

BOOKNOTES

TEACHERS GUIDE

thematic connections

**Survival • Identity
Fear • Family
Friendship • Memories**

Grades 5 up

about the book

Young Misha Pilsudski lives on the streets of Warsaw, Poland and struggles with his identity. When he enters the Jewish ghetto and sees firsthand the evil acts of Hitler's Nazi soldiers, he realizes it's safest of all to be nobody.

Milkweed opens in 1939 and tells the story of a homeless, nameless boy—a “nobody” until he takes up with other street kids and embraces the identity of a gypsy—Misha Pilsudski. Misha is fascinated by the Jackboots, and spends his days stealing food for himself and the orphans. When he meets Janina Milgrom, a Jewish girl, and follows her family to the Jewish ghetto, he loses his fascination with the Nazi soldiers. He slips in and out of the cracks of the walled ghetto, getting food for the Milgroms. For the first time in his life he has a family until resettlement and deportation snatch them away. This good-hearted boy is once again a “nobody” and eventually makes his way to America, carrying only the memories of his adopted family with him.



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Newbery Medalist Jerry Spinelli's first historical novel is a stunning story of heartbreak and hope.

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pre-reading activity

Divide the class into groups and ask them to use the Jewish Virtual Library (see Internet Resources) to find information about the following topics: ghettos in Poland, Himmler on the treatment of ethnic groups and Jews, identifying marks for Jews in Poland, Jewish self-help in Warsaw, and the Warsaw Ghetto. Have groups identify the five most important facts about their assigned topics and share with the class.

thematic connections

QUESTIONS FOR GROUP DISCUSSION

Survival—Uri advises Misha and the other homeless boys that an important survival skill is to remain invisible. How does Misha have a difficult time remaining invisible? What other survival skills do the boys employ? What does Misha teach the Milgroms about survival? What is the greatest threat to the survival of the Jews in the ghetto?

Identity—Discuss what Misha Pilsudski means when he says, “Thanks to Uri, in a cellar beneath a barbershop somewhere in Warsaw, Poland, in autumn of the year 1939, I was born, you might say.” (p. 31) How does the made-up story of his life become so important to him? How does Misha’s identity change throughout the novel? What gives him a true identity at the end of the novel? Discuss Uncle Shepsel’s efforts to give up his identity as a Jew. How is this related to survival?

Fear—Uri is described as “fearless on the streets.” (p. 80) What does Uri teach Misha about fear? Janina has led a privileged life and doesn’t deal with fear until her family is moved to the ghetto. Discuss how Misha helps her cope with her new life. How does fear eventually kill Mrs. Milgrom? At what point in the novel does Misha display the most fear? How does he deal with it?

Family—Ask students to discuss how Misha’s relationship with the Milgrom family changes throughout the novel. At what point does Mr. Milgrom invite him to become a part of the family? Why are Uncle Shepsel and Mrs. Milgrom so reluctant to accept Misha as family? Ask students to discuss how Misha’s desire for family comes full circle by the end of the novel.

Friendship—Brainstorm the qualities of true friendship. Discuss the friendship that develops between Misha and Janina. Engage the class in a discussion about why Misha is such a good friend to the orphans. Why does Dr. Korczak, the head of the orphanage, call Misha a “foolish good-hearted boy”? (p. 65)

Memories—When Misha comes to the United States, he shares his memories of his life in Poland on the street corner. He says that “running” is his first memory. (p. 1) What might he say is his last memory? Misha won’t share Janina with his family, but he pays tribute to her memory by naming his granddaughter for her. Discuss why he wants to keep that memory to himself. Discuss the symbolism of the milkweed. How does planting milkweed at the end of his yard preserve his memories of Poland?

connecting to the curriculum

Language Arts—Misha celebrates Hanukkah with the Milgroms. He receives gifts and is told the Hanukkah story. (p. 159) Assign students to groups and ask them to write and illustrate a picture book that tells the Hanukkah story for Misha's granddaughter, Wendy Janina. Write an appropriate dedication.

There are several references to the story of *Hansel and Gretel* in the novel. Ask students to read the story and discuss its significance to Misha's story. As a class, use a Venn Diagram to compare and contrast. Then instruct students to write a brief paper that discusses the symbolism of the scene where Misha rips the *Hansel and Gretel* book to shreds. (p. 202)

Science/Health—There were raging epidemics of tuberculosis and typhus in the Jewish Ghettos. Ask students to find out the causes and medical treatment for these diseases. Have students design a poster to promote awareness on how the diseases are spread and how to prevent infection during the time of the Holocaust.

Social Studies—Between 1941 and 1943, many Jews in the ghettos tried to organize resistance against the Nazis. One especially strong resistance movement in Poland was a group called the Z.O.B., led by Mordecai Anielewicz. Ask students to research this group (www.ushmm.org/outreach/wgupris.htm) and other resistance efforts. Then have them write a short paper that compares Anielewicz's efforts to Misha's commitment to helping the Milgroms and the other Jews in the Warsaw Ghetto.

Music/Visual Arts—Music and art reflects history and defines important social movements. Sometimes it reflects joy and hope, other times it reflects sorrow and fear. Ask students to read about the kind of music that came out of the Jewish ghettos and camps during the Holocaust (fcit.coedu.usf.edu/holocaust/arts/musVicti.htm). Bring in some music samples for the class to listen to, and have students select the type song that Misha might have sung and draw an image that best reflects their choice.

vocabulary/ use of language

Ask students to jot down unfamiliar words and try to define them using clues from the context of the story. Such words may include: *artillery* (p. 3), *pelted* (p. 9), *manikins* (p. 11), *babka* (p. 22), *tinker* (p. 30), *gilded* (p. 61), *finches* (p. 79), *invisibility* (p. 80), *curlicue* (p. 81), *writhing* (p. 83), *morsel* (p. 89), *bedlam* (p. 94), *bedraggled* (p. 101), *careened* (p. 110), *goaded* (p. 119), *deportations* (p. 170), *hucksters* (p. 199), and *galoot* (p. 200).

related titles

by theme

In My Hands: Memories of a Holocaust Rescuer

Irene Gut Opdyke with Jennifer Armstrong

Survival • Identity • Fear
Family • Friendship • Memories
Holocaust Studies

Grades 7 up / Hardcover 0-679-89181-1
Alfred A. Knopf

The Last Mission

Harry Mazer

Survival • Identity • Fear
Holocaust Studies

Grades 7 up / 0-440-94797-9
Dell Laurel-Leaf

Number the Stars

Lois Lowry

Survival • Identity • Fear
Family • Friendship • Memories
Holocaust Studies

Grades 5 up / 0-440-40327-8
Dell Yearling

internet resources

Holocaust Timeline: The Ghettos

fcit.coedu.usf.edu/holocaust/timeline/ghettos.htm

This site provides a timeline that details the horrors of the Jewish Ghettos from 1939–1941.

Ghettos in Poland

www.ushmm.org/outreach/ghettos.htm

This site offers a brief article on the Ghettos in Poland.

Jewish Virtual Library

www.us-israel.org/jsource/Holocaust/polandtoc.html

This site provides detailed information about the Holocaust and the Jews in Poland.

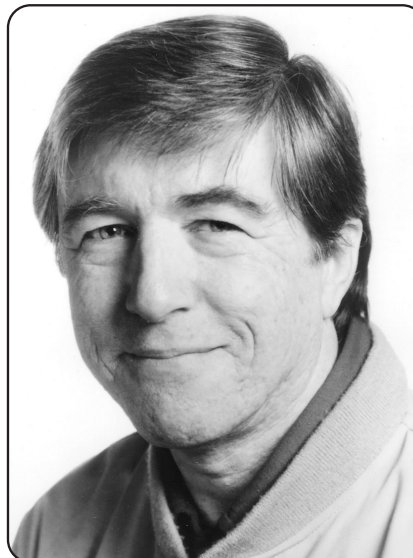


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about the author

Jerry Spinelli won the Newbery Medal for *Maniac Magee* and a Newbery Honor Award for *Wringer*. He has written many other award-winning books for young readers, including *Stargirl*, *Knots in My Yo-Yo String: The Autobiography of a Kid*, and *Crash*. A graduate of Gettysburg College, Mr. Spinelli lives in Pennsylvania with his wife, the poet and author Eileen Spinelli.

Mr. Spinelli has been touched by the Holocaust since his childhood. In writing *Milkweed*, he questioned his own credentials in writing a Holocaust book and then remembered what he has told young writers for years: "Write what you *care* about."

on the web

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