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The Library Card Discussion Guide

The Book

In this collection of four strange, unusual original stories, the lives of four young people are irrevocably changed when a blue library card mysteriously appears in each of their lives. Mongoose turns away from a life of crime and vandalism when he discovers a world of startling facts and figures in books he never knew existed before. For Brenda, the library card helps her overcome her addiction to TV during the Great TV Turn Off Week. Sonseray, a young homeless boy, finds solace from his life of loneliness when he attends a story time at the library. And April Mendez, feeling isolated in her new home in the country and desperate to return to New York City, has her life changed when the local bookmobile is "hijacked" by a mysterious stranger. As the characters discover the world of books, they discover truths about themselves and others around them, truths that open up new choices in their lives.

Theme

Libraries provide access to books and the myriad of worlds contained in books. Spinelli explores the theme that with knowledge and imagination anything is possible — books can change lives in mysterious and powerful ways. Describe the knowledge that is made available, or the world that is opened up, to each of the four central characters in the stories? How does this new knowledge or this new world affect their lives immediately? How would you say their lives will be affected in the longer-term future?

There seems to be a strong element of magic in each of these stories. Discuss whether you think Spinelli intends us to take these stories at face value, or whether their meaning is as much symbolic as literal. What do you think is the symbolism of the bookmobile and the strange girl in the story about April Mendez? What did this story mean to you?

Conflict

Each character faces a different challenge in his or her life. Mongoose has to confront Weasel's crime and vandalism and make choices about his own loyalties. Brenda must overcome her dependence on television and lead her own life. Sonseray has to adapt to new surroundings when he and his uncle move from town to town. For April Mendez, learning to adjust to a new home far from her familiar surroundings is a battle. What all characters share, however, is the need for acceptance and the need to connect to other people. What role do you think the library card plays in the search for acceptance and understanding for each of them?

Setting

The four main characters from the novel live in different places and under different circumstances. Construct a visual representation of your mental picture of the physical setting for one of the four characters. For example, you might draw a map which would indicate the neighborhood where Weasel and Mongoose live and play. Is the setting for some of the stories more integral to the plot than the setting for others? If so, discuss why you think so.

Characterization

Plot each of the main characters on the following scales. Plot each character twice—one time for how the character seemed at the beginning of the story and a second time for how the character seemed at the end of the story. What caused the changes in the characters? Which character do you think changed the most?

Angry-----Content
Unlucky-----Lucky
Stupid-----Smart
Sad-----Happy
Weak-----Strong
Bad-----Good

Discuss

1. Other than the library card, what things unite all four stories?
2. In each of the stories, there is an important symbol. For Mongoose, the symbol is the cicada. Mongoose even goes so far as painting the cicada on the facade of a building. Why is the cicada so important to Mongoose? What symbols are present in each of the other three stories?
3. This book is divided into four stories; these stories are, in turn, divided into sections themselves. What effect does Spinelli achieve by using these chapter-like divisions within each story?
4. Why are the library cards in the stories blank?
5. Mongoose's entrance into the world of possibilities at the library awakens a hunger in him. "His hunger was to feed not only himself but someone else, to both take and give, to share" (p. 23). What is Spinelli telling the reader about the nature of learning in this statement?
6. Call the public library in your area. Find out what percentage of the population in the library's catchment area have a library card. How does this percentage compare with the national average? Find out how many people who have a library card actually use it on a regular basis. What conclusions do you draw from this information? What are the reasons why some people never use the library? Since only some people use the library, do you think users should pay fees to run the library system, just as they pay tolls to drive on certain roads? Or should libraries continue to be funded out of tax dollars which means that everyone has to pay for them?

Other books to compare and contrast

Last Book in the Universe by Rodman Philbrick

Max the Mighty by Rodman Philbrick *Freak the Mighty* by Rodman Philbrick *Memoirs of a Book Bat* by Kathryn Lasky

Other books by the author

My Daddy and Me

Stargirl

Crash

Wringer

Maniac Magee

Knots on my Yo-Yo String

Blue Ribbon Blues

Space Station Seventh Grade

Who Put that Hair in my Toothbrush?

There's a Girl in my Hammerlock
School Daze series
Fourth Grade Rats

About the author

Jerry Spinelli, a one-time dreamer of being a cowboy (at least that's what he wanted to be until he was about ten years old) and a shortstop hopeful for the New York Yankees (well, hopeful in his own mind) grew up to become an editor of a magazine, father of seven children, and eventually an author of dozens of books for children and young adults. His books have captured the hearts, smiles, and laughter of readers everywhere and have garnered top honors, including the Newbery Medal for *Maniac Magee* and a Newbery Honor for *Wringer*. He lives in Pennsylvania with his wife, author Eileen Spinelli.

In the Teacher Store

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Discussion guide written by Kylene Beers and Teri Lesesne, both of whom teach children's and young adult literature at Sam Houston State University, Huntsville, Texas.

- Subjects:

Changes and New Experiences, Discovery and Learning, Compare and Contrast, Plot, Character, Setting, Story Elements, Reading Response, Tolerance and Acceptance

- Skills:

Compare and Contrast, Plot, Character and Setting, Theme