

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

The Pigman & Me

by
Paul Zindel

Book Information

Paul Zindel, The Pigman & Me
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Interest Level: UG

The autobiography of the American author's childhood and adolescence is as zany and offbeat as his novels for teenagers.

Award: ALA Notable/Best Books; BCCB Blue Ribbon Book; Margaret A. Edwards Award; Misc./Other; SLJ Best Book

Topics: Biographies/Autobiographies, Biographies/Autobiographies (All); Humor/Funny, Funny; Interpersonal Relationships, Friendship; Mysteries, Secrets; Popular Groupings, Upper Grades Popular Authors/Starred Reviews; Recommended Reading, NCSS/CBC Notable Social Studies

Main Characters

Betty Zindel Paul's older sister and sometime protector

Connie Vivona co-owner and occupant of the Zindels' house in Travis

Jennifer Wolupopski Paul's new best friend in Travis

Mona Zindel Paul and Betty's "wacko, suicidal" mother

Moose Kaminski a school bully, but not quite Paul's nemesis

Nonno Frankie Connie's father and Paul's 'pigman'

Paul Zindel the narrator of this autobiography

Vocabulary

deranged disturbed; showing signs of mental disorder

flapper young woman, particularly from the 1920s

Minnehaha figurehead on the bow of a ship; also a character in Longfellow's "Hiawatha"

pedigreed pure bred, as in dogs of a particular breed

peristalsis waves of involuntary cramps in the intestines

Synopsis

Paul, the autobiographical narrator, is a teenager when his sister, mother and he move to Staten Island. There, in the Kansas-like town of Travis, they form a household with Connie Vivona, a mother of twins and, like Paul's mother, an abandoned wife. Unlike Paul's mother, Connie is neither crazy nor suicidal. Paul and his sister, Betty, have long been secret pilots of their mother's erratic adulthood. Money has always been short, and stability out of the question.

Paul feels like a misfit, confused about his chances and direction in life. Over the course of the book, he comes to recognize his "pigman," or the guide who will point him on his way. This guide is Connie's Sicilian father, Nonno Frankie, who loves food, fishing, bad jokes, tomatoes, feeding people, Paul and life.

Frankie's influence accrues gradually. He and Paul begin spending time together on Nonno's weekend visits. Companionship turns to guidance as Paul's problems mount. Managing Mona Zindel's absurd rules and overbearing personality comes almost effortlessly to Frankie. He more explicitly helps Paul cope with his fears of starting school, and then his showdowns with the "Travis gang" led by Moose Kaminski.

With Frankie's subtle help, Paul begins to adapt to life in Travis. He finds teachers he values, friends he enjoys, and even projects (like building a terrarium) that temporarily divert Jennifer from her gloom. But when Connie takes it upon herself to explain the "mechanics of passion" to Betty, then becomes engaged to "Chops" Tarinski, Paul's man-hating mother must dissolve their year-old household.

Nonno Frankie's parting gift is to lead Paul on a metaphysical journey into his own mind, where the

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ideal boy (or "ragazzo") inside him reveals the secret of Paul's future.

Open-Ended Questions

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

Literary Analysis

What role does the "water-head baby" play in the book?

Mrs. Lillah's unfortunate infant looms as a symbol of life's random cruelty. Paul, Jennifer and Betty each had very personal initial responses to the baby, but they each "recovered" from their shock to treat the baby's presence as normal. The child's "obituary" in the book comes in one of Paul's lists and simply notes the sadness of Mrs. Lillah having no baby to rock. Considered from the viewpoint of Jennifer's zombie fears and later life, the baby also becomes a dark metaphor for a "Travis childhood" in general. Certainly, Jennifer's self-fulfilling prophecy of a life that was "dead from the start" came true.

Inferential Comprehension

As the book ends, the Zindels are moving to another apartment. Is life likely to improve for them in their new home?

Most likely, there will be more disasters ahead. One rhetorical clue to that probability is that their conversation in the car echoes the one they had when coming to Travis. Mona professes optimism manically, and her children mumble their humoring concurrences. The events of the Travis year changed Paul, certainly, and Betty, possibly, but not their mother. As Paul and Betty continue to mature, their mother's absurd and overwhelming rules will bring her less control over them. That fact will not likely be a comfort to her.

Inferential Comprehension

What kind of relationship did Paul have with his sister, Betty?

Paul and Betty, although very different personalities, were very close. Paul used humor to deflect life's cruelties from himself, while Betty suppressed her emotions and tried to withdraw from them. Her attack on Moose Kaminski when the bully threatened her brother, however, showed how devoted and courageous Betty could be for Paul. Less dramatically, Paul several times backed away when he sensed Betty needed her own emotional space. He was both sensitive to, and respectful of, Betty's emotional needs. Without being one another's confidantes, they were clearly functional allies under their mother's dysfunctional rule.

Constructing Meaning

Put the important lesson Nonno Frankie taught Paul into your own words.

Paul was confused about himself and worried that he would never be able to survive in the world on his own. Having to be his own parent from an early age, he felt overwhelmed by the responsibilities on his shoulders. Nonno Frankie taught him that he would have the freedom to choose his own life. Through most of the book, it was a lesson taught by example, as Frankie shared his food, thoughts and zest for life. When the lesson becomes explicit, however, Frankie guides Paul on a brief journey into his own mind. Thus, in the imaginary temple on Mount Vesuvio, Paul discovers his own answer to his life's question. The form of the lesson perfectly fits its message of freedom.

Teachable Skills

Understanding Literary Features Zindel's book manages to be humorous, even zany, yet remain a believable autobiographical story. Ask students to explore this blended mood the author achieves. How does the humor arise in the book? Is it mostly found in the situations, characterizations or writing style? Nonno Frankie is constantly telling corny jokes. What effect do

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they create? Does the author seem to exaggerate the "disasters" for humor's sake, or soften their real sadness by using humor? Perhaps the most fundamental form of the question would be, "How can a funny book be so sad?"

Understanding the Author's Craft Zindel uses food almost like a separate language in the novel. When Nonno Frankie says "Eat," his banquets are like poems to life. Ask students to think about the meals or dishes in their lives that communicate something special. As a discussion or writing topic, have them both vividly describe the food and indicate its emotional meaning to them. Perhaps interest in the topic will even be sufficient to inspire a special classroom potluck.

Comparing and Contrasting Paul never does provide a direct explanation of the term "pigman" in this book. We know a pigman is a mentor, or guide, who often comes in disguise. Presumably, everyone's individual needs and questions lead them to discover different kinds of pigmen. Ask students to borrow Paul's list-making technique to write five to ten important facts about their own pigman -- either the one they have found, or the one they hope to find.

Extending Meaning The character of Jennifer is likely to be at least somewhat unsettling to students. Her pessimism may find few defenders willing to appreciate her other qualities, such as honesty and a bleak sort of flair with words ("zombies" was her metaphor, for one example, and it fit the town well). Challenge students to analyze their full reactions to Jennifer. Could they befriend such a person? What might explain her dark outlook on life and her unhappy ending? What are the chances that things would have turned out differently for her if Paul had been able to remain in Travis throughout high school?