

Milkweed

Jerry Spinelli

Teacher's Guide

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MILKWEED



CLASSROOM FAVORITES

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SYNOPSIS

Chapter 1

The unidentified first-person narrator remembers running. Someone is chasing him, and they yell out, "Stop thief!"

Chapter 2

A child named Uri is dragging the narrator, saving him from the "Jackboots." Uri asks the narrator, a small child, his name. The child answers, "Stopthief."

Chapter 3

Uri takes the narrator to a stable, where many other homeless children are gathered. They mock the narrator for his small size. The stable is piled with food and other items. One of the boys asks the narrator if he is a Jew, but the narrator does not know. He does not know what a Jew is either. All the children are Jewish. They ask him about the yellow stone he wears around his neck, but he does not know what it is either. They decide that he must be a Gypsy. The children trade myths about Jews, the hatred promulgated by the Nazis. Later, Uri takes the narrator to the basement of a barber-shop, where the orphaned boys have set up a makeshift home.

Chapter 4

Uri takes care of the narrator, bringing him a mattress, giving him a bath, and dressing him in new clothes. Uri gives him a haircut as well. Uri and the narrator end up on a streetcar. When a woman brutally slams the window on Uri's fingers, he does not utter a sound. The boys end up running the streetcar off the tracks into a restaurant.

Chapter 5

The next day, bombs rain down on the city. The Jackboots march in and the little narrator is thrilled at the spectacle. The Nazis appear to him as a delightful parade of magnificent boots. Tanks follow the soldiers as they seize the city. Slow to understand what is happening, the narrator compares bombs to sauerkraut kettles, machine guns to praying mantises, and tanks to colossal, gray, long-snouted beetles. The narrator mistakenly thinks the people are delighted by the arrival of the Nazis.

Chapter 6

The narrator sees the Nazis humiliating an elderly Jewish man by forcing him to scrub the street with his beard. When the innocent narrator tells Uri that he wants to be a Jackboot, Uri smacks him across the face. The narrator has no memory of his family. Uri remembers his younger brother, Jozef, and readers can conclude that Uri has adopted the narrator as his new younger brother.

Chapter 7

The children steal plenty of food. One of the boys asks the narrator if he is a Jew, and he replies that he is a gypsy. We learn that it is 1939. Uri invents a new history for the narrator, naming him "Misha Pilsudski." Uri says that Misha was born to gypsies in Russia, part of a large family. He has made his way to Warsaw, Poland, and has become separated from his family by kidnappers. "Misha" loves the story and makes it his own. Uri creates this story so that no one will mistake Misha for a Jew and kill him.



Chapter 8

Misha wanders into a house, where he meets a girl named Janina Milgrom on the eve of her seventh birthday. She is Jewish. Based on her size and his, Janina estimates that Misha is about eight years old. The next day, Misha comes to Janina's birthday party as an invited guest and steals the birthday cake because he is convinced that the candles are going to burn down the house. The next day he steals another cake and brings it to her as an apology.

He sees that someone has painted a big yellow star in her window. That night, the Nazis shatter all the glass in the city, attacking Jewish homes and shops. Misha is glad that he is not a Jew.

Chapter 9

The barbershop is destroyed, forcing the orphans to seek other shelter. Uri steals food not only for the boys under his care but also for the orphans sheltered by Dr. Korczak. Misha steals food and leaves it at Janina's house.

Chapter 10

A Nazi shoots off Misha's earlobe as he is stealing food. Misha learns that a curfew has been put into effect, and all Jews must be off the streets after dark. He does not understand that the curfew applies to him. Misha learns that one of the boys, Olek, has lost his arm when he was run over by a train. The story of the orphans trying to survive on their own would be entertaining, if it weren't for the devastation around them—people hurrying to dig trenches to stop Nazi tanks, shops exploding in flames, the wailing of sirens, buzzing airplanes, bombs, and human torture.

Chapter 11

Food becomes scarce. Misha starts breaking into houses to find food, even stealing a turkey right from under the noses of guests at a dinner party! People chop down trees for firewood. Dr. Korczak thanks Misha for the food he has brought for the orphans by giving him a bath and clean clothes. It is only the second bath he can ever remember having.

Chapter 12

The Nazis displace Janina and her family and seize their home. Misha is hit by an automobile but not badly injured. Furious, Uri makes Misha promise to obey and not wander around so much.

Chapter 13

Misha becomes enraptured by a merry-go-round. Disregarding Uri's warning, he jumps on a horse and is thrown off to cries of "Dirty Jew!" Dr. Korczak shelters him.

Chapter 14

One of the horses on the merry-go-round is gone and a Jew is made the scapegoat, tormented with water in the bitter cold. Nothing seems to change for the gentiles, who continue to have food and pleasure in the park and their homes.

Chapter 15

The Jews are rounded up and forced to wear armbands. They are locked in the Ghetto. Dr. Korczak and the orphans are forced into the Ghetto as well. Misha offers a bite of his sausage to Janina, who he sees marching into the Ghetto. To his astonishment, all the Jews are afraid of him; they take him for a gentile and think he will harm them. The innocent child is baffled.

Chapter 16

Janina's Uncle Shepsel complains that their new quarters are the size of a closet. Janina's father, a pharmacist, copes best with their new circumstances. He doles out precious drugs from his stock and tries to keep everyone's spirits from sinking too low.

Chapter 17

Suddenly all the orphaned Jewish kids are living in the stables, as life on the street has become too dangerous. Uri has disappeared, but it never occurs to Misha to worry about him. Misha introduces Janina as his sister, but he does not know why he does.

Chapter 18

Uri finds the orphans the next morning. Misha is baffled when he sees dead bodies on the streets, half hidden under newspapers. It is easy to identify the dead children: they are covered with only one page of newspaper. People steal the shoes from the dead bodies.

Chapter 19

The boys sleep in the rubble. They discuss two wondrous and mysterious things: mothers and oranges. Both seem make-believe to them. The boys see the Ghetto police, whom they call "Flops." The boys are hungry and realize that the Nazis are trying to starve them to death. They are reduced to eating rats, which they call "squirrels" to make them more palatable. Misha steals two cooked rats and brings them to Janina and her family. He is a bit like the rats, able to forage by slipping through small holes.

Chapter 20

He continues to steal food to bring to Janina and her family. The Nazis round the Jews up, including Misha, and torture them all night in the bitter cold and snow; Mrs. Milgrom is kicked and clubbed. After this ordeal, Uncle Shepsel says that Misha is not family, but Mr. Milgrom says that he is.

Chapter 21

Jon, one of the orphans, has died. They take his shoes and give them to another orphan, Big Henryk. Uri bravely saves Big Henryk from the Nazis.

Chapter 22

Now it is spring. Misha adopts the last name "Milgrom." They hear that Hitler's primary henchman Himmler is coming to visit the Ghetto.

Chapter 23

Misha sees the Nazis' magnificent cars and is astonished that Himmler, the second in command to Hitler, looks like Uncle Shepsel. The brutal guard they call Buffo, who smells of the mint he chews, hates Misha for teasing him.

Chapter 24

Dr. Korczak asks Misha to find a cow for the orphans. Uncle Shepsel decides to become a Lutheran so he will no longer be persecuted as a Jew.

Chapter 25

It is summer. The kids are infested with lice, and Janina is throwing fits and demanding pickled eggs. She follows Misha to the hole in the wall and wants to smuggle food as he does.

Chapter 26

They pass through the hole together and go to Misha's favorite place, a hotel for Nazis. There, they steal food for the orphans and Janina's family.

Chapter 27

The kids suspend each other upside down to knock out their lice. They see Nazis and their girlfriends taking pictures of the starving and dirty children and laughing at them. The Ghetto has become a Nazi tourist spot.

Chapter 28

Misha and Janina raid the hotel and fine homes for food, sneaking out of the Ghetto at night. Mr. Milgrom orders them to stop, but they ignore him.

Chapter 29

The boys discuss angels.

Chapter 30

More and more Jews are brought into the Ghetto. Misha tries to stop Janina from smuggling because it is so dangerous, but she will not stop.

Chapter 31

Now it is winter. Misha meets Uri in the hotel and to his astonishment, Uri is dressed in fine clothes and working there. Uri orders Misha to ignore him. Misha and Janina see Olek, another of the orphans, hanging from the crossbars of a street lamp. He has been hanged for smuggling.

Chapter 32

Mrs. Milgrom dies. Misha calls Mr. Milgrom "Tata" (father) and mourns with the family. During the funeral, bombs rain down.

Chapter 33

The Russians march in and the Jews believe they are saved. However, life just gets worse, if possible. The bombs keep raining down and rations get even tighter. More refugees stay with the Milgroms. Then tragedy strikes: Misha has grown and can no longer fit in the hole in the Ghetto wall. He cannot escape the Ghetto to steal food and everyone will starve.

Chapter 34

The family celebrates Hanukkah until one of the people in the tiny room steals the Menorah. Mr. Milgrom improvises and gives each child a comb as a gift. Misha loses weight and manages to fit through the hole again. Misha steals an egg and pickle to give Janina the pickled eggs she craves so badly.

Chapter 35

Now it is spring. Smugglers are hanging from the lampposts like fruit from a tree.

Chapter 36

Uri warns Misha to get out of the Ghetto because all the people there will be killed. Whatever he does, Misha should not get on a train: they are headed to the concentration (death) camps. Uri gives Misha a piece of his favorite chocolate candy. Misha passes on Uri's warning but Mr. Milgrom ignores the warning, believing there is nothing more the Nazis can do to the Jews.

Chapter 37

Misha realizes that Uri was correct about the trains and concentration camps. All the orphan boys have been killed or rounded up. The Ghetto is emptied as everyone is taken to the death camps.

Chapter 38

A crazy old man says they are going to the candy mountain. Mr. Milgrom makes Misha promise to keep Janina on the other side of the Ghetto when they sneak out. "Run, run," he begs Misha, realizing the trains will really take them to their death.

Chapter 39

One night, Misha and Janina cannot return to the Ghetto because the hole has been filled in. They finally manage to sneak back in and find the apartment deserted: everyone has been taken to the death camps. Janina runs to the trains. At the novel's climax, despite Misha's efforts to hold her back, Janina gets on a death train. Misha is stopped by a guard—Uri!— who shoots him to prevent him from getting on the train.

Chapter 40

Misha wakes up. The station is deserted.

Chapter 41

Misha escapes, walking aimlessly.

Chapter 42

Misha ends up at a farm. He must work there, for this is the new rule.

Chapter 43

Misha sleeps and works in the barn. He spends three years on the farm. Then the war ends. Misha leaves the farm and wanders aimlessly. He understands why Uri shot him and how Uri saved him from death. He meets the former guard Buffo, now sorely diminished. The guard ignores him.

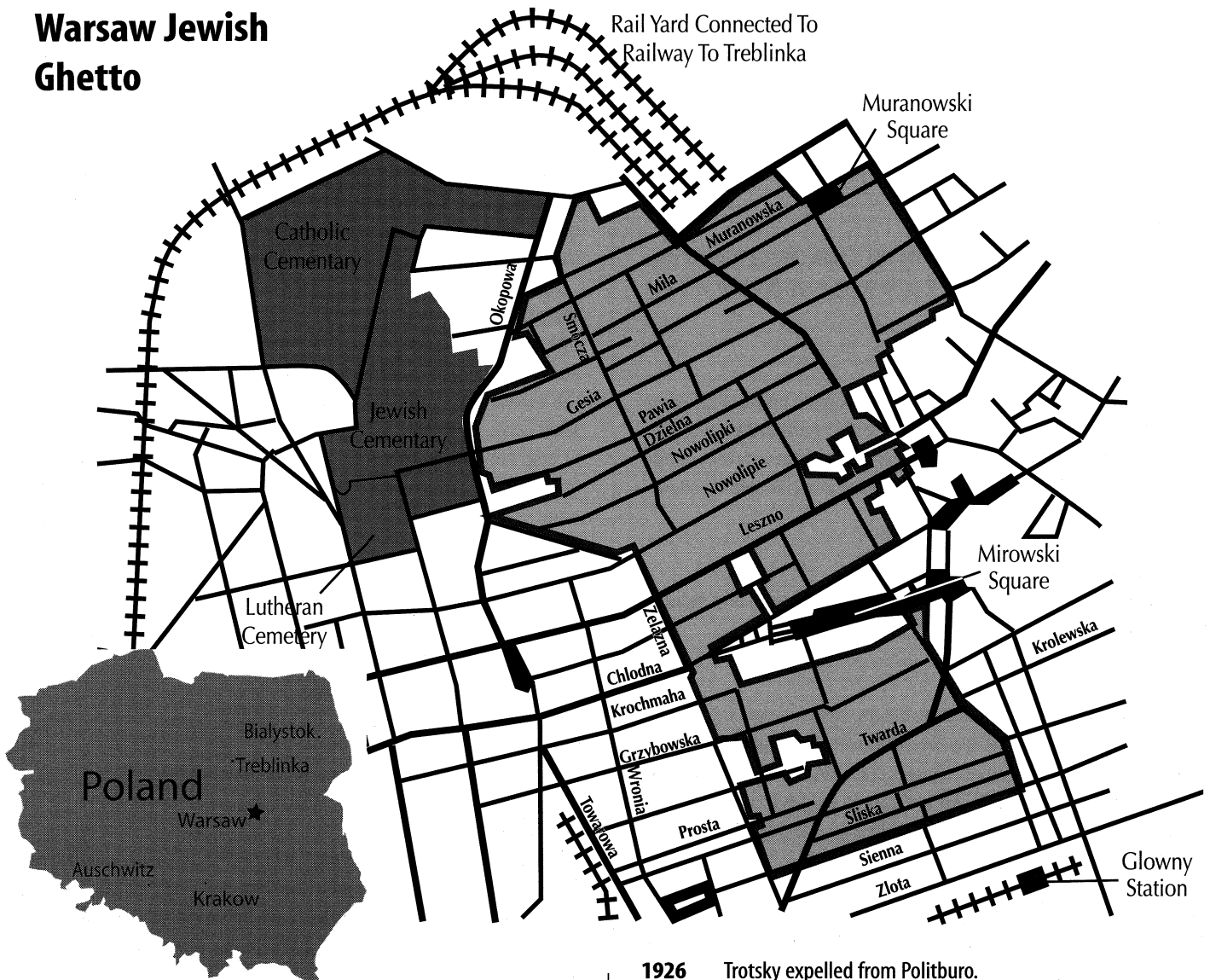
Chapter 44

Misha becomes a huckster like the ones who had fascinated him. He immigrates to America and changes his name to Jack Milgrom. In America, he works as a salesman and feels compelled to talk endlessly about his experiences. He meets and marries a woman named Vivian. The marriage lasts only five months because Jack is so damaged. He has a breakdown and the years slip on. One day, his daughter finds him.

Chapter 45

Jack moves in with his daughter, Katherine. He gives his granddaughter Wendy the middle name Janina. Katherine is twenty-five years old; Wendy, four years old. Jack plants some milkweed in their yard. Wendy calls her grandfather "Poppynoodle."

Warsaw Jewish Ghetto



TIMELINE OF HITLER'S RISE TO POWER AND WARSAW GHETTO UPRISING

- 1923** The Beerhall Putsch, the first show of Nazi power in an attempted coup against the Weimar Republic. Hitler jailed for his attempted coup against Weimar government.
- 1924** Hitler Finishes *Mein Kampf* in prison. Released from prison, Hitler takes back Party control from Rosenberg.
March 13 Reichstag dissolved.
- 1925** Hitler builds up Party and re-organizes S.S.

- 1926** Trotsky expelled from Politburo.
- 1927** **March 10** Prussia /Bavaria lift ban on public speaking for Nazis: Hitler allowed to speak. Bloody confrontations between Nazis and Communists in Berlin.
May Day: 1st Nazi Meeting in Berlin.
November 12 Stalin becomes leader of Russia.
- 1928** Ariel Sharon born in British-ruled Palestine.
- 1929** Germany settles reparations allowing removal of foreign representatives in some German areas.
- 1930** Weimar Republic falls in March, fails to keep votes in the Reichstag. Hindenburg dissolves Legislature: appoints new government.

Government operated by emergency decree.

September Elections: Nazis score victory: Seats increase from 12 to more than 100.

- 1931** Hitler, born in Austria, acquires German citizenship. Hitler runs for presidency with newly-acquired seats in Reichstag.
- 1933** **January** Hitler takes office; the Reichstag, German Legislature building, burns down. Civil rights suspended. Laws established excluding Jews from civil service, academics, arts and other areas. First mass demonstrations of Hitler worship. Compulsive sterilization of people with mental retardation. Rearmament of Germany begun. First concentration camps established: Dachau, Sachsenhausen, Buchenwald and Flossenberg along with smaller camps. Over the next 10 years, more than 1,000 camps built.
- 1939** **September** 400,000 Jews in Warsaw leave as Nazis occupy the city. **November** In retribution for a tenant beating a police officer, 53 Jewish tenants are shot.
- 1940** Polish underground develops. **April** Bund members conduct pogroms, lasts 40 days; beatings in streets. **November 15** All Jewish civil liberties suspended: no one may cross from Aryan side of Ghetto to Jewish side, and vice versa, upon penalty of arrest or death. Barbed wire is erected around the Ghetto wall.
- 1941** **January-March** First major deportation of Jews. **February** Resistance meets and agrees to fight to death. **February** Hunt begins throughout ghetto for non-reportees for deportation. **Summer** Nazi-Soviet War: New boundaries are drawn, and Jews in Poland try to escape to Soviet side. Mass exterminations of Jews begin in Ukraine, Belarus, Bialystok area. The news reaches Warsaw but is still not believed. **April 17** Social workers arrested and executed.
- 1942** **Jan. 14** All resistance groups in the Ghetto meet to agree on armed resistance as deportation calls increase. **April 19** Ghetto newspaper recommends a low profile. Two resistance groups disagree and warn of impending doom. **April 18-July 22** Increased violence against the Jews including nightly raids and shootings. Close to 1,000 people are killed. **May 1** Ten arrested for crossing to Aryan side, all killed.

May-July Massive deportation into the Ghetto including not only Jews but also gypsies.

July Tens of thousands deported to death camps.

July 23 Resistance groups urge armed resistance. Many disagree, feeling it would bring greater deaths and retaliation.

July A resistance member follows the deportation trains to determine whether their intelligence is correct or not: he discovers that the trains are bound for the death camp of Treblinka.

1943 **January 9** Himmler visits Warsaw Ghetto. 8000 ordered deported.

January 18 In reaction to the second liquidation of the Ghetto, the Jewish Fighting Organization fights the Germans: 100 Germans killed.

April 19 Germans approach the Ghetto, armed and with tanks. Start of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising which will last for 27 days, holding off the final liquidation of the Ghetto and deportation of all citizens.

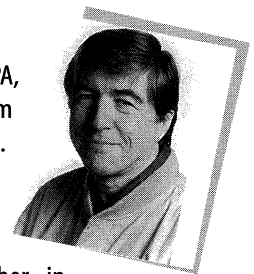
May Commander of Nazi troops in the Ghetto announces that the Ghetto is destroyed.

1944 Small uprising by partisans in the forests.

1945 End of WWII: 80% of Warsaw's buildings lie in rubble; Ghetto is completely erased. A small concentration camp is erected and remains till the end of the war.

Author Sketch

Born February 1, 1941, in Norristown, PA, Jerry Spinelli earned his B.A. from Gettysburg College in 1963 and his M.A. from Johns Hopkins University the following year. Spinelli had a twenty-three year career as a writer and editor with the Chilton Company, a magazine publisher, in Radnor, PA, before becoming a full-time freelance writer. Spinelli's young adult novels cover such controversial topics as racism and sex.



Spinelli began his writing career with the novel *Space Station Seventh Grade*. Jason Herkimer, the protagonist, is a thirteen-year-old boy, curious about his maturing body, who spends his spare time building a model space station. The story is told in Jason's voice, complete with his adolescent attitudes, humor, and vocabulary. While some critics called the language "crude" and Jason's behavior sometimes inappropriate, Ethel Twichell noted in *Horn Book*: "For those who view adolescence from a comfortable distance, the author has produced a truly funny book; those presently at the precarious stage may find Jason's hilarious adventures all too painfully recognizable."

Spinelli's style and content have drawn a loyal following of readers— young adults facing social, moral, and personal problems and are full of questions, just like his characters. A family man who draws on real-life events to both teach and entertain, Spinelli, as Keller wrote, "is a man who shines forth with the desire to be a writer, a man whose great drive is to share his vision of the world with his readers. As he creates the honest and accurate worlds reflected in so many of the passages of his novels, he is also a man whose enthusiasm for what he does is infectious."

Spinelli and his wife Eileen Mesi, also a writer, have seven children and live in Phoenixville, PA.

Critic's Corner

Jerry Spinelli is "a master of those embarrassing, gloppy, painful and suddenly wonderful things that happen on the razor's edge between childhood and full-fledged adolescence," according to Deborah Churchman in the *Washington Post Book World*. Many critics have noted that Spinelli presents adolescents as they are, suffering from acne and filled with pubescent curiosity. John Keller, writing in *Horn Book*, remarked: "Jerry has listened and observed, and, in language that is never self-consciously literary, he illuminates that rough magic children carry around with them." However, *Milkweed* represents a dramatic departure for Spinelli because this novel paints a vivid picture of Nazi-occupied Warsaw during World War II, as seen through the eyes of a curious, kind, heartbreakingly naive orphan. There are no comfortable, familiar suburbs here.

The amazon.com reviewer noted that "Spinelli has written a powerfully moving story of survival—readers will love Misha the dreamer and his wonderfully poetic observations of the world around him, his instinct to befriend a Jewish girl and her family, his impulse to steal food for a local orphanage and his friends in the ghetto, and his ability to delight in small things even surrounded by the horror of the Holocaust." The reviewer called the novel "a remarkable achievement."

Hazel Rochman, writing for the *American Library Association*, noted that *Milkweed* avoids sensationalizing the violence of the Warsaw ghetto because the protagonist is a child too young to understand what is going on. This effectively distances the horror. She said, "Spinelli's narrative is manic, fast, and scattered, authentically capturing the perspective of a young child."

Ginny Gustin, reviewing the novel for *School Library Journal*, praised the novel this way: "This historical novel can be appreciated both by readers with previous knowledge of the Holocaust and by those who share Misha's innocence and will discover the horrors of this period in history along with him."

Spinelli's other works

Space Station Seventh Grade (1982)
Who Put That Hair in My Toothbrush? (1984)
Night of the Whale (1985)
Jason and Marceline (1986)
Dump Days (1988)
Maniac Magee (1990)
The Bathwater Gang (1990)
There's a Girl in My Hammerlock (1990)
School Daze: Report to the Principal's Office (1991)
Fourth Grade Rats (1991)
The Bathwater Gang Gets Down to Business (1992)
Who Ran My Underwear Up the Flagpole? (1992)
Do the Funky Pickle (1992)
Picklemania (1993)
Tooter Pepperday (1995)
Crash (1996)
The Library Card (1997)
Wringer (1997)
Blue Ribbon Blues (1997)
Knots In My Yo-Yo String: The Autobiography of a Kid (1998)
Stargirl (2000)
My Daddy and Me (2002)

Bibliography

Booklist, June 1, 1990, p. 192.
Bulletin of the Center for Children's Books, July, 1984, p. 213; September, 1988, p. 21; September, 1990, p. 16.
Horn Book, June, 1984, pp. 343-344; March, 1987, p. 217; May, 1988, p. 355; July/August, 1991, pp. 433-436; September, 1991, pp. 594, 599.
Kirkus Reviews, May 1, 1984, pp. 51-52.
New York Times Book Review, April 21, 1991, p. 33.
Publishers Weekly, November 28, 1986, p. 78; April 29, 1988, p. 77; September 27, 1991, p. 58.
Washington Post Book World, January 13, 1985, p. 8.

General Objectives

1. To understand anti-Semitism
2. To analyze the author's style
3. To think about man's inhumanity to man
4. To assess Misha's personality
5. To recognize the novel's theme
6. To understand how Uri protects Misha
7. To trace how Misha survives
8. To find examples of cruelty
9. To sympathize with the narrator's plight
10. To describe the tragedy of the Holocaust

Specific Objectives

1. To explore life in Nazi-occupied Poland for Jews and gentiles
2. To trace the increasing restrictions placed on Jews in the 1930s and 1940s in Europe
3. To probe why Misha helps the Milgroms and the orphans
4. To understand Misha's innocence and how this affects the novel's impact
5. To understand why Uri shoots Misha
6. To probe the relationship between Misha and Mr. Milgrom
7. To see how the author uses the symbols of the Holocaust, especially shoes and hair
8. To understand why Janina gets on the death train bound for the concentration camps
9. To grasp the concept of scapegoating
10. To explore the trauma that Misha suffers

Literary Terms and Applications

For a better understanding of Jerry Spinelli's style, present the following terms and applications to the novel:

theme the main idea in a literary work, the author's general statement about life. The theme of *Milkweed* concerns the Holocaust and man's inhumanity to man. In *Milkweed*, Jerry Spinelli explores the horror of Hitler's "Final Solution," the death of six million European Jews. Hitler and his supporters—millions of German, Poles, and other Europeans—attempted to kill all of Europe's Jews (and eventually, to try to kill all the world's Jews.)

point of view the position from which a story is told. In *Milkweed*, Spinelli uses the first-person point of view to give readers a first-hand and immediate account of the action. This plunges readers right into the action and intensifies the horror. Since readers are positioned inside the action, they become one of the persecuted Jews. This forces readers to think about hatred, discrimination, and scapegoating they themselves might have faced in that situation or in any situation. In effect, the novel becomes a lesson in the horror of the Holocaust.

style the author's unique way of writing. Style is comprised of diction (word choice), sentence variety, sentence length, and figures of speech. Spinelli uses a conversational style to capture the rhythms of everyday speech. He also occasionally uses stereotypical Jewish diction. This is evident on page 160 for instance, when Misha reports: "He made for it a collar of newspaper so the hot wax would not drip on my hand." Conventional sentence structure would read: "He made a collar for it..."

The Importance of Setting

The novel is set in the Warsaw Ghetto during World War II. This setting is essential because it enables Spinelli to describe the starvation, despair, disease, terror, and death that the Nazis inflicted on the Polish Jews. The Ghetto becomes a microcosm for the experience of all Jewish people during World War II in Europe.

When it was created, the Warsaw Ghetto contained half a million Jews in an area intended for no more than 40,000. As a result, many families were crowded together in a small apartment. There was little work in the Ghetto at the beginning, and towards the end, almost none. Thus, people sold whatever they could on the streets, hoping to survive. The Warsaw Ghetto, as with nearly all the Ghettos the Nazis created, was nominally governed by a Judenrat, a Jewish council. It was usually comprised of important leaders in the Jewish community, but these leaders were usually appointed by the Nazis. Thus, the Judenrat was under the tight control of the Nazis. The Nazis forced the Jewish leaders to carry out their inhuman plans. Nonetheless, many Jews tried to help one another stay alive.

The Jews barely survived on less than half the calories required to maintain life. Spinelli describes the smuggling that took place as Jews sought any means possible to keep themselves fed. Very little resistance was possible in the Ghetto, as the Nazis kept a strict eye on everything. Smuggling even small portions of bread was punishable by immediate death. As a result, death was a daily occurrence in the Ghetto. People died of starvation and disease as well as being shot for stealing.

Orphanages were set up, the most famous of which was headed by Janucz Korczak, thinly disguised as Dr. Korczak in the novel. He did as much as he could for the children, often getting food and clothing from the residents of the Ghetto who had more than others.

Deportations began as supposed work details to the concentration camp at Treblinka, first of the men; then thousands of women; and finally, the children. As word came that Treblinka was a death camp, members of the Resistance urged the Judenrat to fight the Nazis, an almost impossible task. As described in the novel, the Judenrat decided not to take action. The morning the work detail called for the children, the leaders knew they had been mistaken. They had failed to imagine the unimaginable horror of the "Final Solution."

Cross-Curricular Sources

Books

Anne Frank, *The Diary of a Young Girl*
Primo Levy, *Survival in Auschwitz*
Carol Matas, *Daniel's Story*
Lois Lowry, *Number the Stars*
Lila Perl, *Four Perfect Pebbles: A Holocaust Story*
Art Spiegelman, *Maus*
Andrea Warren, *Surviving Hitler: A Boy in the Nazi Death Camps*
Elie Wiesel, *Night*

Videos/DVDs

Good Conversation! A Talk with Jerry Spinelli (video), Rainbow Educational Video, 1992.
Jerry and Eileen Spinelli (video), J. S. Weiss, 1992.
Meet the Author: Jerry Spinelli (video), Fairfax Network, 1996.
The Pianist
Schindler's List

Audiocassettes

Milkweed (read by Ron Rifkin, 2003)

Internet

Educational Paperback Association information on Jerry Spinelli
<http://www.edupaperback.org/showauth.cfm?authid=74>

Authors Online Biography: Jerry Spinelli
<http://teacher.scholastic.com/authorsandbooks>

Jerry Spinelli biographical information
<http://www.twbookmark.com/authors/23/1607>

Jerry Spinelli biographical information
<http://www.randomhouse.com/teachers>

THEMES AND MOTIFS

A study of the central issues and situations in Jerry Spinelli's *Milkweed* should include these aspects:

Themes

- anti-Semitism
- family
- fear
- Holocaust
- hunger
- inhumanity
- innocence
- maturity
- religious intolerance

Motifs

- surviving unimaginable terrors
- dealing with anti-Semitism
- being selfless and helping others
- maturing and learning from life
- finding a family
- living with dignity
- not giving up
- understanding the forces arrayed before you
- being innocent
- coping with a nervous breakdown

Meaning Study

Below are words, phrases, sentences, or thought units that have particular meaning in the novel. Explain the meaning of each. Chapter and page numbers indicate the context from which the item is taken.

1. "Are you a Jew?" said the boy in my face. (Chap. 3, p. 5)
(Misha is most certainly Jewish, an orphan because his parents were killed by the Nazis. However, because he is so young, Misha does not recall anything of his past. The orphan who asks him this question, as with all the other orphans, is Jewish. All but Misha will likely be dead by the end of the novel.)
2. "Everybody doesn't hate the Gypsies, but there's nobody that doesn't hate us." (Chap. 3, p. 8)
(One of the orphans explains that the Nazis specifically targeted Jews and Gypsies, along with mentally retarded people and homosexuals, for extermination. However, the child recognizes how anti-Semitism had become institutionalized in Europe and the Jews made the scapegoats for all of Germany's economic and social problems.)

3. "I remember ovens." (Chap. 16, p. 76)
(In a stunning example of foreshadowing, Mrs. Milgrom berates Misha for bringing them baking powder. It is evident that they can't bake because they do not have an oven. Her comment about ovens foreshadows the fate of the Jews in the concentration camps.)
4. He slipped it over my coat sleeve onto my right arm. (Chap. 20, p. 95)
(Mr. Milgrom gives Misha the armband that the Nazis forced all Jews to wear. By putting on the blue-and-white armband, Misha is acknowledging and announcing his presumed Jewish identity.)
5. "Milkweed," I said. (Chap. 30, p. 142)
(Misha sees a brown seed with a spray of white fluff coming out of it. The white stuff clings to his shirt. Suddenly, he knows what the stuff is: a plant called milkweed. The milkweed is intertwined with angels, whose existence the boys debate. Like the milkweed, angels symbolize the possibility of goodness and redemption amid all the hatred of the Holocaust.)
6. He lifted each of us and lowered us into the hole with Mrs. Milgrom. (Chap. 32, p. 151)
(With the bombs raining down in the cemetery, Mr. Milgrom shelters the children in his wife's grave. They curl around the scrap of wool at the foot of the corpse. This scene foreshadows the death of everyone except Misha.)
7. "There is no resettlement." (Chap. 38, p. 178)
(Few Jews were able to believe that the Nazis had systematically arranged to have them gassed—the so-called "Final Solution." As a result, millions boarded the trains to the concentration camps. In this scene, an old man with an eye "the color of milk" tries to warn his fellow Jews that the Nazis will kill them, not resettle them in other places. The people yell that the old man lies.)
8. I thought she would sail forever like a milkweed puff on an endless breeze, and I was running and wishing I could fly with her and then she was gone, swallowed up by the black maw of the boxcar. . . ." (Chap. 40, p. 186)
(In the novel's climax, Janina runs to the trains and enters one of the boxcars, which will transport her to a death camp. Misha tries to run after her but Uri stops him with a bullet.)
9. Finally, Vivian had enough. (Chap. 44, p. 202)
(Misha's trauma runs too deep and he is unable to sustain a marriage. His wife, a good woman, is unable to live with someone who has been so damaged, and the marriage dissolves after only five months.)

10. I was. Now I am. (Chap. 45, p. 208)
(Thanks to the love of his granddaughter and daughter, Misha is finally able to recover from the horror of his past. He is finally part of a family that belongs to him. He is complete.)

Comprehension Study

Answer the following questions in your own words. There is not always a right answer. Your judgment is important and you should be ready to defend your answers by referring to passages in the book.

Questions 1-5 (Literal Level)

- When and where does the story take place?
(The story opens in the Warsaw Ghetto in 1939. The action continues throughout the war. After the war ends in 1945, the narrator moves to America. The story ends 29 years later in America.)
- Who is the novel's narrator?
(The narrator is a youth of uncertain background. Most likely a Polish Jew, he starts off being called "Stoptych," then "Misha Pilsudski," and finally "Jack Milgrom.")
- Who is Uri and what is his relationship to the narrator?
(Uri is an older orphan who takes Misha under his wing and teaches Misha how to survive.)
- What is Janina's fate?
(She dies in a concentration camp.)
- What happens to Misha at the end of the novel?
(In America, Misha—now calling himself Jack—meets his daughter and granddaughter and goes to live with them.)

Questions 6-8 (Interpretative Level)

- What is the truth of Misha's background?
(The truth will never be known. When his family died, Misha was too young to have formed any firm memories.)
- What does milkweed symbolize in this story?
(It stands for goodness and redemption. It is closely linked to the imagery of angels in the novel.)
- What does Misha represent?
(Misha stands for the indomitable human spirit that cannot be crushed. Although he suffers a breakdown and has great difficulty functioning in society, Misha does survive. Thanks to the love and acceptance offered by his daughter and granddaughter, he even achieves a measure of happiness.)

Questions 9 and 10 (Critical Level)

9. Do you think Misha is an effective narrator? Why or why not?
(Students are likely to say that he is an effective narrator because of his innocence. This prevents the novel from having a bitter, strident tone.)
10. Would you recommend this book for classroom reading? Why or why not?
(Although the book is grueling because of its subject, most students should argue that it should be required reading in all classrooms to help educate children about the Holocaust and help make sure that such events can never happen again.)

Questions 11-12 (Creative Level)

11. Visit the Shoah website and report on its contents.
12. Working with a small group of classmates, create a new family myth for Misha. Use as your model the story that Uri created for Misha.

Across the Curriculum

LANGUAGE ARTS

1. Create a new title for the novel based on one of its main symbols.
2. Explain the holiday of Hanukkah.
3. At first, Misha joins the “family” of orphans. Then he joins the Milgroms’ family. What makes a group of people a family? Write your definition of a family.
4. Write a brief sequel to the novel in which you explain what has happened to Uri.
5. Recast one chapter from Janina’s point of view.

Art/Music

1. Create a new cover for the novel. Explain how your cover art fits the novel’s tone, theme, and characters.
2. Make a model or a drawing of a merry-go-round like the one that Misha wants to ride.
3. Draw a picture of Misha at the beginning of the novel when he is still a young boy.
4. Many of the Jewish Ghetto communities were rich in music. There were even bands and orchestras in some of the concentration camps. Research some of the music created by the persecuted Jewish people during this era.

History/Social Studies

1. Learn more about Gypsies. Explain their preferred name, country of origin, and history. Share what you learned in a poster or report.
2. Make a timeline of the main events in World War II.
3. Visit a website for one of the Holocaust museums, such as the one in Washington D.C. or Israel. Summarize what you learned about the Holocaust from this source.

4. Trace the economic events leading up to the persecution of the Jews and World War II in Germany.
5. Explain what happened during “Krystallnacht” (Crystal Night), November 9-10, 1938. That night, the Nazis rampaged through communities in Poland and Germany smashing glass, looting Jewish stores and homes, and killing Jewish people as they lay sleeping in their beds. The event is described briefly in Chapters 8-9 of *Milkweed*.
6. Find out how Dr. Korczak in the novel compares to his real-life counterpart.

Speech/Drama

1. Working with a group of classmates, debate whether or not neo-Nazi groups should be allowed to exist in America today.
2. With a partner, role-play a scene in which Misha and Uri are reunited in America, after the war. What would they say to each other?
3. Write and deliver a eulogy for Janina.
4. Improvise a speech that Misha might deliver as he felt compelled to “give witness” to what he had seen.
5. Create the scene in which Misha meets his daughter and granddaughter.

Mathematics/Science

1. Find out how many calories a child, adult woman, and adult man needs to survive. Compare this to the 500 calories the average Warsaw Ghetto person ate during this time.
2. Mr. Milgrom is a pharmacist. Research the education, training, and tests required to become a pharmacist today.
3. Uri has bright red hair. Make a chart showing what percentage of the American population has red hair, brown hair, and blond hair.
4. Make a graph showing the number of children orphaned as a result of World War II.
5. The guard Buffo chewed mint all the time. Find out what benefit—if any—mint has.
6. All the children have lice. Make a pamphlet showing how lice are transmitted and how to treat the condition. Share your findings with the class.

Alternate Assessment

1. List examples of difficulties that Misha faced. Then rank these hardships on a scale from most to least difficult. Be ready to justify your rankings.
2. Compile a list of actions that demonstrate how Misha survives.
3. Compose a scene in which Misha meets his real family.
4. Make a character list and describe each character.

Vocabulary Test

Match each word to its meaning. Write the letter of your choice in the space provided.

- | | |
|--------------------|-----------------------|
| ___ 1. shalom | A. "peace," in Hebrew |
| ___ 2. runt | B. ridicule |
| ___ 3. matzo | C. alarms |
| ___ 4. wail | D. Nazi soldiers |
| ___ 5. sirens | E. rubbish, debris |
| ___ 6. carcass | F. fermented cabbage |
| ___ 7. babka | G. slum |
| ___ 8. curfew | H. twist, curl |
| ___ 9. boulevard | I. meat inside bones |
| ___ 10. Jackboots | J. lament, moan |
| ___ 11. mock | K. corpse |
| ___ 12. sauerkraut | L. trashy people |
| ___ 13. bedlam | M. madness |
| ___ 14. typhus | N. twist from pain |
| ___ 15. rubble | O. deadline |
| ___ 16. marrow | P. type of cracker |
| ___ 17. writhing | Q. cake |
| ___ 18. curlicue | R. large, wide street |
| ___ 19. ghetto | S. small weak animal |
| ___ 20. riff-raff | T. a disease |

Comprehension Test A

Part I: Matching (20 points)

Complete each of the following descriptions with a name from the list that follows. Place the letter of your answer in the blank provided at left.

- | | |
|------------------------|---|
| _____ 1. Uri | A. Misha's wife |
| _____ 2. Stopthief | B. the man who runs the orphanage |
| _____ 3. Janina | C. the little girl who becomes Misha's best friend |
| _____ 4. Mr. Milgrom | D. Hitler's second in command |
| _____ 5. Dr. Korczak | E. a red-headed orphan who protects the narrator |
| _____ 6. Olek | F. a one-armed orphan |
| _____ 7. Uncle Shepsel | G. a pharmacist |
| _____ 8. Vivian | H. Misha's granddaughter |
| _____ 9. Wendy | I. the narrator's name at the very beginning of the story |
| _____ 10. Himmler | J. the man who tries to become a Lutheran |

Part II: Sentence Completion (20 points)

Circle the correct word or phrase to complete each of the following statements.

1. At the beginning of the story, many orphans are gathered in a (**stable, school**).
2. The children decide that the narrator must be a (**Nazi spy, Gypsy**).
3. The novel opens in the year (**1929, 1939**).
4. Misha comes to Janina's birthday party as an invited guest and steals the (**turkey, birthday cake**).
5. He sees that someone has painted a big (**yellow star, blue flag**) in her window.
6. A Nazi shoots off Misha's (**arm, earlobe**) as he is stealing food.
7. Misha is hit by (**a tank, an automobile**) but he is not badly injured.
8. Misha becomes enraptured by a (**merry-go-round, barber pole**).
9. The boys see the Ghetto police, whom they call ("**Flips, "Flops"**).
10. Janina has a craving for (**pickled eggs, chocolate candies**).

COMPREHENSION TEST A (PAGE 2)

Part III: Identification (20 points)

Briefly describe each and explain its importance in the story.

1. parades
2. Jackboots
3. milkweed
4. trains
5. mothers

Part IV: Essay (40 points)

Choose two and answer in complete sentences on the following page.

1. Compare and contrast Misha and Janina. Explain how they are the same and different.
2. Which character in *Milkweed* do you find most admirable? Why?
3. Analyze what role Mr. Milgrom plays in Misha's life.
4. What is the author's message in this novel?

Comprehension Test B

Part I: True/False (20 points)

Write T if the statement is true or F if the statement is false.

- _____ 1. At the beginning of the story, the narrator sees the Nazis as a delightful parade of magnificent boots.
- _____ 2. The narrator remembers only his younger brother, Jozef, but not his parents back in Russia.
- _____ 3. One evening, the Nazis shatter all the glass in the city, attacking Jewish homes and shops.
- _____ 4. The Nazis round up the Jews and force them to wear armbands that mark them as Jews.
- _____ 5. Uncle Shepsel accepts his changed circumstances with good humor, sharing all his food and even helping Misha steal food for the others.
- _____ 6. Misha discovers to his astonishment that Janina is really his sister!
- _____ 7. The Jews are reduced to eating rats, which they call "squirrels" to make them more palatable.
- _____ 8. Nazis and their girlfriends take pictures of the starving and dirty children and laugh at them. The Ghetto has become a Nazi tourist spot.
- _____ 9. Janina tries to stop Misha from smuggling because it is so dangerous, and he agrees to her wishes.
- _____ 10. Misha realizes that Uri is wrong about the trains and concentration camps. The Jews really are being resettled in another part of Poland.

Part II: Matching (20 points)

Complete each of the following descriptions with a name from the list that follows. Place the letter of your answer in the blank provided at left.

- | | |
|-------------------------|---------------------------|
| A. Uncle Shepsel | F. Mrs. Milgrom |
| B. Vivian | G. Janina |
| C. Wendy | H. Misha Pilsudski |
| D. Buffo | I. Jack Milgrom |
| E. Dr. Korczak | J. Uri |

- _____ 1. Misha's granddaughter
- _____ 2. The man who bravely shelters the orphans
- _____ 3. The name that Uri gives to the narrator
- _____ 4. The narrator's protector, another Jewish orphan who poses as a Nazi
- _____ 5. The cruel guard who smells of the mint leaves that he chews
- _____ 6. Janina's mother
- _____ 7. The narrator's wife
- _____ 8. The name the narrator takes when he comes to America
- _____ 9. The Jewish man who decides to become a Lutheran
- _____ 10. The girl who steals food with Misha

COMPREHENSION TEST B (PAGE 2)

Part III: Motivation (20 points)

Complete each phrase below with a reason or justification.

1. Uri invents a new history for the narrator because
2. Misha steals Janina's birthday cake because
3. Misha starts breaking into houses to
4. The Jews are locked in a Ghetto because
5. Olek, one of the orphans, is hanged because
6. The children get into Mrs. Milgrom's grave because
7. The Jews welcome the Russians because
8. Uri warns Misha to get out of the Ghetto because
9. Uri tells Misha that he should not get on a train because
10. Misha's marriage breaks up because

Part IV: Essay (40 points)

Choose two and answer in complete sentences on the following page.

1. Explain how Misha survives.
2. Analyze what you learned about the Holocaust from this novel.
3. Describe how the Milgroms treat Misha.
4. Trace the novel's plot. Include the rising action, climax, and resolution.

Answer Key

VOCABULARY TEST

- | | | | |
|------|-------|-------|-------|
| 1. A | 6. K | 11. B | 16. I |
| 2. S | 7. Q | 12. F | 17. N |
| 3. P | 8. O | 13. M | 18. H |
| 4. J | 9. R | 14. T | 19. G |
| 5. C | 10. D | 15. E | 20. L |

COMPREHENSION TEST A

Part I: Matching (20 points)

- | | |
|------|-------|
| 1. E | 6. F |
| 2. I | 7. J |
| 3. C | 8. A |
| 4. G | 9. H |
| 5. B | 10. D |

Part II: Sentence Completion (20 points)

- | | |
|------------------|-------------------|
| 1. stable | 6. earlobe |
| 2. Gypsy | 7. an automobile |
| 3. 1939 | 8. merry-go-round |
| 4. birthday cake | 9. "Flops" |
| 5. yellow star | 10. pickled eggs |

Part III: Identification (20 points)

- Parades captivate the narrator. He does not understand the menace that the goose-stepping Nazis represent.
- "Jackboots" is the narrator's name for the Nazi soldiers. He admires their gleaming boots.
- Milkweed stands for innocence and the possibility of redemption, even amid the greatest man-made tragedy the modern world has known.
- Trains represent death, as they transport the Jews to the death camps.
- Mothers are mythical to the children, like angels and oranges. None of the children has ever known a mother, an angel, or an orange.

Part IV: Essay (40 points)

Answers will vary.

COMPREHENSION TEST B

Part I: True/False (20 points)

- | | |
|------|-------|
| 1. T | 6. F |
| 2. F | 7. T |
| 3. T | 8. T |
| 4. T | 9. F |
| 5. F | 10. F |

Part II: Matching (20 points)

- | | |
|------|-------|
| 1. C | 6. F |
| 2. E | 7. B |
| 3. H | 8. I |
| 4. J | 9. A |
| 5. D | 10. G |

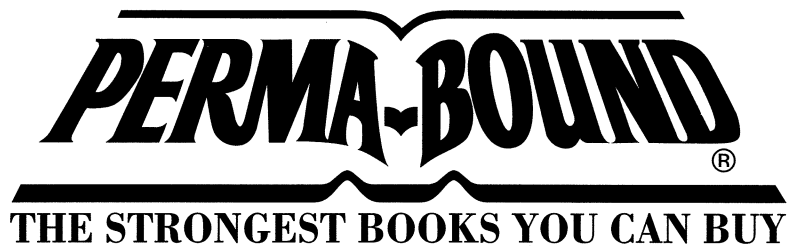
Part III: Motivation (20 points)

- Uri is trying to keep him safe from the Nazis.
- He has never seen a birthday cake with candles so he is convinced that the candles are going to burn the house down.
- steal food because food is so scarce
- The Nazis are trying to starve them to death.
- He was caught smuggling food.
- They are seeking shelter from the bombs.
- They mistakenly believe that the Russians will save them from the Nazis.
- All the Jews will be killed.
- The trains are taking the Jews to the death camps.
- He is too badly damaged by his experiences to live with someone else and to give and receive love.

Part IV: Essay (40 points)

Answers will vary.

TEACHER'S NOTES



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