

Jack
by
A.M. Homes**Book Information**

A.M. Homes, Jack
Quiz Number: 6038
Random House, 1989
ISBN 0-679-73221-7; LCCN
220 Pages
Book Level: 4.7
Interest Level: UG

Fifteen-year-old Jack's confused feelings for his father, who left him and his mother four years earlier, are further complicated when he finds that his father is gay.

Award: ALA Notable/Best Books

Topics: Family Life, Fathers; Family Life, Homosexual Families; Family Life, Sons; READNOW - Demco Media Turtleback Books, Demco Media - Read Now Grades 9+

Main Characters

Bob Paul's homosexual partner and roommate

Jack a fifteen-year-old who learns to adjust to a gay father, his first girlfriend, and his best friend's broken family

Jack's mother an initially insecure woman who has adjusted to her husband's absence by establishing a career in real estate and finding a boyfriend

Maggie Rogers a member of the popular group at school, whose dad is also gay and who becomes Jack's first real girlfriend

Max Burka Jack's best friend, a blunt, rather rude adolescent, who is astonished by Jack's gay dad and hurt by his own father's abuse

Mr. Burka (Sandy) Max's father, who has tendencies toward impatience and violence

Mrs. Burka (Elaine) Max's mother and one of Jack's favorite adults; she is also very fond of Jack

Paul Jack's father, who left his wife and family for another man; a highly sensitive man who cares greatly for those around him

Vocabulary

gay relating to homosexuals

heterosexual tendency to be sexually attracted to members of the opposite gender

homosexual tendency to be sexually attracted to members of the same gender

reconstruction the process by which the Confederate states were reorganized as part of the Union after the Civil War

Webtone an odd or unusual person

Zen a form of Buddhism that strives to gain enlightenment through meditation and insight

Synopsis

Jack is the fifteen-year-old son of divorced parents, who lives with his mother and her boyfriend, Michael. Early in the story, Jack learns that his father, Paul, has a homosexual relationship with Paul's roommate, Bob.

Jack and Jack's best friend, Max Burka, meet Maggie Rogers at a bowling outing with his dad and some of his dad's friends. She belongs to the more popular group at school, is very attractive, and also has a gay father. Max is astonished to discover that both Jack and Maggie's fathers are gay and mentions it to friends at school, who then proceed to harass Jack. Soon, Jack and Maggie become close friends and begin dating. Meanwhile, Jack's mom and dad begin getting along better with each other following Jack's basketball injury. Jack also begins adjusting to his father's homosexuality and his dad's lover, Bob.

Jack faces another challenge when he accompanies the Burkas to Max's aunt and uncle's farm. In Jack's opinion, the Burkas are "the perfect family." While at the farm, however, Mr. Burka hits Mrs. Burka, ending the visit prematurely. Max is suddenly in a family without a father and is embarrassed and angry about his father's violence. With all his preconceived notions about families, homosexuality, and relationships challenged, Jack realizes that the differences among those around him are all right. He discovers that he alone is responsible for who he becomes, which is both a relief and a tremendous challenge.

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Open-Ended Questions

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

Initial Understanding

Four gay men are described in this story: Jack's dad, Bob, Maggie's dad, and John. In addition, three heterosexual men are identified: Michael, Mr. Burka, and the basketball coach. Describe how Jack's feelings toward each of these men change throughout the story, using references to the story.

Jack loves his dad, is hurt at being left, is angry at him when he discovers he is gay, and then loves him again at the end. Jack is uncomfortable with Bob early, but learns to accept him. Jack is angry at Maggie's dad for kissing John at the restaurant, but later accepts him for who he is. Jack's feelings toward John are influenced by Maggie because Jack never gets to know John. Jack only tolerates Michael at first, but grows to appreciate him and his philosophies later. Jack thinks Mr. Burka is a great father but, after learning of his violent outbursts, seems to fear and dislike him. Jack thinks the coach is foolish, especially when the coach demonstrates his lack of knowledge or understanding of gay men. His attitude toward the coach doesn't seem to change.

Literary Analysis

Jack faces a number of challenges to his conventional attitudes about families and relationships. What does Jack learn through facing these challenges about people who turn out to be different from what he expected?

Possible responses may include the following answers: His divorced parents still care for him; Gay men can be fathers; "Perfect" families can have flaws; Ultimately each person is an individual with positive and negative attributes. The key ideas are tolerance and understanding.

Inferential Comprehension

As Jack discovered that his father had left, and later that his father was gay, his initial response could be described as fear. Identify Jack's fears in each of the above situations. What ultimately helps Jack overcome his fears?

When his father left, Jack was afraid he had lost his hero and that he had no family. Later, however, Jack accepts his father, Bob, and Michael as part of his family. Jack initially fears he might be gay, too. He tries to hide it by beating up George and by holding hands with Ann McCormick. As Jack realizes his father hasn't changed, and he becomes attracted to Maggie, his fears dissolve.

Constructing Meaning

Jack learns several things about homosexuality and homosexual individuals that are different from the opinions he had previously held and many around him continue to hold. Identify some opinions he and others express which Jack later realizes are false.

Gay men always try to influence boys to become gay. Gay men are effeminate and poor athletes. Gays are never fathers.

Teachable Skills

Making Inferences This story is written as a series of dialogues described by Jack, the narrator. On several occasions, Jack recognizes silence or quiet in conversations, which means different things to him. Find the author's references to silence in the book, and identify the meaning the author is trying to convey in each circumstance.

Extending Meaning When Jack's history teacher discusses the civil rights of African-Americans, Jack thinks about his dad and the things people might do to him because he is gay. Recently, questions have been raised about U.S. military policy toward homosexuals serving in the armed forces. In the library find out what the current policy is, and write a short paper discussing this policy with reference to your understanding of civil rights.

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Understanding Dialogue This story relates the struggle of a young boy learning to adjust to his father's homosexuality and, in the process, discovering tolerance. Meanwhile, he is exposed to and uses derogatory language. Identify language you have heard around your school or on TV that demeans a specific religion, race, or sexual orientation, etc. and expresses intolerance and lack of understanding. Write a short evaluation of this language as if you were a member of the group and the language was directed toward you.

Responding to Literature Jack discovers on his trip to the farm that the Burka family has a problem with domestic abuse. Contact a local social service agency, domestic abuse shelter, or the local police to interview a domestic abuse professional about the effects of abuse on family members. Report what you learn to your class.