

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

Wringer

by
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Book Information

Jerry Spinelli, Wringer
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As Palmer comes of age, he must either accept the violence of being a wringer at his town's annual Pigeon Day or find the courage to oppose it.

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Main Characters

Beans a mean boy who is the leader of his own small gang

Dorothy Gruzik a girl who lives across the street from Palmer

Henry a tall but meek member of Beans's gang

Mutto a faithful member of Beans's gang

Nipper Palmer's pet pigeon

Palmer a boy who is torn between his love for a pet pigeon and his desire to be accepted by his peers

Vocabulary

audible able to be heard

fusillade a group of many shots fired at once or in quick succession

lax negligent or lenient

scenarios possible plots of a particular drama or scene

Synopsis

Palmer LaRue has always dreamed of being accepted as one of the gang with the popular boys Beans, Mutto, and Henry. He receives his wish when the three show up for his ninth birthday party. Despite the seemingly awful gifts he receives from them, Palmer is ecstatic because they give him the nickname Snots, and he knows it means he has been accepted. Palmer quickly fits into the gang as he bravely faces the birthday "Treatment" from Farquar, which involves being punched repeatedly in the arm. The bruise he receives from The Treatment makes him a temporary celebrity with nearly all the neighbor kids except Dorothy. Dorothy's lack of interest in Palmer's bruise upsets him, though he is not sure why. Palmer responds to this rejection from Dorothy by joining the gang in a continuous, insidious attack on Dorothy.

Throughout the summer Palmer enjoys hanging out with the gang. However, when the local Family Fest begins, Palmer tries to avoid the gang. He knows that the other boys are excited about the yearly pigeon shoot that occurs on the last day of the Family Fest, but Palmer does not wish to attend. Years earlier he had stopped attending the pigeon shoot because he was frightened and sickened by the slaughter of the helpless pigeons. Palmer pretends he is sick and stays in bed. His mother seems to understand that he does not want to go to the event, so she keeps him company.

After the pigeon shoot, Palmer resumes hanging out with the gang and harassing Dorothy. Palmer's life changes, however, when a pigeon appears on his windowsill. Palmer decides to feed the bird despite knowing this will make the bird continue to return to his house for food. Palmer knows that if news of his new pet, Nipper, gets around, both he and the bird will be in danger from the gang and, he assumes,

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others in the town. He keeps his pet and his secret, until one day he decides he must tell someone. He chooses to tell Dorothy since he knows she will understand his compassion for the pigeon. Dorothy and Palmer spend many spare moments playing with the bird in his bedroom until one day the gang suspects what he is doing. Nipper recognizes Palmer and lands on his head when he is outdoors with the gang. Palmer tries to pretend it was a fluke but realizes it has created a desperate situation. From then on Palmer does many crazy things to avoid being caught with the bird, including getting in trouble in school. His misbehavior increases his popularity and accomplishes his goal, but it does not make him feel good about himself.

As the school year draws to an end, Palmer's longstanding dread of his tenth birthday increases. Once children in his town reach the age of ten they can become a "wringer" at the pigeon shoot. A wringer's job is to wring the neck of all pigeons that have not been killed by the adult shooters. Palmer does not want to be a wringer but does not know how he can avoid it. He even attends wringer school where the children are taught what to do during the pigeon shoot. Dorothy advises Palmer to refuse to be a wringer. Palmer does not think it is that simple until his father says that it is his decision whether he wants to be a wringer or not.

Eventually Palmer decides he has had enough of the gang and that he will not be a wringer. He also decides it is no longer safe to keep Nipper. Dorothy reluctantly agrees to take Nipper on vacation with her and release him far away. When Family Fest arrives, Palmer attends the event with his parents, who know he has been keeping a pet pigeon and understand his disapproval of the pigeon shoot. On the day of the pigeon shoot, however, Palmer finds himself unexplainably drawn to the event. When Dorothy arrives and Palmer realizes that Nipper may be among the pigeons that have been gathered for the shoot, he tries to look for the bird. It is not until Nipper is released and escapes the shooter's aim that Palmer recognizes the bird. Unfortunately, the bird recognizes Palmer also. Rather than flying off to safety, it returns through the firing area headed for

Palmer and is shot down and wounded. Palmer recklessly dives for the bird and takes it home with him. Nipper survives, and Palmer comes to understand that he can be a bird lover in his pigeon-shooting town.

Open-Ended Questions

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

Initial Understanding

Palmer experiences a wide range of emotions throughout the story. When does Palmer seem to be the happiest? When is he the saddest? When is he most afraid?

Palmer feels proud and happy on his ninth birthday when he receives "The Treatment" from Farquar and is accepted into the gang. This emotion is fleeting, however, as the day ends and he sadly realizes he is only one year away from becoming a wringer. Palmer's greatest joy comes from the simple pleasure of spending time with Nipper. Palmer is sad when he tries to get rid of Nipper and witnesses the extermination of the pigeons at the soccer field. Palmer is frightened the most by the idea that he is expected to become a wringer. He is afraid of disappointing his family, friends, and community. He is also filled with terror as Beans and the gang chase him through the town with the intent of harming him.

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Literary Analysis

There are several conflicts that exist within this story's plot. Which conflict do you feel is the most important to the story? Why is this conflict important?

While there are significant conflicts between Palmer and the gang, Palmer and Dorothy, and Palmer and his parents, the main conflict in this story takes place within Palmer. Palmer struggles throughout the story between his desire to fit in with the boys in the gang and his need to make some of his own decisions. For most of the story he feels too embarrassed to tell his parents and his friends he does not want to be a wringer. With Dorothy's help he finds the strength to refuse to be a wringer even though he knows it will make the boys in the gang reject and pick on him.

Inferential Comprehension

Palmer finally decides that he will not be a wringer. Who do you think has the biggest influence on that decision? Could Palmer have made this decision without support from others?

The people who seem to have influenced him the most are Dorothy and his parents. Dorothy helps to show Palmer that he can be his own person and does not need to be a part of Beans's gang to be happy. Palmer's parents also help influence his decision. They let him know that they would love him whether he is a wringer or not. Palmer would have had a much more difficult time keeping Nipper and avoiding becoming a wringer if it were not for their support. Even though deciding to alienate himself from Beans's gang is difficult, it would have been nearly impossible for Palmer without his loving parents and supportive friend Dorothy.

Constructing Meaning

Palmer is excited when Beans, Mutto, and Henry show up for his ninth birthday party. They give him gifts that his mother thinks are awful, and they are generally rude and obnoxious. Afterwards they invite Palmer to go to the park with them, they play with his new ball, and they give him a nickname. All these things are signs to Palmer that he is accepted by the gang and make him feel good. What do your friends do that makes you feel accepted by them?

Students' answers will vary. They should include personal accounts of things their friends do to include them in games or activities.

Teachable Skills

Understanding Hist./Cultural Factors Palmer seems to have a difficult time accepting the Pigeon Day shoot because he cannot understand why the people of Waymer deliberately want to shoot the pigeons. Since the town needs to import pigeons from other areas in order to shoot them, Palmer also cannot understand how they are a nuisance. Have the students research pigeons and write an essay about interactions between humans and pigeons in history. In which cultures or countries have pigeons been kept as pets, or trained for racing or carrying messages? In which cultures or countries have they been regarded largely as pests? Speculate on reasons why people have treated pigeons so differently. Students may also choose to research the passenger pigeon to find out why they were hunted to extinction.

Comparing and Contrasting Many towns in this country hold annual events that involve hunting or fishing. Have the students use the Internet to research hunting competitions or fishing derbies within the United States. How are these events similar to the Pigeon Day in Waymer? How are they different? Have the students create a characteristics chart that tracks the qualities of such events, using headings that show the time, place, and reasons for these competitions.

Recognizing Details The smell of the Pigeon Day

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shoot has a distinct and deep effect on Palmer. Odors can create a strong physical or emotional response from a person. Set up an experiment with odors. Have students gather a collection of odors and then ask different people to smell them and tell them what the odor made them think of or feel. Or have the students bring one item to class that elicits a response from them. The students could either share their responses with one another or write a paragraph explaining what effect the odor has on them.

Responding to Literature Most students can think of a time when peer pressure caused them to make a decision that they later regretted. Ask your students to share a situation they may have found themselves in that is similar to Palmer's. Ask them how they handled the situation. You may wish to invite a professional, such as a guidance counselor or a DARE representative, to speak to the students on how to think for themselves and say "no" under high-pressure situations.