



Loser

Jerry Spinelli

Teacher's Guide
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CLASSROOM
FAVORITES

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Synopsis

Chapter 1

The author recounts Zinkoff's story—a case study of sorts—in short sentences from a deliberately reportorial point of view, documenting the first years of the boy's life and his evolution into a loser. In this chapter, the narrator explains that people grow up with a kid but never really notice him. Zinkoff is that kid.

Chapter 2

Zinkoff realizes that he can run forever. He shouts "Yahoo!" in his joy.

Chapter 3

All the kids race down the street. Zinkoff never wins but neither he or any of the other small children notice—yet.

Chapter 4

On the first day of school, Zinkoff wears his giraffe hat, even though his mother is upset that the other kids will mock him. Miss Meeks, his teacher, realizes that Donald Zinkoff will never blend into the crowd.

Chapter 5

Miss Meeks welcomes the class to their first day at John W. Satterfield Elementary School. Zinkoff is transfixed when she tells them that they will attend school for 2,160 days until they graduate from high school.

Chapter 6

Zinkoff has terrible handwriting. On the playground, the other kids pick on his giraffe hat and when an upper-grader tries to tease him by taking it, Zinkoff cheerfully gives it to him. The tall boy is disgusted that he has not been able to upset Zinkoff. Later, at home, Zinkoff thinks about his father, a postal carrier, whom Zinkoff admires very much. He also thinks about the family's "clunker"

cars and his mother's charming habit of giving him stick-on stars.

Chapter 7

Zinkoff is a caring, sensitive boy with loving and supportive parents. Everyday is like the first day, filled with joy. Miss Meeks tries to punish him for his outbursts of laughter with a button that says "I know I can behave," but the punishment is ineffectual because Zinkoff likes wearing the button and does not realize that he is misbehaving. At the end of the year, his teacher writes on the back of his report card, "Donald is one happy child! And he certainly does love school!" Donald, it seems, loves everything; he's sunshine in a bottle.

Chapter 8

Zinkoff gets two new friends: a baby sister named Polly and a next-door neighbor named Andrew Orwell. Zinkoff's mother bakes a cake to welcome Cherise Orwell and her family to the neighborhood. Andrew is not pleased that the family has moved, so Zinkoff bakes him a giant snickerdoodle cookie.

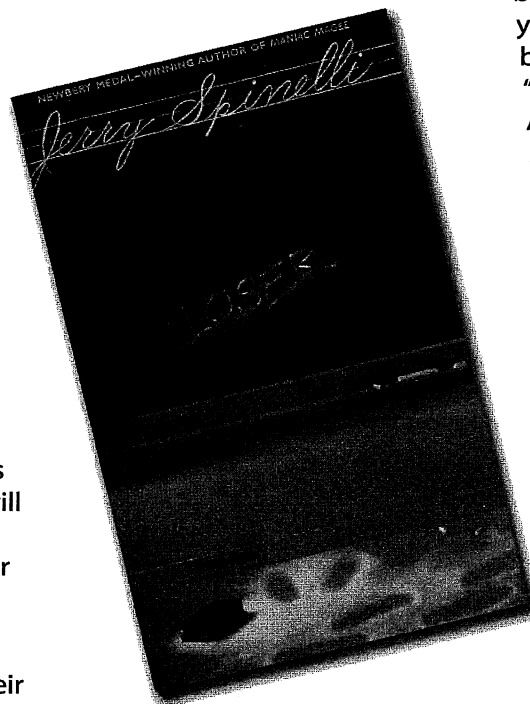
Unfortunately, he drops the cookie and Andrew runs inside in a fury. Zinkoff then eats most of the cookie himself and throws up.

Chapter 9

Zinkoff loves soccer but he plays it so badly that his teammates call him "Wild Foot." When his team wins, he tries to give his trophy to Andrew, but Andrew's mother won't let him take it.

Chapter 10

Zinkoff gets off on the wrong foot with his second-grade teacher, Mrs. Biswell. She does not like children and has no patience with Zinkoff's poor skills.



Chapter 11

Zinkoff's father arranges a special Take Your Kid to Work Day. Zinkoff is delighted.

Chapter 12

On Sunday, Zinkoff and his father deliver 100 blank letters to the customers on Mr. Zinkoff's mail route. On the route, Zinkoff meets a man he dubs "The Waiting Man" because he has been waiting for decades for his brother to return home from the Vietnam War.

Chapter 13

Zinkoff has surgery for the upside-down stomach valve that makes him throw up all the time. Zinkoff decides that he needs to give himself a test while he is recovering.

Chapter 14

As his test, Zinkoff forces himself to confront the Furnace Monster in the basement.

Chapter 15

Zinkoff loves his fourth grade teacher, Mr. Yalowitz, who is delighted with Zinkoff as well. Things do not go as well with his classmates. They begin to notice Zinkoff's sloppy handwriting, horrible flute playing, bad grades, clumsiness, and ineptitude at sports. Previously, Zinkoff's eccentricities and lack of coordination had been accepted, but in the fourth grade Zinkoff is discovered. His classmates turn their critical eyes to him and brand him a loser. From then on, he endures the fate of so many outcasts--the last to be picked for the team, a favorite prey of bullies, and the butt of cruel comments from classmates.

Chapter 16

Field Day is a disaster. Gary Hobin, a class leader, does not want Zinkoff on his team but Mr. Yalowitz insists. Everyone calls Zinkoff a loser, but back home, Zinkoff knows that his family will never give up on him.

Chapter 17

Despite his clumsiness and occasionally poor social skills, Zinkoff is remarkably good-natured about all the ostracizing and taunting that he endures. He is too busy being himself to worry about what other people think of him. Fifth grade is filled with interesting things.

Chapter 18

The teacher, Mrs. Shankfelder, gives them a test in which she asks the students to name their best

friend. Zinkoff is stumped. He writes "Hector Binns," a classmate who is collecting his earwax to make a candle.

Chapter 19

Zinkoff is determined to be the best friend ever, but Hector is not especially interested in Zinkoff's friendship, even though he is an outsider as well. To cement their friendship, Zinkoff gives Hector some of his own earwax, but Hector refuses it.

Chapter 20

When Zinkoff gets the only A on a Geography test, the other kids congratulate him. He never knows that he is being mocked. Field Day comes again and no one wants Zinkoff on their team. He decides to cut school to avoid Field Day.

Chapter 21

Zinkoff visits an elderly lady he met the day he went on the mail route with his father. She makes him an sandwich. She does not have any star stickers, but she gives him a sticker with a turkey, which delights him.

Chapter 22

At elementary school graduation, Zinkoff's sister Polly cheers for him, to his great delight.

Chapter 23

Zinkoff spends a pleasant summer and then begins Monroe Middle School. He meets up with Andrew, who had long ago moved, but Andrew (who has changed his name to "Drew") snubs him cruelly. Zinkoff becomes invisible: he is less than a loser; he is a nobody.

Chapter 24

When it snows, Zinkoff goes to play before going home. Soon, it is dark and he is very late. Finally on his way home, he sees police and hears that a little girl named Claudia has wandered off. Not realizing that she has long been found and that everyone is now looking for him, Zinkoff sets off in search of Claudia.

Chapter 25

Zinkoff wanders in the icy weather for seven hours.

Chapter 26

Zinkoff keeps searching for Claudia.

Chapter 27

Finally, a snowplow operator finds him by accident. He is half-frozen.

Chapter 28

Zinkoff's parents and relatives care for him and celebrate his selfless bravery.

Chapter 29

Recovering, Zinkoff looks at the stars.

Chapter 30

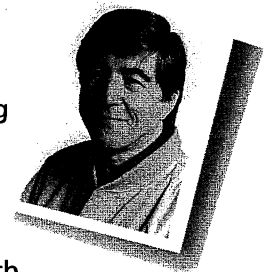
The boys on the playground mock Zinkoff's heroic act and refuse to choose him for a pick-up game. The kids don't know what to do when he refuses to go away, so they finally include him.

Timeline

- 1941 Jerry Spinelli born
December 7 America enters World War II
- 1948 State of Israel founded
- 1950 Korean War begins
- 1952 Elizabeth II crowned Queen of England;
Car seat belts introduced; polio vaccine invented
- 1954 Supreme Court issues *Brown v. Board of Education*, making segregation illegal
- 1955 Disneyland opens; McDonald's corporation founded
- 1956 Sabin invents oral polio vaccine
- 1957 Dr. Seuss publishes *The Cat in the Hat*
- 1958 NASA established
- 1960 First televised U.S. presidential debate
- 1961 Peace Corps founded; Berlin Wall built;
Alan Shepard is first American in space
- 1963 President Kennedy assassinated;
Spinelli graduates from college
- 1967 First Super Bowl; first heart transplant
Six Day War in Middle East
- 1969 Neil Armstrong is the first human on the moon
- 1974 President Nixon resigns
- 1979 Sony introduces the Walkman
- 1981 First woman appointed to the U.S.
Supreme Court; Pac-man video game is very popular
- 1983 Sally Ride becomes first woman in space
- 1989 Berlin Wall taken down
- 1990 Nelson Mandela is freed in South Africa;
Jerry Spinelli wins the Newbery Medal for *Maniac Magee*
- 1991 Collapse of Soviet Union
- 1997 Scientists clone sheep

Biographical 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."

In *Loser*, Spinelli "enters the consciousness of the social pariah," according to a *Publishers Weekly* critic. A writer for *Kirkus* labeled *Loser* "a masterful character portrait."

Spinelli's style and content have drawn a loyal following of readers—young adults facing social, moral, and personal problems and 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.

Critics 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."

A reviewer on amazon.com had this praise for *Loser*: "As he did in *Stargirl*, Newbery Medal-winning author Jerry Spinelli again explores the cruelty of a student body and how it does and doesn't affect one student, pure of spirit."

Reviewer Karin Snelson had both positive and negative comments about the novel: "What makes the book charming and buoyant is that the reader, like Zinkoff's parents and his favorite teacher, appreciates the boy's oblivious joie de vivre and his divine quirks. What is less compelling about the novel is the *let this be a lesson to us* heavy-handedness that accompanies the reportorial approach. Still, Spinelli comes through again with a lively, often moving story with humor and heart to spare."

Critic Edward Sullivan noted: "Although perhaps not as funny as Jack Gantos's little hellion, Joey Pigza, Zinkoff is a flawed but tough kid with an unshakable optimism that readers will find endearing. Losers in schools everywhere will find great comfort in this story, and the kids who would so casually brand their classmates should read it, too."

The American Library Association wrote in their review: "It's impossible to dislike sunny, sweet-spirited Donald, and readers will doubtless be pleased by his victory—even though many will find it hard to believe that a normal child could be so relentlessly oblivious to his environment. Ultimately, this nagging question of credibility compromises the success of an otherwise fast-paced, engaging story."

Other Works By The Author

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, 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 assess the difficulty of being an individual
2. To analyze the author's style
3. To think about what causes someone to be accepted or rejected
4. To assess Zinkoff's personality
5. To recognize the novel's theme
6. To understand how Zinkoff's parents appreciate him
7. To appreciate Zinkoff's goodness
8. To find examples of cruelty
9. To sympathize with Zinkoff's plight
10. To describe the joys of childhood

Specific Objectives

1. To explore life in a typical suburban school system
2. To trace the main character's journey through childhood
3. To probe the pressures of social conformity
4. To understand why Zinkoff takes such joy from everyday experiences
5. To understand why Zinkoff is considered a "loser."
6. To probe the relationship between Zinkoff and his parents
7. To see the effect of acceptance in a child's life
8. To understand the plot structure
9. To grasp why people often fear someone who is different
10. To explore the consequences of not fitting in with your peers

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 *Loser* concerns the cruelty of childhood. In *Loser*, Jerry Spinelli explores the results of being judged by others for not fitting in, a common theme in many of his novels. Zinkoff is unusually oblivious to being labeled a loser, a nobody (except for Field Day), but readers are acutely aware that his peers

and even teachers often treat him with contempt and even cruelty. The other kids don't know what to make of someone so oblivious to his outcast status, as shown in the following excerpt: "The kid really is stupid," Bonce thinks. "The kid doesn't know that even if he's allowed in he's only going to be ignored. Or embarrassed. Or hurt. He doesn't know that he's a klutz. Doesn't know he's out of his league." (p. 217)

point of view the position from which a story is told. In *Loser*, Spinelli uses the third-person point of view to give readers some distance from Zinkoff and his plight. Since readers are positioned outside the action, they become the people who shun and taunt Zinkoff. This forces readers to think about their role in similar social situations. In effect, the novel becomes a lesson in tolerance and acceptance.

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. This gives the book an engaging and accessible style.

The Importance Of Setting

Loser takes place in a stereotypical blue-collar suburb. Mr. Zinkoff is a postal carrier; Mrs. Zinkoff, a homemaker. The family is able to save enough money for a three-day summer vacation at a modest seaside resort, but not enough to join the town pool for the summer. Mr. Zinkoff drives a series of second-hand junk cars which he calls "clunkers." Held together with luck and chewing gum, the cars tend to die suddenly on the road, only to be replaced with yet another clunker. Donald is not driven around by this mother as is common in affluent suburbs. Rather, when he is old enough, he rides around on his bicycle. However, the district does include more upper-class areas, which we see when Andrew, Donald's former next-door neighbor, moves to a nicer home in a better neighborhood. Andrew's father is an upwardly-mobile banker, which Andrew does not hesitate to throw in Donald's face. The blue-collar and white-collar neighborhoods areas feed into the junior high and high school, creating greater social distinctions.

The commonality of the setting gives the novel its great universality: what happens to Donald Zinkoff can (and does) happen to children across the world. By setting *Loser* in a familiar and common locale, Spinelli conveys to readers the fact that every community, every neighborhood, every school has its "losers."

Cross-Curricular Sources

Novels

Joan Bauer, *Hope Was Here*
Meg Cabot, *The Princess Diaries*
Jenny Carroll, *Shadowland*
Sarah Dessen, *Dreamland*
Laurie Halse Anderson, *Speak*
Davida Wills Hurwin, *A Time for Dancing*
E. L. Konigsburg, *Silent to the Bone*
Gail Carson Levine, *Ella Enchanted*
Lois Lowry, *Gathering Blue*
Louise Rennison, *Angus, Thongs and Full-Frontal Snogging*
Jacqueline Woodson, *If You Come Softly*

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.
Revenge of the Nerds

Audiocassettes

Loser (Audiofile, 2002)

Internet

Spinelli's official web page
www.jerryspinelli.com.newbery_001.htm
Educational Paperback Association information on Jerry Spinelli
<http://www.edupaperback.org/showauth.cfm?authid=74>
Authors Online Biography: Jerry Spinelli
<http://www2.scholastic.com/teachers/authorsandbooks/authorstudies/authorstudies.jhtml>
Jerry Spinelli biographical information
<http://www.twbookmark.com/authors/23/1607>

Themes And Motifs

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

Themes

- athletics
- confusion
- conformity
- enthusiasm
- family support
- friendship
- heroism
- individuality
- maturity
- peer pressure

Motifs

- accepting others for who they are
- being willing to try new things
- being considered a "loser"
- dealing with being different
- expressing your individuality
- getting zest from commonplace, everyday things
- having a big heart
- being kind to others
- dealing with growth and change
- having self-awareness and maturity

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. Here is the surprise: Every day is like the first day to Zinkoff. (Chap. 7, p. 28)
(Donald Zinkoff has an undeniable zest for life. As a result, he approaches each day like a shiny new gift to be unwrapped and savored.)
2. Zinkoff is determined to become a better loser. (Chap. 9, p. 45)
(When Donald's soccer team loses a game, he is astonished at their display of disappointment. He plays the game for the sheer joy of playing, unaware of the rules, purpose, or goal. When he sees his teammates throwing a fit at losing,

Donald joins in with gusto, outdoing their theatricals. Ironically, of course, Donald does not have to learn to be a better loser because he is already the biggest loser in the school.)

3. "My handwriting is atrocious!" he announces to his parents at the dinner table that day. (Chap.10, p. 54)
("Atrocious" means very bad. Donald does not know what the word means, so he takes it as a compliment. His parents, unwilling to shatter his self-esteem, congratulate him on his accomplishment. His mother even gives him a gold star.)
4. Zinkoff has always been clumsy, but now they notice. (Chap. 15, p. 99)
(When Donald reaches the fourth grade, his classmates notice how messy and giggly and slow he is. They notice the gold stars that his mother glues to his shirt, stars more appropriate for a first grader. They notice everything about him, even his tiny birthmark. Now, he is an object of ridicule and scorn.)
5. Zinkoff looks up. Hobin sneers, "You're a loser. A stinkin' loser." (Chap.16, p. 106)
(The Purple team loses in Field Day because of Zinkoff's poor showing. Nearly all the team mocks him and calls him a "loser." But that night, Zinkoff takes solace from his family. He knows that he could lose a thousand races and his father and mother will never give up on him.)
6. A turkey is perfect. (Chap. 21, p. 152)
(Zinkoff cuts Field Day and visits the elderly lady on his street. He asks her for a gold star and because she does not have any, she gives him a sticker with a turkey on it. He is delighted by it. This scene again shows his open and delightful nature.)
7. I will find her, I will find her. (Chap. 24, p. 176)
(Zinkoff mistakenly thinks that little Claudia is lost. He risks his life to find her. He wanders in the sleet and snow for seven hours. He is rescued by a snow plow operator. Here, we see how Zinkoff will risk his life for others.)

8. That's what being a kid is: found, caught. (Chap. 26, p. 185)
(Spinelli suggests that kids need to know that adults will care for them, support them, rescue them. Donald Zinkoff receives this type of care and unconditional love from his parents.)
9. "You, Donald. They were looking for you." (Chap 28, p. 201)
(Donald is astonished to learn that the police cars he saw were all looking for him because he had assumed they were looking for Claudia. This shows that he is totally oblivious to his surroundings.)
10. He points, he says it: "Zinkoff." (Chap. 30, p. 218)
(For the first time since Zinkoff was labeled a "loser," another player chooses him to play on their team. This hopeful ending, the last line in the book, suggests that Donald might someday be accepted by the other children.)

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)

1. Who is Donald Zinkoff's favorite teacher? Why?
(His favorite teacher is Mr. Yalowitz, his fourth grade teacher. Mr. Yalowitz delights in Zinkoff's exuberance and good nature and treats him with great kindness and fairness.)
2. How do Zinkoff's parents treat him?
(Zinkoff's parents give him unconditional love and acceptance. Donald feels safe and loved at home.)
3. Why do the other students mock Donald?
(Donald is clumsy and not skilled at sports. He is not any better at academics. He wears clothing they consider inappropriate, such as his giraffe hat. He laughs too much, even when nothing is especially funny. Until a minor birth defect is corrected, he vomits often.)

4. Does Donald change as the novel progresses? If so, in what ways?

(He gets bigger and taller, but his basic personality remains the same.)

5. Why won't Andrew be Donald's friend when they are in middle school?

(Andrew recognizes that Donald has been labeled a loser and does not want to be associated with a social outcast. Andrew considers himself very cool—as shown by his cell phone and his name change to "Drew"—and being with Donald would damage his social standing.)

Questions 6-8 (Interpretative Level)

6. How does this novel show the conflict between the individual and society?

(Donald is in conflict with society because he does not fit. In the early part of elementary school, he is just a loser, but as he grows older, Donald becomes less than a loser—he becomes invisible, a nobody. Fortunately, perhaps, he is rarely aware of his status as an outcast, but this is likely to change as he continues to grow up.)

7. Is Donald Zinkoff really a loser?

(Students can consider him a loser because he does not fit in and has no friends. He is mocked by the students and even some of the teachers. On the other hand, he is far from a loser because he has many qualities that we admire a great deal. For instance, he is sweet, caring, and even heroic.)

8. What is the novel's theme or underlying meaning?

(The story's theme is be kind to others. Spinelli conveys the importance of the Golden Rule: "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.")

Questions 9-10 (Critical Level)

9. What do stars represent in this novel?

(Stars function as a symbol of self-esteem and happiness. Zinkoff's mother gives him gold stars to reward his achievements. Zinkoff believes these paper stars are the same as the stars in the sky. He thinks they have fallen from the sky and his mother has placed them in the freezer to chill. After Zinkoff is rescued, he steps outside to admire the stars. They make him happy.)

10. How would the novel have been different if told from the first-person point of view, through Donald's eyes?

(The novel would have conveyed the pain of Zinkoff's experience with much more immediacy. As a result, it would have been more raw and upsetting. By distancing readers from Zinkoff's feelings through the use of the third-person omniscient narrator, Spinelli allows readers some distance and a filter for Zinkoff's isolation.)

Questions 11-12 (Creative Level)

11. Write a story for the school newspaper describing the Field Day at Satterfield Elementary School.

12. Working with a small group of classmates, discuss some ways that you might have coped with Zinkoff's situation had you been in his place.

Across The Curriculum

Language Arts

1. Zinkoff believes that his mother collects fallen stars, puts them in the freezer for 45 minutes, and when they come out they are flat and shiny. Make up another charming story to explain how little silver stars are made.
2. Give a star to someone who deserves the recognition. In a brief paragraph, explain what this person has done to deserve this prize.
3. Write the teachers' notes on Donald's report cards for grades 4, 5, and 6.
4. Write a brief sequel to the novel in which you explain what has happened to Zinkoff fifteen years later.
5. Recast one chapter from Zinkoff's point of view.
6. Spinelli says that being a kid is being "found, caught." He means that kids need freedom to wander but safety and support at home. List at least three other things that kids need to grow up to be happy, productive adults.

Art/Music

1. Create a new cover for the novel. Explain how your cover art fits the novel's tone, theme, and characters.
2. Donald is given the flute because it is supposedly the easiest instrument to play. Find out if this is true. Then choose a musical instrument and demonstrate how to play it for the class.
3. Play "Pomp and Circumstance" for the class. Find out the history of the song and explain why it has become the traditional music at graduations.
4. Create a medal that the winning team on Field Day could wear.
5. Make yourself a lucky rock. Carry it with you as Zinkoff does with his lucky rock.

History/Social Studies

1. Learn who created basketball and when. As you share your findings in an oral report, explain the rules of the game.
2. List five qualities that you believe make a person popular. Then explain why most people want to be part of the "in-crowd."
3. Create a safety plan in case a small child wanders out of his or her house. Who would you call? How would you mobilize the neighborhood and rescue teams?
4. List all the clubs in your school. Choose at least two to join and justify your choices. If there aren't any clubs that you want to join, create two that interest you.

Speech/Drama

1. Working with a group of classmates, debate whether Zinkoff is a pathetic victim or an heroic winner.
2. With a partner, role-play a scene between Zinkoff and Andrew in the present, in which they explain their feelings for each other and reasons for acting as they did in high school.
3. Imagine that you are a school psychologist. Working with a partner, role-play the advice that you would give to Donald's parents about dealing with their son.
4. Working with a partner, improvise a dialogue in which Mr. Yalowitz explains what makes Zinkoff such an appealing kid.

5. Stage a Field Day for your class or grade.
6. Imagine that you have been chosen as the sixth grade valedictorian. Write and deliver a speech for graduation.

Mathematics/Science

1. Zinkoff believes that stars sometimes fall from the sky, and you can go around collecting them like acorns. Explain what stars really are.
2. Calculate how many more days, hours, and minutes of school you have left until you graduate from high school.
3. Explain the meteorological conditions that cause snow.
4. Zinkoff wanders outside in the bitter cold weather for seven hours. Explain what changes the body undergoes when it is exposed to these conditions.
5. Explain the differences between snow and sleet.

Student Involvement Activities

1. Role-play ways to get students like Donald Zinkoff accepted by other students.
2. Plan the ideal summer vacation. Include at least six weeks' of activities that you would really enjoy.
3. In your own words, state the novel's theme or message.
4. Using scenes from the novel, create a mural that shows its main events.
5. Analyze Jerry Spinelli's writing style in this novel, focusing on word choice, sentence structure, and figurative language.

Alternate Assessment

1. List examples of difficulties that Zinkoff 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 Zinkoff is sweet and kind.
3. Compose a scene in which the other kids explain how they feel about Zinkoff.
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. hoagie | A. type of sandwich |
| ___ 2. trolley | B. recovering from an illness |
| ___ 3. squint | C. inborn tendency |
| ___ 4. giddy | D. fearless |
| ___ 5. instinct | E. walk slowly; plod |
| ___ 6. denial | F. restraint |
| ___ 7. legible | G. pranks |
| ___ 8. jabbers | H. twisted |
| ___ 9. drowsy | I. good manners |
| ___ 10. intrepid | J. giggly |
| ___ 11. convalescing | K. refusal |
| ___ 12. constraint | L. terrible |
| ___ 13. klutz | M. clumsy person |
| ___ 14. litter | N. astonished |
| ___ 15. trudge | O. chatters |
| ___ 16. etiquette | P. strain to see |
| ___ 17. agape | Q. can be read easily |
| ___ 18. gnarled | R. sleepy |
| ___ 19. antics | S. type of railroad car |
| ___ 20. atrocious | T. group of newborn animals |

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. Andrew's mother | A. Polly |
| ___ 2. Lets Zinkoff on the team at the end of the book | B. Andrew |
| ___ 3. The loser | C. Donald Zinkoff |
| ___ 4. Donald's second grade teacher; she hates kids | D. Mr. Zinkoff |
| ___ 5. Donald's friend who lives next door | E. Mrs. Cherise Orwell |
| ___ 6. Donald's nickname because of his soccer skills | F. Wild Foot |
| ___ 7. The little girl on the leash | G. Mrs. Biswell |
| ___ 8. Donald's baby sister | H. Mr. Yalowitz |
| ___ 9. The teacher who likes and helps Donald | I. Bonce |
| ___ 10. A kindly postal carrier | J. Claudia |

Part II: Sentence Completion (20 points)

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

1. When Zinkoff realizes that he can run forever, he shouts ("**Zowie!**" "**Yahoo!**")
2. On the first day of school, Zinkoff wears his (**monkey, giraffe**) hat, even though his mother is upset that the other kids will mock him.
3. Miss Meeks tells the children (**how many tests they will have, how many days they will attend school**).
4. Zinkoff has terrible (**handwriting, manners**).
5. Miss Meeks tries to punish Zinkoff for his outbursts of laughter by making him wear a (**button, dunce cap**).
6. To welcome his new neighbors, Zinkoff makes them a giant (**card, cookie**).
7. Zinkoff tries to give his (**money, trophy**) to Andrew, but Andrew's mother won't let him accept the gift.
8. Zinkoff plays the (**flute, tuba**) in the school band.
9. Zinkoff's lucky stone is made of (**bubble gum, granite**).
10. The "Waiting Man" has been waiting for decades for his brother to return home from (**school, the Vietnam War**).

Comprehension Test A (Page 2)

Part III: Identification (20 points)

Briefly describe each and explain its importance in the story.

1. jabip
2. stars
3. Field Day
4. mail, such as letters
5. snow

Part IV: Essay (40 points)

Choose two and answer in complete sentences on the essay response page.

1. Compare and contrast Donald Zinkoff and Hector Binns. Explain how they are the same and different.
2. Which character in *Loser* do you find most admirable? Why?
3. Analyze what role Mr. Yalowitz plays in Donald's life.
4. What is the author's message about individuality and conformity 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. One of Zinkoff's teachers writes on the back of Zinkoff's report card, "Donald is one happy child! And he certainly does love school!"
- ___ 2. Zinkoff drops the cake that his mother has baked for the family but they all eat it anyway.
- ___ 3. When Andrew's soccer team wins, he tries to give his trophy to Zinkoff, but Zinkoff's father won't let him take it.
- ___ 4. Zinkoff forces himself to confront the Furnace Monster in the basement.
- ___ 5. When Zinkoff reaches the fourth grade, his classmates decide that he is a loser.
- ___ 6. Despite his clumsiness and poor social skills, Zinkoff is remarkably good-natured about all the ostracizing and taunting that he experiences.
- ___ 7. On a class test, Zinkoff writes that Claudia is his best friend.
- ___ 8. Hector Binns wants to be Zinkoff's friend very much. Binns always invites Zinkoff over for dinner and sleep-overs.
- ___ 9. At the elementary school graduation, Zinkoff's sister Polly cheers for Zinkoff, delighting him.
- ___ 10. Zinkoff spends a miserable summer until he meets up with Andrew, and they become close friends again.

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. Gary Hobin | C. Waiting Man | E. Mrs. Cherise Orwell | G. Mr. Yalowitz | I. Polly |
| B. Hector Binns | D. Mrs. Shakenfelder | F. Donald | H. Andrew | J. Mrs. Zinkoff |

- ___ 1. The neighbor who stands by the window looking for his brother, a soldier
- ___ 2. Andrew's mother
- ___ 3. The young man who snubs Zinkoff in Monroe Middle School
- ___ 4. The woman who gives Zinkoff gold stars for being a good boy
- ___ 5. Zinkoff's fifth grade teacher who asks him to name his best friend
- ___ 6. The "loser" of the title
- ___ 7. The young man who collects his earwax to use to make a candle
- ___ 8. Zinkoff's baby sister
- ___ 9. The star athlete who refuses to allow Zinkoff on his team
- ___ 10. The teacher who likes Zinkoff and seats him in the first row

Comprehension Test B (Page 2)

Part III: Motivation (20 points)

Complete each phrase below with a reason or justification.

1. The bully doesn't take Zinkoff's giraffe hat after all because
2. Miss Meeks tries to punish Zinkoff for his outbursts of laughter with a button that says "I know I can behave," but stops the punishment because
3. Until he is in the fourth grade, Zinkoff vomits a lot because
4. Zinkoff gets off on the wrong foot with his teacher Mrs. Biswell because
5. Zinkoff adores his fourth grade teacher, Mr. Yalowitz, because
6. Gary Hobin, a class leader, does not want Zinkoff on his Field Day team because
7. In the sixth grade, Zinkoff cuts school for the first and only time because
8. During the snow storm, Zinkoff stays out for seven hours because
9. After the snow storm, Zinkoff's relatives come to the house because
10. At the end of the novel, the kids on the playground allow Zinkoff to play with them because

Part IV: Essay (40 points)

Choose two and answer in complete sentences on the essay response page.

1. Explain why Donald is considered a "loser."
2. Analyze what you learned about acceptance and individuality from this novel.
3. Describe how Donald's parents treat him.
4. Trace the novel's plot. Include the rising action, climax, and resolution.

Answer Key

Vocabulary

- | | | | |
|------|-------|-------|-------|
| 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. "Yahoo!" | 6. cookie |
| 2. giraffe | 7. trophy |
| 3. how many days they will attend school | 8. flute |
| 4. handwriting | 9. bubble gum |
| 5. button | 10. the Vietnam War |

Part III: Identification (20 points)

- "Jabip" is the silly word that sends Zinkoff into gales of laughter. It demonstrates his joyful, uninhibited behavior.
- Zinkoff loves stars, both the real ones and the little gold ones that his mother sticks on his shirt as a reward. This shows his delight in simple things as well as nature's beauty.
- Zinkoff is horribly humiliated during the first Field Day. As a result, he does not attend the second one. This shows the importance of athletic achievement to many people, especially many children. It is a key way that children can or can not fit in with their peers.
- Zinkoff loves going on a mock Take Your Kid to Work Day with his father, where they deliver fake mail. He delights in the routine and in imagining the lives of all the people on his father's route.
- Snow is another thing that Zinkoff adores. He nearly freezes to death while searching for little Claudia in the snowing and sleet, but that does not dampen his enthusiasm for snow.

Part IV: Essay (40 points)

Answers will vary.

COMPREHENSION TEST B

Part I: True/False (20 points)

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

Part II: Matching (20 points)

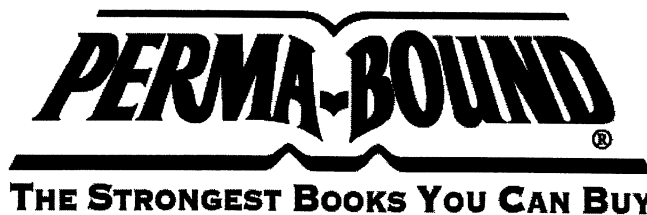
- | | |
|------|-------|
| 1. C | 6. F |
| 2. E | 7. B |
| 3. H | 8. I |
| 4. J | 9. A |
| 5. D | 10. G |

Part III: Motivation (20 points)

- it's only fun to take the hat if it upsets the child, and Zinkoff hands over his hat happily
- it does not work. Zinkoff likes wearing the button
- a valve in his stomach does not work properly; it is upside down
- she does not like children and has no patience with Zinkoff's poor skills
- Mr. Yalowitz is kind, supportive, and humorous. The teacher has patience with Zinkoff
- Zinkoff is such a poor athlete and will seriously affect their chances of winning
- he wants to avoid having to be in Field Day
- he thinks Claudia is lost and he is looking for her
- they want to congratulate him on his heroic search and make sure that he is OK
- they do not know what else to do with him because he won't go away

Part IV: Essay (40 points)

Answers will vary.



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