

On My Honor

by Marion Dane Bauer

Classroom Favorites



Teacher's Guide by Kathleen Greenholdt

A Perma-Bound Production

Synopsis

Joel Bates and Tony Zabrinky have been best friends since they were six months old. Joel often wishes that Tony was his brother, rather than four-year-old Bobby. Now, it is the summer of their twelfth year, and Tony is in search of adventure.

The boys ask Mr. Bates (Joel's father) for permission to ride their bikes to Starved Rock State Park, a well-known tourist attraction near Chicago, Illinois. Tony has dared Joel to climb the treacherous bluffs in the park, but Joel does not want to go. Anyway, he is certain that his father will never agree to the long distance trek in the first place.

But, to Joel's surprise and lament, Mr. Bates grants permission. However, he also tells Joel that the boy is "on his honor" to go nowhere but the park.

The boys then leave on their bicycles, but Tony, who is more reckless than Joel, stops at the Vermillion River and decides to go for a swim. Joel warns Tony that the river is dangerous, but he pays no mind. Instead, he eventually coaxes Joel into the river as well.

Tony soon gets bored and decides to leave the river and ride to the state park after all. However, Joel dares him to swim out to the sandbar in the river, thinking this feat would be safer than climbing the bluffs at the park.

Tony takes the dare, and the boys begin to swim to the sandbar. When Joel reaches it, though, Tony is nowhere in sight, and Joel searches for him frantically. After seeking the futile help of two teenagers, it becomes evident that Tony has drowned.

Filled with grief and guilt, Joel does not go to the police. Instead, he first decides to run away, then returns home with his secret.

Unable to face either his parents or the Zabrinkys, Joel says that he became tired during the ride and left Tony to ride on to Starved Rock. But, his guilt overcomes him as he completes his daily paper route with his little brother.

Later that night, the police arrive and Joel is coaxed into telling the truth because he "is an honorable boy." Joel blames his father to displace his guilt.

After Joel goes to bed, his father comes to comfort him. Mr. Bates takes some of the blame, because he allowed the boys to ride to the park. However, Joel tells his father that it was his own fault. Mr. Bates explains that he, Joel and Tony all made choices that

day, and only Tony would not have to live with his. Painfully, Joel accepts his guilt and begins to try to live with his choice.

Biographical Sketch

Marion Dane Bauer was born November 20, 1938 in Oglesby, Illinois, a community near Chicago.

In 1962, she received a B.A. from the University of Oklahoma, and subsequently became a high school and college instructor in English and writing.

She has written several books for children and adults, including *Foster Child*, which was named a Golden Kite Honor Book by the Society of Children's Book Writers in 1979. Other published works for children are *Shelter from the Wind* (1976) and *Tangled Butterfly* (1980).

Currently, Ms. Bauer lives in Minnetonka, Minnesota. She is married and has two children.

Critic's Corner

On My Honor is a Newbery Honor Book. Annually, the Children's Librarians Section of the American Library Association presents this award to selected American authors. This book has also been chosen as an ALA Best Book for Young Adults, and it received a starred review from *Booklist*.

General Objectives

1. To understand the meaning of "honor"
2. To explore the concepts of good and bad judgment
3. To learn the importance of taking responsibility for one's decisions
4. To understand the literary function of "fatal character flaws"
5. To examine human struggles with conscience
6. To explore the natural settings in the story
7. To learn the importance of playing safely

Specific Objectives

1. To understand the nature of the boys' friendship
2. To see Tony's character flaws

3. To recognize Joel's character flaws and strengths
4. To explore Joel's decision-making processes and conscience

COMPREHENSION STUDY

Discussion Questions

Literal (Questions 1-3):

1. Describe Joel's personality strengths and how he uses them in the story.
(Joel is sensible and tries to talk Tony out of his crazy schemes. He is also honest, and his conscience makes him tell the truth in the end. Finally, he is compassionate and watches over Tony and, later, Bobby.)
2. What are the "fatal character flaws" of Joel and Tony?
(Joel knows no limits to loyalty. He discards his good judgment whenever Tony rejects it. And, Tony is just plain reckless. Both boys lose in the end due to these flaws — Joel loses a friend, and Tony loses his life.)
3. Describe the differences between the Zabrinisky family and the Bates family.
(Tony lives in a single-income family with many children. His mother is very tired, but loving. Tony is the youngest child, and he receives hand-me-downs, such as his bicycle, from older siblings. Joel and his younger brother are the only two children in the Bates family. Joel's parents both work. Bobby looks up to Joel as a role model.)

Interpretive (Questions 4-7):

4. How does Joel feel about the death of Tony?
(He feels guilty evidenced by: his lies, his tumultuous conscience, his attempts to justify the incident, and his placement of blame on his father and Tony. Joel also feels empty because he has lost his best friend.)
5. How does Joel's attitude toward his brother change as the story progresses?
(In the beginning, Joel views his brother as a pest and even wishes that Tony could replace Bobby. After Tony dies, however, Joel decides to protect and care for Bobby. In a way, Bobby fills a void left by Tony.)
6. How does Joel try to escape from his role in Tony's death?
(He blames Tony and Mr. Bates. He invents a story that excludes his participation in Tony's death. He locks himself in the house. He considers running away. He completes his paper route as if it is a normal day. He does not go to the police.)
7. Why is Joel afraid to tell the truth?
(He is afraid that his father and Mr. Zabrinisky will be angry. He thinks that he will get in trouble with the police. He doesn't want to admit guilt and feel blame. He believes that his father will say that he betrayed his honor.)

Critical (Questions 8-10):

8. Why doesn't Mr. Bates take Joel's pain away?
(He wants Joel to take responsibility for his own decisions.)
9. What does Mr. Bates mean when he tells the police that Joel is "an honorable boy"?

(He means that Joel will tell the truth and admit mistakes. He means that Joel always does what is right and takes responsibility for his actions.)

10. Why can't Joel remove the river's stench from his body?
(The smell is imaginary. Even after Joel takes a shower, the smell remains. It is a manifestation of Joel's guilty conscience.)

Creative:

11. How will Joel learn to live with his friend's death?
(Bobby will probably help fill the void left by Tony. Joel may learn to rely on his own judgment more and choose less reckless friends.)

Meaning Study

The following words, phrases and passages help form the setting of the story. Consult the book and explain the meaning of each.

1. "You know we're not allowed to swim in the Vermillion. Nobody is. It's dangerous . . . sink holes and currents. Whirlpools, sometimes! Besides being dirty." (p.16)
(Some bodies of water are so treacherous that the public is prohibited from using them for recreational purposes. Discuss "sink holes," "currents" and "whirlpools." Also discuss what makes a river "dirty" (examples: chemicals, sewage, factory waste).)
2. "Old Man River is the Mississippi." (p.14)
("Old Man River" is a nickname for the Mississippi River. Discuss America's biggest and most famous river. Discuss its role in U.S. history and culture. Also mention the musical Showboat, which features the song Old Man River.)
3. poison ivy (p.17)
(Joel thinks that Tony romped through poison ivy on the hill by the river. Poison ivy is identified by its three green leaves, with a purple spot between them at the base of the stem. When touched, the plant causes an allergic reaction in many people, exhibited in the form of a spreading skin rash.)
4. sandbar (p.23)
(Joel dares Tony to swim out to the sandbar in the river. A "sandbar" is a ridge of sand in the water that has been built up by currents.)
5. "silty river bottom" (p.32)
(Silt is a thin layer of tiny rock particles. It is carried and deposited by water currents.)
6. "Starved Rock bluff" (p.48)
(A bluff is a very high, steep bank or cliff. Indians were trapped and starved to death on this particular bluff. The Indians chose it as a hiding place because it was too treacherous for many people to climb. Starved Rock State Park is a well-known tourist attraction in northern Illinois.)
7. "The water foamed and eddied around the sandbar as if it were in more of a hurry there than other places." (p.28)
(Water that "eddies" is that which moves in the opposite direction of the regular current. A whirlpool is an example of water that moves in a circular direction opposite of the current.)

8. "About five minutes, I'd say." (p.42)
(Discuss drowning and the length of time it takes for a person to drown. At under five minutes, there is no room for horseplay in the water. It is important to learn to swim.)

Student Activities

1. Write a poem about a good friend and describe what makes your friendship special.
2. Clip articles from a newspaper or magazine that describe real-life acts of honor and dishonor. Discuss these articles with the rest of the class.
3. With three or four other students, create a fifteen-minute skit about being "on your honor." Set the skit at home, in school or at the store.
4. Write a short essay about a famous river from anywhere around the world (examples: Amazon, Seine, Thames). Discuss the river's function as a natural element, as the subject of historical legends and as an industrial or recreational resource. Then, using colored pencils, illustrate your report with a picture of the river.

ON MY HONOR ANSWER KEY

Vocabulary (30 points)

- | | | |
|------|-------|-------|
| 1. F | 6. O | 11. M |
| 2. G | 7. J | 12. I |
| 3. B | 8. D | 13. H |
| 4. K | 9. C | 14. L |
| 5. N | 10. A | 15. E |

True or False (30 points)

- | | | |
|------|-------|-------|
| 1. F | 6. T | 11. T |
| 2. F | 7. T | 12. T |
| 3. F | 8. T | 13. T |
| 4. T | 9. T | 14. T |
| 5. F | 10. F | 15. T |

Fill in the Blank (10 points)

1. Vermillion
2. Illinois
3. park
4. Old Man River
5. five

Essay Questions (30 points)

Answers will vary.

ON MY HONOR TEST

Part I Vocabulary (30 points)

For each underlined word, find a definition from the list below. Write the letter of the definition in the correct space.

- _____ 1. "Climb the Starved Rock bluffs? You've gotta be kidding!"
- _____ 2. The eddying whirlpool moved Joel in the river.
- _____ 3. The river had dangerous sink holes in it.
- _____ 4. For a moment they stood glowering at one another . . . their fists raised.
- _____ 5. Joel's father studied his face minutely, looking for clues to Tony's whereabouts.
- _____ 6. The traffic on the road was sparse on weekdays.
- _____ 7. "No," Joel said, shaking his head vigorously.
- _____ 8. Joel was skeptical about whether there were very many people anxious to buy worm mash.
- _____ 9. It sucked at him, grinding him against the silty river bottom.
- _____ 10. The currents in the river were both slow and fast.
- _____ 11. Joel held his muscles rigid and pretended to be asleep.
- _____ 12. "Will you stay?" he asked, reaching a hand out tentatively to touch his father's knee.
- _____ 13. ". . . the wall of trees nearly obscuring the water?"
- _____ 14. ". . . his eyes open and smarting in the murky water?"
- _____ 15. "They're okay, Joel," he said, laying them down reverently as though they were jewels.

A. parts of water moving in the same, continuous direction

H. hiding

B. deep holes of water

I. without being sure

C. covered with loose, tiny rock particles

J. forcefully

D. doubtful

K. staring with anger

E. with great honor and respect

L. hurting

M. stiff

F. high, steep banks

N. with attention to each detail

G. moving in the opposite direction of the flow

O. of few and scattered amounts

True or False (30 points)

Decide if each statement is true or false, and mark **T** or **F** in the blank.

- _____ 1. Joel wanted his father's permission to ride to Starved Rock.
- _____ 2. Tony was an only child.
- _____ 3. Tony's bike was brand new.
- _____ 4. Joel thought that Tony knew how to swim.
- _____ 5. Joel once saw Mr. Zabrinky hit Tony with a belt.
- _____ 6. Chemicals and sewage were in the river.
- _____ 7. Tony did not have permission to go to the park.
- _____ 8. When the police arrived, Joel thought that the teenage boy had reported him.
- _____ 9. Mr. Zabrinky began to sob when Joel told the true story.
- _____ 10. Joel had permission to climb the bluffs.
- _____ 11. Bobby wanted to be like Joel.
- _____ 12. Tony said that he wanted to try out for the swim team.
- _____ 13. Joel began to run away to Starved Rock after Tony drowned.
- _____ 14. Joel's own guilty conscience made him tell the truth.
- _____ 15. The river stench on Joel's body was a sign of guilt.

Fill in the Blank (10 points)

Fill in each blank with the correct word or phrase missing from the sentence.

- 1. Tony and Joel went swimming in the _____ River.
- 2. This story is set in the state of _____.
- 3. Starved Rock is a well-known state _____.
- 4. The Mississippi River is also known as _____.
- 5. It takes less than _____ minutes for a person to drown.

Essay Questions (30 points)

Answer each question in paragraph form.

1. In what ways does Joel's conscience affect him?

2. Explain why Joel and Tony are friends.

TEACHER'S NOTES



THE STRONGEST BOOKS YOU CAN BUY

PERMA-BOUND BOOKS • 617 East Vandalia Road • Jacksonville, Illinois 62650
Toll Free 1-800-637-6581 • Fax 1-800-551-1169
E-mail: books@perma-bound.com

PERMA-BOUND CANADA • Box 517, Station A • Willowdale, Ontario M2N 5T1
Toll Free 1-800-461-1999 • Fax 1-888-250-3811
E-mail: perma-bound.ca@sympatico.ca

VISIT OUR WEB SITE: <http://www.perma-bound.com>