

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

Rumble Fish

by
S.E. Hinton

Book Information

S.E. Hinton, Rumble Fish
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Junior high tough guy Rusty-James learns life's real problems can't be solved with fists.

Award: ALA Notable/Best Books; Margaret A. Edwards Award

Topics: Community Life, Violence; Emotions, Envy; Family Life, Brothers; Read Now with Power Up Recommended Lists, Just Connect: Relationships; READNOW - Demco Media Turtleback Books, Demco Media - Read Now Grades 9+

Main Characters

Biff Wilcox the boy who knifes Rusty-James in retribution for a comment Rusty-James made to his girlfriend

Cassandra a young substitute teacher who develops affection for the Motorcycle Boy

Patty Rusty-James's girlfriend

Rusty-James the principal character in the story, a fourteen-year-old boy who emulates his older brother and wants the respect of his peers in a tough neighborhood

Steve Hays Rusty-James's best friend, a well-behaved teen who is loyal to Rusty-James and, who in turn, Rusty-James defends

the Motorcycle Boy Rusty-James's older brother, who has a reputation for toughness and is killed by the police

Vocabulary

bennies slang for amphetamine tablets; speed

reformatory a penal institution for young offenders that attempts to discipline and improve behavior

rep short for reputation

tracks marks left by needles from shooting drugs

Synopsis

As the story opens, Rusty-James is sitting on a beach and is approached by an old classmate, Steve Hays. Steve jogs Rusty-James's memory, which appears to be somewhat damaged, and they begin to talk about their old neighborhood. When Steve hints that he looks like the Motorcycle Boy, Rusty-James's memory is reawakened, and he remembers the troubled times that led to his stint in the reformatory.

At fourteen, Rusty-James is looked up to as a leader of a group of junior high boys whose hangout is Benny's. While shooting a game of pool, Rusty-James is informed that Biff Wilcox is out to get him for something he said to Biff's girlfriend. The fight between them is to take place that evening in a vacant lot. Without the Motorcycle Boy around to stop it, Rusty-James sees an opportunity to bring back the good old gang fights. Before the fight, he visits his girlfriend Patty and readies himself with some alcohol. Biff shows up high and with a knife. Rusty-James is able to gain the upper hand, but is distracted when the Motorcycle Boy appears. Biff takes this opportunity to slash him. Rusty-James is helped home by his friend Steve and the Motorcycle Boy, Rusty-James's older brother who had just returned from California. Rusty-James is not frightened by his injury, but reveals his biggest fear is to be left alone.

The narrative now becomes a series of incidents that occur in the intertwined lives of these boys. Rusty-James is kicked out of school and loses his girlfriend after a night of carousing on the beach. The toughness of the neighborhood and the home life of Rusty-James and the Motorcycle Boy are revealed. Although the Motorcycle Boy is revered for his toughness, he is a loner and lives a lot of his life in his own world, devoid of colors and sounds.

Their father had fallen into alcoholism after his wife left him. This had a devastating effect on the boys' psyche, for the Motorcycle Boy could recall seeing colors before this, and Rusty-James is afraid of

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abandonment. While the Motorcycle Boy had been in California, he had visited their mother. After their conversation, Rusty-James is able to see his mother and father in a different light.

Rusty-James senses that something is bothering the Motorcycle Boy. He wants to follow him and enlists Steve to go along. Steve, a "good" kid, has become easier to persuade since his mother has been hospitalized. They follow the Motorcycle Boy downtown and are attacked by some thugs. Rusty-James is severely beaten, and he becomes quite disoriented after this. He refuses hospitalization and goes to Steve's house instead. Steve, badly beaten by his own father, appears at the door. Steve declines to follow Rusty-James anymore after this.

In the end, Rusty-James breaks into a pet shop with the Motorcycle Boy. The Motorcycle Boy takes some Siamese fighting fish he had seen earlier that afternoon to release them into the river. The police arrive, and the Motorcycle Boy is shot and killed on the scene. For a moment Rusty-James loses his senses of color and sound, but they return, along with pain. He realizes the futility of trying to be someone he is not and never could be.

Rusty-James returns to the present, but does not want to meet Steve for dinner to discuss the past as Steve suggests. He would rather forget.

Open-Ended Questions

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

Initial Understanding

Why does Rusty-James seem surprised when Steve admonishes him for taking the hubcaps and Patty chastises him for being with other girls?

Rusty-James seems to operate from a different moral plane than his two friends. He does not seem to show a sense of guilt or comment on the right or wrong of a particular action. As in the case with Patty and the other girl he is with, he sees them as separate and independent of each other, each meeting a different need at a different moment. His lack of guilt reflects a morality in which he justifies his needs. He needs money -- so he steals. He sees nothing wrong with it except if he gets caught. His need for companionship also makes him vulnerable to bad influences and places him in troublesome situations.

Literary Analysis

Why is *Rumble Fish* an appropriate title for this book?

The Siamese fighting fish, or rumble fish, seem born or bred to fight, but not for a particular purpose, such as for defense or for food. Even though some of the characters in the story seem to think fights are for defending turf or for a sense of honor, the Motorcycle Boy perceives that the real reason is just for fun. It is a lot like the rumble fish that would die trying to kill its own reflection.

Inferential Comprehension

What can the reader infer from the Motorcycle Boy's behavior when he breaks into the pet store?

It appears the Motorcycle Boy is unconcerned with the risk involved. He breaks into the pet store after hanging out there the entire afternoon. He switches on the lights as soon as he enters, announcing his presence. He seems obsessed with the Siamese fighting fish, wondering earlier if they would still fight if they were free, not caged in. He may feel caged in by his environment and circumstances, as well. He may see the fish as a symbol of himself and reason that if the fish could be free, so could he.

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Constructing Meaning

How is Steve like a rabbit and the Motorcycle Boy like a panther?

A rabbit is a prey animal, twitching and nervous, always looking out for danger. Steve is nervous in all the situations he finds himself in with Rusty-James. He is tense and waiting to be caught. The Motorcycle Boy not only looks like a panther with his sleek reddish black hair, he acts like one too. He is aloof and afraid of no one. He appears out of nowhere to attack those who hurt his family. He is both respected and feared.

Teachable Skills

Understanding Literary Features The Motorcycle Boy sees the world from a different perspective than most. Rusty-James describes it as "living in a glass bubble and watching the world from it." Have the students choose a passage in the book and rewrite it, looking at it through the Motorcycle Boy's eyes. What is the tone of the writing? Do they perceive the Motorcycle Boy's attitude to be condescending? detached? comical? concerned? The students may wish to share their perspectives with others.

Comparing and Contrasting The story provides the reader with two different father images. Even though they are not well-developed characters, it may be worthwhile to compare Rusty-James's father to Steve's father concerning their relationship (or lack thereof) with their wives, their relationships with their sons, etc. How do their actions affect their sons' home lives, independence, and responsibility? Have students perform a short skit where, given a particular situation, they can portray the differences in reactions between the two men.

Identifying Reasons Many people display an idiosyncrasy that can be attributed to an event in their past. For Rusty-James, his fear of being alone goes back to his abandonment as a young child. Have the students evaluate their fears, good luck charms, and slightly unusual behaviors. Can they identify when they began? If they feel

comfortable sharing these insights, have them do so. If, because of personal issues, they do not, they may choose a character in another novel and find reasons that explain the behaviors they see.

Identifying Persuasive Language Some readers have criticized S. E. Hinton for her exclusive use of macho male protagonists, leaving her female characters inadequately developed. Have the students review and form an opinion on this matter. Assign students other novels by S.E. Hinton to avoid judging her on the basis of one book. They should be able to support their opinions by citing examples from the texts. Using this information, host a classroom debate on the issue. Ask the students to present their opinions convincingly to persuade people to accept their point of view.