

Book Review as Argument: Putting *The Pigman* on Trial

Ladies and gentlemen of the jury: I intend to prove that, despite being a little dated, *The Pigman* by Paul Zindel is a very good young adult novel that discusses many teenage issues in a realistic voice that manages to be “literary” without being dull. Narrated by two first-person protagonists, John Conlan and Lorraine Jensen, the novel is a “memorial epic” that recounts the development of their friendship with Mr. Pignati, a desperately lonely older man whom they nickname the Pigman. The main issue addressed in the novel is how teenagers learn to accept responsibility for their actions, which can involve difficult truths and hard lessons.

The only real problem with the novel is the setting. New York in 1968 is not a world that today’s plugged-in teenagers understand. It is a world of beehive hairdos and zoos that allow you to feed the animals. It is a world without cell phones and caller ID, a world before iPods and computers. Ten dollars is considered a great deal of money and school fees are only two dollars. Pay phones are everywhere, and all the phone numbers include letters! John and Lorraine write their story on a typewriter in the school library instead of on a computer in the media center. But even though it is a world modern teenagers may not relate to, the strong characterization and engaging story make up for the parts of the book that might be outdated.

“I hate school, but then again most of the time I hate everything,” says John in the first paragraph of the book. We immediately know that we are dealing with a teenage troublemaker who covers his insecurities with tough talk and outrageous behavior. Known as the “bathroom bomber,” John is probably not the most well-liked kid at school, particularly by the principal. He writes on desks, tells outrageous lies, and doesn’t do much homework, but when he finds a friend in practical (and sometimes paranoid) Lorraine, some of his outrageous behavior is tamed. John’s narration of his outrageous antics and Lorraine’s sympathetic explanations of all the reasons for them are voiced in very realistic teenage tones that run thick with hyperbole and sarcasm. It is clear that Paul Zindel, the author of this novel, understands teenagers – how they think, how they talk, and how they often protect fragile emotions with distractions. It is not hard to see why many teenagers relate to this book: Not only was it written with a young adult audience in mind, but it is also written in their language. Even though this is a work of fiction, the narrators seem like real people, and part of that reality is the tension and awkwardness in their relationship with one another.

“...suddenly we had become slightly awkward in front of each other,” says Lorraine after she and John dressed up in Mr. Pignati’s clothes, drank wine from long-stemmed glasses, and kissed. This brand of awkwardness is happening in every school all the time: two people who clearly like each other, not quite sure how serious their relationship is, and not quite sure what the other is thinking. We see ourselves in the relationship between John and Lorraine, and we recognize that many teenage friendships cover up the romantic feelings we may be afraid to express. One of the great questions of growing up is how do friends become more than friends. *The Pigman* addresses these questions and other teen issues in an honest way, without preaching or talking down to the audience. It is not hard to see why the book resonates with teenagers. It addresses the issues they deal with every day.

Another reason this book is effective and engaging is because it is fun. “Help me!” John scrawls on a desk in the library, “A rotten science teacher has given me a drug to change me into a teeny weeny mosquito....” Even though his behavior is often delinquent, John’s enthusiasm, sarcasm, and humor is refreshing. He swears like this -- @\$% -- saying that this is a good idea because it leaves it to the reader’s imagination and most people have a worse imagination than he has. Not only does this method eliminate any profanity from the book, but it capitalizes on the readers’ sense of humor. Whenever we see @\$%, we naturally start counting letters and smiling to ourselves. Then there are Mr. Pignati’s memory games and personality profiles, which he shares with John and Lorraine as their friendship grows. Not only do we learn about the characters, but we get to play along as well, maybe learning something about ourselves in the process. Regardless of what you think of the plot, these little gimmicks sprinkled throughout the book make it entertaining and fun.

Finally, *The Pigman* is a rare gem, in young adult literature because it manages to be literary without being boring. The story is rich in characterization, theme, motifs, foreshadowing, and all those other literary elements that English teachers love so much. Maybe that is why it works so well as an in-class novel: students are able to enjoy the story as well as appreciate the literary elements, which they often cannot do with books that are assigned in class. (Can anyone say Charles Dickens?) Although Lorraine usually serves as John’s “straight man” and the moral conscience of the story, all the literary elements come together in John’s final lines: “Baboons. Baboons. They build their own cages, we could almost hear the Pigman whisper as he took his children with him.” In any other place, a line like this would probably just make kids say, “Huh?!” But after reading about Mr. Pignati’s lonely friendship with a baboon named Bobo who lives in the zoo, a trip to the pet store where three monkeys in a cage remind Lorraine of the three main characters, and all the times John and Lorraine have pretended to be Mr. Pignati’s kids, it makes perfect sense. Even the dullest and least literary reader can appreciate the symbolism in these poetic final lines. For many students, *The Pigman* is the first novel they have read where they felt like they were reading “real literature.” It is more than just a plot. There are thoughtful digressions about big issues like death and friendship, rich characterizations of people we love and hate, some action, a little adventure, lots of exotic food, and even a fight.

In a world when many students can’t make it through the first chapter of *The Hunger Games* because all the background information is so “boring” and “confusing,” *The Pigman* stands as an example of how good literature can be found in simple stories about friendship and doesn’t have to involve vampires or magic wands. It is a very good young-adult novel that has stood the test of time because it respects how teenagers think and does not talk down to its audience. I highly recommend it.