

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for Freak the Mighty/The Mighty by Rodman Philbrick

Book Information

Rodman Philbrick, Freak the Mighty/The Mighty
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At the beginning of eighth grade, learning disabled Max and his new friend Freak, whose birth defect has affected his body but not his brilliant mind, find that when they combine forces they make a powerful team.

Award: Judy Lopez Memorial Award for Children's Literatur

Topics: Disabilities, Learning; Interpersonal Relationships, Friendship; READNOW - Demco Media Turtleback Books, Demco Media - Read Now Grades 9+; Recommended Reading, California Recommended Lit., English, 6-8; Recommended Reading, YALSA Popular Paperbacks

Main Characters

Gram Max's overprotective grandmother
Grim Max's pessimistic grandfather
Gwen Kevin's mother, who was a friend to Max's mother
Iggy a local leader of a motorcycle gang, who attempts to help Max
Kenny Kane Max's father, who killed his mother and tries to kidnap Max
Kevin Max's best friend, a brainy child with a physical disability
Loretta Lee Iggy's girlfriend, who tries to help Max
Max an eighth grader with a turbulent past who befriends Kevin
Tony D. a local thug, who causes trouble for Max and Kevin

Vocabulary

aberration deviation from what is right and true

evasive seeking to avoid

juvy slang term for juvenile hall; a correctional facility for children

manifestation appearance

parole the release of a prisoner before his or her sentence has expired

Synopsis

Maxwell Kane is a large boy for his age. Everyone tells him he looks just like his father. For many boys, that would be a compliment, but it bothers Max because his father was convicted of killing Max's mother. Max lives in the basement of his grandparents' home. His grandfather, Grim, is very wary of his grandson because he looks like the man who killed his daughter. Max's grandmother, Gram, is an overprotective mother figure who watches out for the boy's welfare.

The summer before Max is in eighth grade, a boy named Kevin moves into his neighborhood. Kevin is abnormally small and needs a brace to walk. Max and Kevin quickly become friends. On the Fourth of July, Kevin and Max escape from a dangerous encounter with a town bully by wading into a pond with Kevin on Max's shoulders. As a result of this experience, Kevin often rides on Max's shoulders and creates the persona of "Freak the Mighty."

As Freak the Mighty, the two spend the summer searching for adventures. One of the adventures the boys have involves a lost purse in a storm drain. They leave their homes in the middle of the night, dress in black, and sneak off to the drain. After they fish the purse out, they find it belongs to a person named Loretta Lee. Kevin and Max decide to return her purse the next day.

When they reach the address on the identification card, they find themselves in the worst part of town. Loretta Lee turns out to be a woman who is involved with Iggy, the leader of The Panheads. She notices that Max resembles Killer Kane and, after insulting the boys, rubs Kevin's head for "good luck."

Soon after this adventure, school starts. Kevin

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makes Fair Gwen, his mother, persuade the school authorities to let Max out of L.D. classes to be in his classes. The authorities relent, and Max becomes a permanent fixture in Kevin's classes. Max, who was always considered stupid by the rest of the school, was learning that he always had the ability to read. It was writing that was hard for him.

Christmas Eve comes quickly and brings a heartfelt gift from Kevin to Max: a hand-crafted dictionary. The dictionary contains all of Kevin's favorite words and his personalized definitions for each word. That night, as Max falls asleep, he is awakened by his father. Kenny Kane forces his son to leave with him. They go to Iggy's home, where Iggy gives them food and shows them another place they can stay. During this ordeal, Max is terrified. He knew his father wanted to see him, but he did not know he would be out of prison so soon. He stays very quiet and listens to everything his father says. When they reach a new hiding spot, his father ties Max up with ropes. During this time, Kenny Kane swears he is a man of God and that he did not kill Max's mother. However, when Kenny tries to strangle Loretta for attempting to help Max, Max shouts out that he remembers when Kenny killed his mother. Kenny's attention is diverted, and he attempts to strangle Max. He is stopped by a small voice saying, "Put your hands up, villain!" Max rolls over to see Kevin holding a squirt gun. Kevin shoots Kenny in the eye with the substance in the gun, which he claims is a corrosive acid. His ruse works, and Max and Kevin flee to safety.

Soon after this adventure, it is Kevin's birthday. He receives a new computer from his mother. During his party, he becomes ill and is rushed to the hospital. At the hospital, Kevin persuades Max to write the adventures of Freak the Mighty in a blank book he gives him. When Max goes to visit Kevin at the hospital the next day, he finds that Kevin has died. Enraged, Max runs around and destroys much of the hospital equipment in his path. He is subdued by police and released in Grim's custody. A year passes and Max runs into Loretta, who tells him, "Nothing is a drag, kid. Think about it." It is at that moment he decides to write the adventures of Freak

the Mighty in the book given to him by his best friend.

Open-Ended Questions

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

Initial Understanding

Throughout the beginning of the novel, it seems like Grim does not really trust Max. Why do you think this is? How does his opinion of Max change by the end of the novel?

Grim probably sees Killer Kane every time he looks at his grandson. Grim did not approve of his daughter's choice for a husband, and he is confronted with the reality of her death every time he looks at Max. By the end of the novel, Grim seems to understand that while Max may look like his father, he has his mother's heart.

Literary Analysis

Although Kevin is physically small, he has a very large personality, whereas Max, who is large, is often quiet and shy. Why do you think this is?

Kevin is aware that his life will be shorter than most people's lives. It is easy to assume that he wanted to make as much out of his life as possible. He creates quests and adventures much like those he reads about in books. When his physical problems prevent him from doing things, he has the help of Max to lift or take him places. Kevin's larger than life personality probably conceals his feelings of mortality and his fear of death. Max, on the other hand, is a large boy who wants nothing more than to blend into a crowd. All his life he is seen as a "chip off the old block." He probably would prefer this if the "old block" was not Killer Kane, the man who killed his mother. Max does not like the attention his resemblance to his father brings him. He is quiet and shy, which is the exact opposite of his infamous father.

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Inferential Comprehension

If Killer Kane had successfully abducted Max, do you think Max would have eventually come to love and respect his father?

During the course of the story, Max never seems to be fond of his father. Throughout the novel, he is trying to distance himself from anything that has to do with his father. When people judge him based on his resemblance to his dad, Max is unnerved and hurt. He wants people to see him for what he is, not the monster he looks like. When Kenny Kane abducts Max, Max's disgust for his father grows. While Kenny attempts to strangle Loretta, Max is so horrified that he remembers seeing his father kill his mother in the same fashion. Based on all of his experiences, it is doubtful Max would ever come to respect his father.

Constructing Meaning

When Max's dad kidnaps him, Max is very quiet and meek. He basically speaks only when spoken to. He answers every question with "yes, sir" or "no, sir." Were you surprised when he accused his father of killing his mother? Why or why not?

Most readers will answer they were surprised when Max accuses his father of killing his mother. Throughout the novel, Max never indicates he had witnessed his mother's death. Max's action is also surprising because he is afraid of his father. Max yelling these accusations and risking further hurt shows he is desperate and no longer wants to forget.

Teachable Skills

Understanding Characterization Kevin is a very imaginative young boy. He reads many books that describe adventures and quests. Discuss the meaning of the word "quest" with the students. In small groups, have the students brainstorm ideas for a modern quest. Next, ask them to create a short skit to act out for the class. Perhaps your class could host a "Knights of the Round Table" evening and present the skits to their parents and community.

Recognizing Feelings One of the main topics highlighted in this book is the importance of accepting others who are different. Arrange for a guest speaker to come to your class and speak about diversity and tolerance. Ask your students to prepare questions to ask the guest speaker. If the speaker is familiar with the novel, he or she may also wish to incorporate Kevin's special circumstances into his or her discussion. Then, have your students write a thank-you letter to the speaker describing what they learned.

Identifying Reading Strategies Have your students create a dictionary that includes their favorite words. Ask them to look up the definitions in another dictionary, then create their own personal definitions much like Kevin's dictionary. Then ask each student to choose his or her favorite word and definition and read it to the class.

Responding to Literature This is a book about friendship. Max and Kevin are two very different boys who overlook their differences and become best friends. Ask your students to think about their friends and create a list of the important and special aspects of friendship. Then ask them to use the list to write a short essay on the importance of friendship.