is his story, and it's a story that is very careful not to let the facts get mixed up with the truth.

From Scholastic Authors and Books

<http://www2.scholastic.com/teachers/authorsandbooks/teachingwithbooks/producthome.jhtml?productID=10893&displayName=Description>

(Accessed 8/04/05)

Awards

1991 Newbery Medal

1990 *Boston Globe-Horn* **Book** Award

1991 Notable Children's Books (ALA)

1991 Best Books for Young Adults (ALA)

1990 Children's Editors' Choices (*Booklist*)



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jerry Spinelli's Biography



Born: February 1, 1941
in Norristown , PA , United States
Current Home: Phoenixville , PA

When I was growing up, the first thing I wanted to be was a cowboy. That lasted till I was about ten. Then I wanted to be a baseball player. Preferably shortstop for the New York Yankees.

I played Little League in junior high and high school. I only hit two home runs in my career, but I had no equal when it came to standing at shortstop and chattering to my pitcher: "C'mon, baby, hum the pea." Unfortunately, when I stood at the plate, so many peas were hummed past me for strikes that I decided to let somebody else become shortstop for the Yankees.

It was about that time that our high school football team won a heart-stopping game against one of the best teams in the country. While the rest of the town was tooting horns and celebrating, I went home and wrote a poem about the game. A few days later the poem was published in the local newspaper, and suddenly I had something new to become: a writer.

Little did I know that twenty-five years would pass before a book of mine would be published.

Not that I wasn't trying. In the years after college I wrote four novels, but nobody wanted them. They were adult novels. So was number five, or so I thought. However, because it was about a thirteen-year-old boy, adult book publishers didn't even want to see it. But children's publishers did -- and that's how, by accident, I became an author of books for kids.

Life is full of happy accidents.

Sometimes I'm asked if I do research for my stories. The answer is yes and no. No, in the sense that I seldom plow through books at the library to gather material. Yes, in the sense that the first fifteen years of my life turned out to be one big research project. I thought I was simply growing up in Norristown, Pennsylvania; looking back now I can see that I was also gathering material that would one day find its way into my books.

John Ribble's blazing fastball. Dovey Wilmouth, so beautiful a fleet of boys pedaled past her house ten times a day. Mrs. Seeton's whistle calling her kids in to dinner. The day my black snake disappeared. The creek, the tracks, the dump, the red hills. My days did not pass through, but stayed, filling the shelves of my memory. They became the library where today I do my research.

I also get material from my own kids. Along the way I married another children's writer, Eileen Spinelli, and from our six kids have come a number of stories. Jeffrey and Molly, who are always fighting, have been especially helpful.

Ideas also come from everyday life. And from the newspapers. One day, for example, I read a story about a girl who competed on her high school wrestling team. A year later bookstores carried a new book with my name on it: *There's a Girl in My Hammerlock*.

So there you are. I never became a cowboy or baseball player, and now I'm beginning to wonder if I ever really became a writer. I find that I hesitate to put that label on myself, to define myself by what I do for a living. After all, I also pick berries and touch ponies and skim flat stones over water and marvel at the stars and breathe deeply and grin from ear to ear and save the best part for last. I've always done these things. Which is to say, I never had to become anything. Or anyone. I always, already, was.

Call me a berry-picking, pony-touching star-marveler.

Jerry Spinelli won the Newbery Medal for *Maniac Magee*, the sixth of his more than fifteen acclaimed books for young readers. Growing up, he played no fewer than five different sports, including football, track, and basketball. He wanted to be a shortstop in the majors long before it occurred to him to be a writer. *Crash* came out of his desire to include the beloved Penn Relays of his home state of Pennsylvania in a book. And, of course, to show the world a little bit about athletes and what makes some of them tick. Jerry Spinelli lives in Phoenixville, Pennsylvania.

From Scholastic Authors and Books

<http://www2.scholastic.com/teachers/authorsandbooks/authorstudies/authorhome.html?authorID=90&collateralID=5286&displayName=Biography&requestid=184094>



BOOK REVIEW

(This review by Carol Otis Hurst first appeared in [Teaching K-8 Magazine](#).)

You can find it in most libraries because it received the Newbery Medal but you'll want at least one copy of your own.

For those of you who haven't already had the pleasure, let us introduce you to this wonderful book. It's about prejudice and love and home and baseball and fear and understanding. It's about Jeffrey Lionel Magee, sometimes known as Maniac Magee, and about the people of the town of Two Mills.

Jeffrey's parents were killed in a trolley accident when he was three and he spent the next eight years in the bizarre household of his Aunt Dot and Uncle Dan, who hated each other but refused to divorce and so lived in the same house without speaking to each other, using Jeffrey as their go-between. In a scene that will remind some of you of John Irving's adult novel, *Prayer for Owen Meany*, Jeffrey screams at them from the middle of a school concert, "Talk to each other!" and then runs away.

That's the beginning of his running and his search for a real home. He ends up in the town of Two Mills, two hundred miles away from his aunt and uncle. Two Mills is a town divided by race into East and West End. There Jeffrey becomes "Maniac Magee", the subject of legends that have lasted ever since. In his search for a place to belong, he eventually succeeds to some degree in uniting the town by forcing at least some of the Blacks and Whites to know each other.

There's enough to work with in this novel to take up a whole school year, but first of all, the novel is fun. There is much to laugh out loud about before you cry and then you think about what Spinelli is telling us in this book which is understandable, at least on one level, by children as young as third graders.

You won't need most of these suggestions for things to talk about. The book is so rich and so well written that you need to talk about it when you've finished reading it and so will the kids.

<http://www.carolhurst.com/titles/maniacmagee.html> (Accessed 8/4/05)



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Maniac Magee is always running—and often he’s running away. He runs from his aunt and uncle, from the Beales’ home, from Grayson’s funeral, and from the bridge over the Schuylkill River. What do you think makes **Maniac** run?
2. “The East Enders stayed in the east and the West Enders stayed in the west and the less they knew about each other, the more they invented” (page 159). Explain this statement. What examples can you find from the **book** that illustrate this observation?
3. How does Jeffrey’s behavior at the school play foreshadow events that come later in the story (pages 6–7)?
4. Review what the East End man, called the “Old Ragpicker,” says to **Maniac** (pages 60–61). Which parts of what he says seem true, and which parts seem unfair?
5. What does having an address mean to Jeffrey? How do you know it is important to him?
6. Describe the relationship between Grayson and Jeffrey. What support do they provide for each other?
7. Explain this metaphor at the end of Chapter 23: “In that bedeviled army there would be no more recruits. No one else would orphan him.” What is the “bedeviled army?” Who are the “recruits?” Why does Jeffrey feel this way? What decision does he come to at the end of this chapter and what makes him change his mind (page 123)?
8. Jeffrey doesn’t go to school, so why does he work so hard to make sure that Piper and Russell McNab do? Why does Jeffrey think “... to abandon the McNab boys would be to abandon something in himself” (page 155)?

9. Describe the relationship between **Maniac** and Mars Bar. How does it change over the course of the **book**? How is their trust established?
10. Compare the Pickwells and the Beales. Why does Jeffrey think the families are alike (page 154)?
11. Think about the incidents at the trolley trestle. What exactly happened? Why do you think each person there—**Maniac**, Mars Bar, Russell, Piper—acts the way he does?
12. How is Amanda able to accomplish what no one else has and make **Maniac** come home? (pages 182–184)

<http://www.harperchildrens.com/hch/parents/teachingguides/spinelli.pdf>
(accessed 8/4/05)



AUTHOR INTERVIEW

Q: Where did the idea for *Maniac Magee* come from?

A: *I get my ideas from everyday life, memories, and imagination—and that probably covers everything. Maniac Magee was a patchwork quilt of memories and observations that I stitched together, some of it dreamed up and some of it based on people I’ve known and situations I’ve been in. For example, I did meet a sixth grade girl in New York City once who brought her books to school every day in a suitcase. She became the basis for Amanda Beale. To me, what the story is really about is childhood recollected. When you’re an adult looking back on childhood, there’s a quality about it that seems indistinguishable from Homeric myth. Lots of things seem special, grand, or huge as one’s memory grows.*

Q: Did your own childhood inspire aspects of *Maniac Magee*?

A: *I grew up in a town like Two Mills, with a kind of division of black and white, although I simplified it for the book. Maniac’s attitude of not really buying into segregation and discrimination is reflective of mine. In terms of his athletic prowess—I wish I were that good.*

Q: And what sparked *Wringer*?

A: *I would read about a pigeon shooting event in the newspaper every year. I recognized there was a story there, but I wasn’t sure for several years how to get into it. Then I realized the best way to do it was by way of one of the kids.*

Q: Have you ever had a pet pigeon?

A: *No. I did have a series of pet rats and a chinchilla. When I was writing *Wringer* I went down to a park and sat on a bench and watched the pigeons and took notes. I don’t do a lot of research. You don’t need to go into a library and dust off books to get into a kid’s experience.*

Q: How did you start writing for children?

A: *I don’t sit down and think I’m writing for kids. I’m writing about them. Basically I try to interview the story and get it to tell me how it wants to be told. That’s what I write for. **Jerry Spinelli** lives in West Chester, Pennsylvania, with his wife, Eileen, who is also an author. He graduated from Gettysburg College.*

(Accessed 8/4/05)



If You Like...

Maniac Magee

by Jerry Spinelli,

you might like the following books, too!!

Holes by Louis Sachar

Shiloh by Phyllis Reynolds Naylor

The Giver by Lois Lowry

The Folk Keeper by Franny Billingsley

Superfudge by Judy Blume

Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone by J. K. Rowling

Poppy by Avi

Bud Not Buddy by Christopher Paul Curtis

A Single Shard by Linda Sue Park