

A GUIDE TO Maniac Magee

Jerry Spinelli

. . . [T]he history of a kid is one part fact, two parts legend, and three parts snowball. And if you want to know what it was like when Maniac Magee roamed these parts, well, just run your hand under your movie seat and be very, very careful not to let the facts get mixed up with the truth.

THE NOVEL AT A GLANCE

Maniac Magee is a novel that combines social commentary with elements of folk tales and legends to address the issues of homelessness and racism.

Setting: The recent past, northeastern Pennsylvania.

Protagonist: Maniac Magee, a twelve-year-old homeless orphan with remarkable powers who brings racially divided communities together.

Conflicts: The plot is driven by the central internal conflict within Maniac, who longs for a home but fears that he brings tragedy to everyone he lives with. Other important issues are the external social conflict between the black community, who live on one side of town, and the white community, who live on the other; the external personal conflict between Maniac Magee and John McNab and his white Cobras; and the external personal conflict between Maniac and Mars Bar Thompson and his black gang.

Resolution: Maniac Magee finally gets members of the black and the white communities into each other's neighborhood, defusing tensions between the two sides. Maniac comes to accept that he has not brought about the deaths of people he has loved and finds a home for himself in the black community.

Themes: Human needs and emotions transcend racial and cultural differences; different races must learn to live together; everyone needs a home and a family of some kind.

SPECIAL CONSIDERATIONS

The novel should pose no problems for students reading at the middle school level. *Maniac Magee* offers a sometimes funny, sometimes poetic view of homelessness and racial tensions. Maniac's legendary exploits

add humor and color to the novel and establish him as a larger-than-life hero who rises above ordinary human pettiness.

BACKGROUND

Geographic Locations. The Schuylkill (pronounced "skool' kil") River runs through the city of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Although Two Mills, the novel's principal setting, is not a real town, a number of places mentioned in the novel are real cities in Pennsylvania: Bridgeport, Hollidaysburg, Conshohocken, Worcester, Plymouth, and East and West Norriton.

MAIN CHARACTERS (IN ORDER OF APPEARANCE)

Jeffrey Lionel Magee (Maniac), a homeless boy about twelve years old; orphaned in a freak accident, he often sleeps at the zoo and runs all over the town of Two Mills; he has remarkable powers.

Amanda Beale, an African American girl about Maniac's age who befriends him and brings him to her home.

Giant John McNab, a twelve-year-old boy who lives in the white West End of Two Mills; huge for his age; a legendary baseball pitcher.

Mars Bar Thompson, an African American boy about Maniac's age who is powerful in the black East End but doesn't dare go into the white West End.

Mrs. Beale, Amanda's mother; becomes a second mother to Maniac.

Hester and Lester Beale, Amanda's four-year-old sister and three-year-old brother; they adore Maniac.

Earl Grayson, an elderly white ex-baseball player who finds Maniac and helps him set up a home in the baseball equipment room.

Russell and Piper McNab, John McNab's pesky little brothers; they idolize Maniac.

PLOT

Part I

Chapters 1–2. We meet the central **character** and discover his main **internal conflict**—his longing for a home. Legends abound regarding Maniac Magee, but just who is he? He starts out as Jeffrey Lionel Magee, orphaned at three when his parents are killed in a freak accident in which their trolley plunges into a river. Jeffrey goes to live with his nearest relatives, a miserable aunt and uncle. At about eleven, he runs away from their unhappy home. He runs for a year, covering two hundred miles and ending up in the town of Two Mills, the novel's main **setting**, just across the Schuylkill River from his old home.

Chapters 3–6. In Two Mills, Jeffrey meets Amanda Beale, a main **character**, hauling a suitcase filled with her beloved books on her way to school. Amanda, who is black, is startled to see a white boy in the East End; reluctantly, she lends him the book he begs for. Later that day, Jeffrey impresses high school football players by intercepting and punting a ball while holding his book in one hand. Then he goes to the white West End and rescues a terrorized boy from the yard of the infamous child-hating Finsterwald. Still later, uninvited, Jeffrey has dinner with the large Pickwell family, in a scene suggesting the **theme** of the need for home and family.

Chapters 7–9. Still in the West End, Jeffrey successfully hits a number of pitches—including a frog—thrown by the conceited strikeout king, John McNab, another major **character** and a source of **conflict** in the novel. People start calling Jeffrey Maniac because they think he's crazy. At night he sleeps in the deer shed at the zoo. As revenge for the frogball hit, McNab and his Cobra gang chase Jeffrey until he crosses Hector Street, which divides the white West End from the black East End, an important **setting** detail.

Chapters 10–12. Now in the East End, Maniac decides to return Amanda's book. Mars Bar Thompson, a powerful black kid and another major **character**, tries to pick a fight and grabs the book. The relationship between Maniac and Mars Bar will develop both the **conflict** involving racial tensions and the **theme** of the need for racial understanding. A woman intervenes, advising Maniac to go back to his own neighborhood. But Maniac wanders around the East End and again runs into Mars Bar, who tears Amanda's book. This time, Amanda appears and yells at Mars Bar. Then she takes Maniac home, where he meets her family, stays for dinner, and spends the night.

Chapters 13–15. Maniac fits right into the Beale family, helping Mrs. Beale with chores and caring for little Hester and Lester Beale. As time passes, Maniac is blissful; for the first time he feels part of a happy home. In these chapters the **themes** of the need for family and of the common needs of people of all races are developed.

Chapters 16–17. Complications develop in the plot. Maniac discovers to his surprise that a white kid living with a black family is a source of **conflict** for some people in the East End. An old man harangues him: "Black is black! White is white!" Later Maniac sees Mrs. Beale scrubbing graffiti reading "[F]ISHBELLY GO HOME" off her house.

Chapters 18–21. Amanda tries to dissuade Maniac from moving back to the zoo. She advises him to become a local hero instead by untying Cobble's Knot, a huge string knot that a local grocer created years before in a contest. Maniac does, but the ploy doesn't work. Another **complication** interferes: Maniac learns that someone has ripped up Amanda's prize book—the *A* volume of the encyclopedia. Believing that this vandalism occurred because of him, Maniac leaves the Beales and heads toward the West End but runs into Giant McNab and his Cobras. So with East Enders on one side of him and West Enders on the other—a **symbol** of the racial **conflict** and of his refusal to take sides—Maniac Magee walks right down the middle of Hector Street and out of town.

Part II

Chapters 22–24. The **setting** shifts. Maniac moves back to the zoo, sleeping in the buffalo pen. One day he falls off a fence and loses consciousness. A new major **character**, Grayson, an old man who works in the park, takes the boy to the baseball equipment room in the abandoned band shell, feeds him, and hears some of his story. Then he takes Maniac to his own home, the YMCA, and gets Maniac a shower and some worn old clothes. Maniac tells Grayson, who is white, about his pleasant life among the black people of the East End, developing the **theme** of racial understanding. Maniac learns that Grayson was once a baseball player.

Chapters 25–28. Thanks to Grayson, Maniac makes a comfortable home in the equipment room. The two become companions, and Grayson tells the story of his baseball career: how he never made it out of the minor leagues but once managed to strike out the great Willie Mays. When he sees the collection of books Maniac has amassed in his room, Grayson asks Maniac to teach him to read. After a few weeks, Grayson can read "The Little Engine That Could." The **theme** of home and family is further explored as Maniac fixes Grayson dinner and then invites the old man to stay with him.

Chapters 29–32. Maniac and Grayson share a wonderful Thanksgiving. Maniac paints an address on the door of the equipment room, a **symbol** of his yearning for a home. He and Grayson celebrate Christmas, decorating the room and a live tree in the park. Maniac gives Grayson some clothes and a book he made about Grayson's striking out Willie Mays; Grayson gives Maniac his beloved baseball glove. But the old man suddenly dies five days later; one morning, he just doesn't wake up. After barely making it through the grim, institutional funeral, Maniac once again takes off running.

Part III

Chapters 33–34. The **atmosphere** of the novel becomes grim. Maniac spends a horrible January drifting from town to town in the bitter cold, sometimes crossing the bridge where his parents died. He sleeps in the buffalo pen or in abandoned shelters. When he runs out of food, he moves to one of the cabins used by Washington’s soldiers at Valley Forge. He is ready to die. However, after two nights, he hears voices and discovers two little boys running away from Two Mills. When they all go back to town, Maniac discovers that the runaways are none other than Giant John McNab’s little brothers.

Chapters 35–37. Maniac wins John McNab over by fibbing to the little boys to save the Giant’s reputation as strikeout king. Maniac moves into the McNab house—a new **setting**—a dirty, unpleasant hovel presided over by the uncaring, bigoted George McNab. Maniac desperately misses the Beales and Grayson. In a series of entertaining **complications**, Maniac keeps himself sane by trying to coax little Russell and Piper McNab to school. He bribes them with exploits that add to his legend: going to the dreaded Finsterwald’s house, walking through a rat-infested dump, kissing the zoo’s baby buffalo. Finally, the two little McNabs dare him to go into the East End.

Chapters 38–39. Marching into the East End, Maniac meets up with Mars Bar Thompson. Mars challenges him to a race, which Maniac wins, running backward. This victory points to the **resolution** of their **conflict**. Then suddenly he hears Hester and Lester Beale calling him and ducks into their house. But afraid of reprisals against the Beales, he leaves them the next morning and crosses back into the West End. Russell and Piper McNab are astounded to see him come back alive. The three go to the McNabs’, where George McNab has begun to build a pillbox, a reinforced bunker armed with guns. The pillbox is a **symbol** of the poisonous racial **conflict** that the McNabs are eagerly anticipating—a war in which East Enders will attack West Enders.

Chapters 40–42. Spring comes, and Maniac continues his wandering, enjoying the generosity of the Pickwell family but staying with the McNabs. He is unwilling to abandon Russell and Piper to their bigoted father and brother. But one day when Maniac tries to stop their game of black vs. white, the boys order him out of the house and he goes. He wishes that the members of the black and the white communities could just see one another as real people. Later Piper insists that Maniac come to his birthday party, and Maniac agrees on the condition that he be allowed to bring one guest. This guest turns out to be Mars Bar, whom Maniac dares to visit the West End to prove his “badness.” First Maniac takes Mars to the Pickwell home, where he is treated kindly. Then he and Maniac go to Fort McNab. The younger party guests play white vs. black revolution in the pillbox while Giant John McNab’s Cobras try to

frighten Mars Bar. Racial **conflict** flares when Giant McNab insults Mars and Mars insults him back; however, Maniac manages to maneuver Mars out the door before any fighting starts. As Mars struggles to go back to the pillbox and take on the Cobras, Maniac takes pride in Mars’s bravery.

Chapters 43–44. Maniac continues his wandering; with summer coming, he can sleep in the buffalo pen again. In July he and Mars Bar start running together, wordlessly hanging out together. One morning they run into a tearful Piper McNab, who leads them toward the trolley trestle where Maniac’s parents died. Russell McNab is now stranded on that same trestle, frozen in terror, as a trolley idles nearby. In the novel’s **climax**, Piper pleads with Maniac to save his brother, but Maniac walks away, gripped by his childhood trauma over his parents’ death.

Chapters 45–46. Later Mars Bar finds Maniac in the buffalo pen, and Maniac explains about his parents and the trestle. Mars Bar tells him that he finally rescued Russell himself and as a result, the still-terrified Russell just would not let go of him. So Mars ended up taking both McNab boys to his house, where his mother babied them. Then Mars invites Maniac home, and Maniac tries to describe his **internal conflict**: his fear that bad things will happen to the people he lives with. Maniac runs back to the familiarity and safety of the buffalo pen but wakes that night to find Amanda Beale haranguing him. Mars Bar, who summoned her, is standing nearby. She forcefully resolves Maniac’s conflict by ordering him to come home with her. And so, accompanied by Mars Bar and Amanda, Maniac Magee finally walks home.

APPROACHES FOR POST-READING ACTIVITIES

The outstanding element of this novel is its combination of social commentary and elements of **folk tale** and **legend**. Discussion groups or students doing individual research projects might focus on the following activities.

1. Exploring the Use of Legend in the Novel

Students will probably be intrigued by the novel’s use of such elements of folk tale and legend as exaggeration, heroism, and humor. What makes Maniac Magee a folk hero? How do the elements of legend make this novel different from others students have read? What were students’ favorite parts of Maniac’s legend? To explore this issue further, students might do one of the following activities:

- researching other American folk heroes and their exploits
- creating an original legend (perhaps to solve a community problem)
- writing a sequel that describes further exploits of Maniac Magee and the outcomes of his relationships with the Beales, Mars Bar, and the McNabs

2. Evaluating Credibility and Relevance

Discussion groups might focus on other elements of the novel:

- How believable are the **characters** and their actions? Besides Maniac, which character seems the most appealing and why?
- Does the **setting**, including Two Mills's division into two parts, seem believable? Ask students to think of real-life examples of similar settings.
- Did the novel's **resolution** of the racial tensions and Maniac's homelessness seem overly optimistic? Explain.
- How do the novel's **conflicts** connect with news stories, movies, or TV dramas students are familiar with?

3. Extending the Novel

Discussion groups might extend ideas in the novel:

- List actions that might ease racial tensions in American communities.
- Research how local communities care for homeless children.

MEET THE WRITER

Jerry Spinelli (1941–) grew up in the eastern Pennsylvania setting portrayed in *Maniac Magee*. As a professional writer, he soon discovered that his talent lay in presenting what one critic called “those embarrassing, gloppy, painful, and suddenly wonderful things that happen on the razor’s edge between childhood and full-fledged adolescence.” Most of Spinelli’s books—including *Maniac Magee*, his most acclaimed work and the winner of the Newbery Medal—focus on adolescents and their struggles. Among his other writings are *Space Station Seventh Grade* (1982), *Who Put That Hair on My Toothbrush?* (1984), *Dump Days* (1988), and *There’s a Girl in My Hammerlock* (1990). Once a group of

schoolchildren asked Spinelli where he got his writing ideas. He told them, “From you. You’re the funny ones. You’re the fascinating ones. You’re the elusive and inspiring and promising and heroic and maddening ones.”

READ ON

Jerry Spinelli, *Space Station Seventh Grade*. A coming-of-age novel. Seventh-grader Jason Herkimer copes with a number of problems: troubles at school, divorced parents, and a new stepfather. Its sequel, *Jason and Marceline*, portrays Jason in the ninth grade.

Judy Blume, *Iggie’s House*. Novel. An eleven-year-old girl learns about friendship when a black family moves into her white neighborhood.

Judith Berck, *No Place to Be: Voices of Homeless Children*. Nonfiction. Homeless children offer their perspectives.

Dean Hughes, *Family Pose*. Novel. An eleven-year-old orphan runs away from his foster home to find a new kind of family in a hotel.

Maya Angelou, “Brother” from *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. An autobiographical account of the brother whose exploits made him the greatest person in Angelou’s world.

Avi, “What Do Fish Have to Do with Anything?” A short story about a boy who, against the wishes of his overprotective mother, befriends a homeless man.

Clifton Davis, “A Mason-Dixon Memory.” A non-fiction narrative about two interracial groups of students who take a united stand against prejudice.

Carl Sandburg, “They Have Yarns” from *The People, Yes*. A poem that catalogs famous American tall tales.

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