

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

On My Honor

by

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Book Information

Marion Dane Bauer, On My Honor
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When his best friend drowns while they are both swimming in a treacherous river that they had promised never to go near, Joel is devastated and terrified at having to tell both sets of parents the terrible consequences of their disobedience.

Award: ALA Notable/Best Books; Booklist Editors' Choice; Newbery Honor; Publishers Weekly Best Book; SLJ Best Book

Topics: Emotions, Sadness; Interpersonal Relationships, Friendship; Read Now with Power Up Recommended Lists, Do the Right Thing: Integrity; Recommended Reading, California Recommended Lit., English, 3-5; Recommended Reading, IRA/CBC Choice

Main Characters

Bobby Joel's four-year-old brother

Joel Bates the main character who feels responsible for Tony's death

Mr. Bates gentle and caring father of Joel

Tony Zabrinky stubborn and willful boy who drowns because he is too proud to admit he cannot swim

Vocabulary

engrossed having the mind or attention deeply fixed

jubilant expressing great joy

nonchalance showing indifference

supplication asking earnestly and humbly; praying to God

Synopsis

One day Tony invites his friend, Joel, to climb Starved Rock with him. Joel is startled, explaining that someone was killed there. He diplomatically tries to back out of the offer and explains that it is dumb. Tony accuses Joel of being scared. Joel offers other ideas, but Tony will not accept them. Finally, Joel reasons that if he asks his father, who tends to be conservative about things, it will appear to Tony that he is genuinely interested and his father will say no, and he will save face.

Things do not go as expected with Mr. Bates, however. At first, it seems he will say it is too dangerous and not let Joel go. Tony lies that he has received permission from his mother to go. He reasons that there is not much traffic. When Mr. Bates asks Joel if he can do it, Joel replies that he can, in an effort to not look like a "chicken" to Tony. Finally, Mr. Bates yields, but he makes Joel promise only to go to the park. Joel knowingly lies to his father.

Tony gets "dibs" on Joel's bike, and Joel is left struggling to get up the hills. Realizing Joel won't make it up the hill, Tony comes up with another plan--to go swim in the river. Joel immediately realizes the danger and tells Tony it would be like swimming in a toilet. Tony mocks him in a girlish voice. Tony manages to get Joel to the river, and as they are playing around, Joel warns him of the current. Tony insults Joel's cautiousness, claiming he is just like his father. Joel, insulted, shoves Tony. Joel counters with a comment about Tony's dad and his use of the belt.

Tony turns to leave, saying he will go to Starved Rock alone. Not wanting to be alone, Joel pleads with him to stay. He gets Tony to swim in the river by accusing him of being scared. Joel swims out toward the sandbar, and soon notices Tony is not around. He realizes that, with the current so strong, Tony must be dead. He ventures out onto the road and enlists the help of a teenage boy and his girlfriend. The boy dives for Tony but finds no body. He explains that the current has carried him far away and urges Joel to go to the police.

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Joel struggles with what he should do and with which lie he should tell. He is afraid of being blamed for Tony's death. He even goes back to the scene and rearranges Tony's clothes, thinking he can tell people Tony wanted to go swimming and he did not, so he left Tony alone. He is constantly reminded of the dead-fish smell on his clothes and on his body--even a shower cannot remove the smell. He wonders why his parents do not notice this smell. Joel's guilt grows deeper and stronger, and he even wishes that his dad will hit him. He takes his anger out on his younger brother, Bobby, who senses something is wrong.

Eventually the police arrive and Joel lies to them as well. It is only when his father explains to them that his son would not hold anything back because he is an "honorable boy" that Joel admits what happened. His father holds him and lets him beat at his chest with his fists. Later, in Joel's room, Mr. Bates admits that he feels guilty and that he is responsible. Joel admonishes him and says it is all his fault. He asks if his father will punish him, and his father suggests that he has already punished himself enough. His father says they will get through this together, and he stays with Joel until he falls asleep.

Open-Ended Questions

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

Initial Understanding

Why did Joel feel that other kids seemed boring compared to Tony?

Tony was a very outgoing person, and people liked him. Joel was even jealous because he had so many friends. Tony came up with plans to make money, as well as plans on how to spend their days. He always knew things to do and how to get people to listen to him.

Literary Analysis

After Tony took Joel's bike, Joel had to struggle up the hill on Tony's inferior bike. Joel just accepted that and said, "But of course Tony didn't think of things like that." What did he mean? Give examples.

Tony seemed more concerned with his own needs than those of others. What he thought was what mattered. He thought it was acceptable to push people into doing things they did not want to do. Examples would be taking Joel's bike and pressuring him into going out to Starved Rock.

Inferential Comprehension

What do you think the author's perspective on guilt is?

Guilt tends to consume us, and it makes us behave differently. Witness Joel's angry, almost belligerent behavior toward Bobby and his parents. He waits for a punishment from his father, but no punishment is worse than what Joel's guilt is doing to him.

Constructing Meaning

Joel is prompted to tell the truth when his father says he is "an honorable boy." If his father had not said this, do you think Joel would have told the truth anyway?

Yes, it is likely. He was very guilt-ridden, and he even hoped his parents would find out the truth. He could not have carried around the secret much longer.

Teachable Skills

Recognizing Plot Joel seemed to be a follower rather than a leader. His fear of being disliked or made fun of was so severe that he even participated in activities that frightened him or were dangerous. Things would have likely been different if Joel had stood his ground with Tony. Use this idea as a springboard to a talk about peer pressure. You might even have a guest lecturer come in and talk to the students. Get students to talk about what they think are areas where peer pressure is common. Examples are

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drug abuse, alcohol, smoking, sex, gangs, and skipping school. Another idea is to talk about ways to cope with peer pressure, and perhaps identify people who can help them in times of trouble.

Recognizing Plot After Tony's death, Joel spent much energy concocting a lie to tell. His guilt made him miserable, and he suffered in silence before admitting the truth. Ask students to either write about or role-play a scene in which Joel immediately tells what happened after Tony's death. He could have gone to the police, or he could have called his parents at work. How might things have been different if Joel had been honest from the beginning?

Understanding Literary Features A theme in this book is honesty, and the often negative consequences that come from lying. For instance, Joel and Tony would never have been at that river if Joel had been honest about being too scared to go. Other consequences include guilt and alienation. Have students discuss the repercussions of Joel's dishonesty. Why did he lie? Ask them to write about or share a time when they have lied. Why did they lie and what happened? Can they see how lying causes trouble?