

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for The Great Brain by John D. Fitzgerald

Book Information

John D. Fitzgerald, The Great Brain
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Book Level: 5.2
Interest Level: MG

The exploits of the Great Brain of Adenville, Utah, are described by his younger brother, frequently the victim of the Great Brain's schemes for gaining prestige or money.

Topics: Adventure, Rescue/Save;
Fantasy/Imagination, Misc./Other;
Humor/Funny, Funny; Recommended
Reading, California Recommended Lit.,
English, 3-5; Recommended Reading,
California Recommended Lit., English, 6-8;
Series, Great Brain

Main Characters

Abie Glassman a traveling peddler, who decides to open a variety store in Adenville

Andy Anderson J.D.'s friend, whose leg is amputated, which eventually leads to the Great Brain's reformation

John (J.D.) the younger brother of Tom and Sweyn, who is usually witness to many of Tom's activities

Mr. and Mrs. Fitzgerald the brothers' parents, who are non-Mormons among Adenville's Mormon majority

Mr. Standish the new teacher in the town's one-room schoolhouse and a strict disciplinarian

Sweyn Tom and John's older brother

Tom the brother referred to as "The Great Brain" because he seems to have the solution for everyone's problems

Vocabulary

barker the person who stands in front of an attraction trying to get people to pay to see the attraction

contemptible deserving of contempt or scorn; worthless; despicable

proposition a proposed deal, as in business

quarantine a period of isolation, especially for people with contagious diseases

Synopsis

J.D. is the youngest brother in a family of three boys growing up in a small town in the heavily Mormon populated state of Utah. He has a brother, Tom, who seems to J.D. to have an incredible brain. Tom often goes into the barn to think about a problem and comes out with a solution. Very often, however, Tom's ideas involve making money or gaining a personal advantage out of situations.

Tom's schemes include charging neighbor kids to see the family's new water closet and cesspool, teaching an immigrant boy how to fight, and charging two poor neighbor boys to lick the family's ice cream dasher. Occasionally Tom becomes the hero because of his ideas, especially when he rescues the Jensen boys from Skeleton Cave and when he manages to stop Mr. Standish from punishing the children with paddlings.

In his biggest scheme, Tom convinces Andy, a young boy with only one leg, to give him his prized erector set if Tom can teach him how to be useful again. Tom works diligently with Andy and eventually teaches him how to do chores, run, and play games with his wooden leg. When Andy brings Tom his erector set to fulfill his side of the agreement, Tom refuses to take it. Tom has had a change of heart and realizes the good feeling one can get by being good and honest with other people. The town and family are never the same after Tom reforms his ways.

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

What did J.D. think was the worst punishment his parents or brothers could give to him? Explain why it was so terrible.

He hated the silent treatment more than anything else. When someone wouldn't talk to him he felt invisible and unimportant. It also made him feel lonely.

Literary Analysis

What did Tom think Basil needed in order to fit in with other kids and become an "American" boy?

At a comic level, Tom convinces Basil's father he will need the proper toys, and so the Great Brain proceeds to sell the Greek boy his old marbles and slingshot at premium rates. Tom also realizes Basil must learn English, which he soon begins to teach his new friend. Most of all, Basil must learn to stick up for himself against the town bullies. Ironically, Tom discovers Basil can best accomplish this last necessity by relying on his Greek heritage and using his wrestling talents.

Inferential Comprehension

Before J.D. discovers what it is, he knows that Tom has made a "business deal" with the Jensens. J.D. writes, "And, oh, how I wished I had a great brain like my brother's so I could figure it out." Why might Tom seem so much smarter than J.D.?

Although J.D. often admires his brother's great brain and regrets his own little one, Tom's intelligence is more a combination of age difference and trickery than raw smarts. The reader--even a young one--can predict most of the schemes Tom conceals from J.D. What Tom has mastered mostly is artful deception, not extraordinary perceptiveness. J.D. will surely grow as "wise" as the Great Brain.

Constructing Meaning

Tom made J.D. promise not to tell anyone that Tom knew Abie's strongbox was empty. Was J.D. right to keep that promise? Explain why.

Despite Tom's self-serving logic, he was probably quite right about one important fact: "The people who didn't buy from Abie and didn't worry about him would love to have somebody to blame for his death...." If J.D. had revealed Tom's secret, his brother probably would have been treated as a scapegoat throughout the town. As Papa made clear, the blame for the peddler's death really belongs to the adults who did not look out for their neighbor's welfare. While Tom should have told his secret when it might have helped Abie, it would not be fair for him to shoulder the blame for his death.

Teachable Skills

Understanding Hist./Cultural Factors At

different points in the story, the Mormons were discussed in relationship to how they shaped daily life in Utah. Over the years, the Mormons have had a profound influence on Utah and its residents. Have the students investigate the depth of influence that the Mormons had and still have on life in Utah, including laws, commerce, recreation, etc.

Understanding Hist./Cultural Factors When Papa and Tom discuss how intolerant Sammy and his father were of immigrants, Papa explains that it was the mingling of nationalities that would make the United States one of the greatest nations on earth. Have the students study the immigration patterns of the United States and how they influenced society. What contributions have different ethnic groups made to the country?

Identifying Persuasive Language Papa has a weakness for new inventions. He continually orders them from magazines and catalogs. Although he realizes that many of the inventions fail to live up to their advertisements, he continues to try out new inventions. Have the students locate some old Sears catalogs from the late 1800s or early 1900s. Discuss the

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descriptions the advertisers used to convince customers to buy their inventions. What products, now familiar, were treated as marvels? Do they notice inventions or appliances that people no longer use or even recognize?

Understanding Literary Features *The Great Brain* may well be young readers' first experience with a naive narrator. The book offers you a fine opportunity to operationalize that concept with your students. The key word, of course, will be "irony": J.D. is a wonderful straight man, and his numerous professions of inferiority make clear illustrations of the author's use of irony clear. Students should find it enjoyable to point out and reread those places in the text where the reader's view of an event is directly the opposite of the narrator's statements.