

# Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for The Pushcart War by Jean Merrill

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## Book Information

Jean Merrill, The Pushcart War  
Quiz Number: 635  
Dell, 1964  
ISBN 0-440-47147-8; LCCN  
222 Pages  
Book Level: 6.5  
Interest Level: MG

This is a satire on modern city life depicting the fierce war waged by pushcart peddlers and the city's children against the menacing bully trucks.

**Award:** SLJ Best Book

**Topics:** Humor/Funny, Funny; Power Lessons AR,  
Grade 6; U.S. States/Regions, New York

## Main Characters

Carlos a soft-spoken Spanish-speaking man whose pea shooter idea begins the peddlers' retaliation

Eddie Moroney a coal and ice peddler whose bowling hobby turns out to be quite fortuitous

Frank the Flower who, when arrested during the Pea Shooter Campaign, takes credit for over 18,000 flat tires

Harry the Hot Dog a real asset during the Pea Shooter Campaign

Joey Kafflis a truck driver who is fired after mentioning that traffic is lousy

Louie Livergreen owner of LEMA (Lower Eastside Moving Association)

Marvin Seeley a boy whose photograph has an impact on the outcome of the war

Maxie Hammerman also known as "The Pushcart King," a wise man who makes and repairs most of the pushcarts in New York

Mayor Emmett P. Cudd elected on the platform that trucks equal progress; he also owns shares in the three trucking companies

Miriam Portlette a cleaning woman whose transcript of a meeting ultimately saves Maxie's life

Moe Mammoth also known as "Big Moe," owner of Mammoth Trucking

Morris the Florist a proud man who inadvertently starts the war

Mr. Jerusalem a peaceful, elderly junk dealer

Old Anna a fruit peddler who becomes known as General Anna

Papa Peretz the pretzel man

Walter Sweet also known as "The Tiger," owner of Tiger Trucking

Wenda Gambling a movie star who is sympathetic to the pushcart peddlers' cause

## Vocabulary

**campaign** a series of military operations

**menace** something that threatens to cause harm

**moderator** a person who presides over a meeting

**unsanitary** uncleanness that may affect health

## Synopsis

The trucks in New York are getting bigger and bigger, and they have become downright bullies! Some drivers don't think twice about smashing pushcarts that are in their way. The pushcart peddlers finally decide enough is enough. They decide to fight back. But how much can a few pushcart peddlers do? They band together and begin their battle with the Pea Shooter Campaign. After one of their own is arrested, they cease shooting and find they have gained public support. The mayor soon issues a tax on tacks and when that is not well-received, he stops the production and packaging of dried peas. The truck owners see that their opponents are gaining ground, and they respond by attempting to kidnap The Pushcart King. Maxie outsmarts The Three and when the people of the city let the officials know how they feel, the truckers know they are beaten. Things end mostly peacefully, and the monstrous trucks have even been reduced in size.

## Open-Ended Questions

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

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## Initial Understanding

*The Pushcart War* was published in 1964. Why has the book remained popular?

*The traffic problems still exist in large cities. It is a reminder not to be bullied by someone or something that is bigger than we are.*

## Literary Analysis

When did the tone of the war itself change? How did this affect the outcome of the war?

*When average citizens began writing letters to the newspapers, both the peddlers and the truckers realized that the public's sympathy was with the pushcarts.*

## Inferential Comprehension

Why did the truckers get away with the bullying for so long?

*The people who were in the public eye, the mayor and The Three, were able to twist their words in ways that made it look as if the truckers were the ones who deserved sympathy.*

## Constructing Meaning

How do you think the New York of today compares with the New York of *The Pushcart War*?

*The traffic is probably just as bad or worse than it was in the story, and the pushcart vendors are probably fewer in number.*

## Teachable Skills

**Recognizing Setting** This story is set in New York in 1986. The author uses actual places in the city while she describes the events that took place. The book was originally published in 1965, so the author set the book in the future, although now the setting is in the past. Have students choose a problem that exists in their city or town (traffic or environmental problems, a political situation, school crowding, crime, etc.). They should write about that situation as if they were living twenty years from now. Students should use actual

places and landmarks in their own city, making sure to write an aftermath about what happened to the main characters.

**Understanding Literary Features** The Pushcart War is a satire on life in the big city. The students should be able to list some of the absurd things described in the book that make readers think the city is a horrible place for a pedestrian. Then have them write a satirical description of rural life, which includes descriptions of life there in an absurd, ironic, or sarcastic manner.

**Understanding Literary Features** The theme of the story is about the little guy standing up to the big guy. The peddlers did not have the might or the money (at first) to fight the way the truckers did. The author showed how some simple acts were effective against the giants. What other works of literature explore the theme of the underdog persevering to victory? Popular movies? Students could write a letter to a large company (fictitious or otherwise) with a complaint about a product and a dismissive response from the company. The letters could go back and forth until the tide turns and one side emerges victorious.

**Understanding Characterization** The pushcart peddlers and the truck drivers are clearly divided on several issues. Have the students write about an event in the war from the perspective of one of the peddlers, then take the same event and write a description of it from a trucker's point of view. Have the students pretend to be peddlers and ask them what they would sell from their carts. They could also describe the carts and wares, and include dialogues with fellow peddlers.