

A GUIDE TO

The Pigman

Paul Zindel

“Look at me, world! Look at my life and energy and how glad I am to be alive!”

THE NOVEL AT A GLANCE

A coming-of-age novel in which two nonconformist high school students learn important lessons about love, responsibility, and freedom from a lonely old man they befriend.

Setting: Staten Island, New York, in the late 1960s.

Protagonists: John Conlan, an intelligent, articulate, but mischievous high school student and his introspective, idealistic best friend, Lorraine Jensen.

Point of View: The story is told via flashbacks in the alternating first-person voices of John and Lorraine.

Conflicts: John and Lorraine’s conflicts with their parents and school authorities; their inner conflict and guilt about their relationship with the Pigman; their conflicts with their peers over attitudes and behavior.

Resolution: Through the Pigman’s example, John and Lorraine learn about the value of love, compassion, and freedom in a society that is often uncaring.

Themes: The conflict of generations; society’s indifference toward the elderly; the tension between youthful ideals and the pressures of parents and society.

SPECIAL CONSIDERATIONS

The Pigman should pose no problems for students reading at or above grade level. The book does, however, contain scenes of mild violence, disruptive classroom behavior, teenage smoking and drinking, and ruminations about death. The only adult in the novel who provides a positive role model is the Pigman. (The text is generally quite biased against adults—something students should talk about.) The book is best suited to emotionally mature students who can place adult themes in perspective. Despite its gritty subject matter (or perhaps because of it), the novel remains one of the most popular YA novels ever written.

**MAIN CHARACTERS
(IN ORDER OF APPEARANCE)**

John Conlan, narrator, a handsome, talented, mercurial high school student with a penchant for mischief and a distaste for conformity.

Lorraine Jensen, narrator, John’s best friend; highly verbal, sensitive, and earnest.

Dennis Kobin and **Norton Kelly**, friends of John’s and Lorraine’s.

Bore, John’s father.

The Pigman, Angelo Pignati, a lonely man in his late fifties. He befriends John and Lorraine and becomes an example of joy, freedom, and courage to them.

Mrs. Jensen, Lorraine’s mother.

PLOT

Chapter 1. John Conlan, the book’s first narrator, admits to hating school. In his first year at Franklin High, his skill in setting off bombs in the boys’ room earned him the nickname “The Bathroom Bomber.” Now, in his second year, he has settled down a little. John and his friend Lorraine are typing a special project in the library.

Chapter 2. Lorraine takes over the first-person narrative, which alternates between her and John throughout the book. She says she is not attractive—unlike John, her best friend, who she says gets away with so much because he’s handsome (six feet tall, brown hair, blue eyes). She says that she is compassionate and that John really is, too (although he wouldn’t want anyone to know it), because he befriended her when she first arrived in town two years earlier, friendless and awkward. John’s compassion is also one of the reasons they got involved with the Pigman.

Chapter 3. John says that Lorraine, with her love of words, is going to be a great writer and that he, a man of action, aspires to be a great actor. Beginning the flashback that will tell the story, John recalls the prank

phone calls he and Lorraine and their friends Dennis and Norton made earlier that year. The objective was to pick a number at random out of the phone book and see how long one of them could keep a stranger on the line. That's how they ran across the Pigman.

Chapter 4. Playing the phone game one day, Lorraine happens upon the name Angelo Pignati. She calls him, pretending to represent a charity. Mr. Pignati seems so glad to talk that he keeps her on the phone telling corny jokes until she begins to pity him. He finally offers to make a ten-dollar donation to their imaginary charity.

Chapter 5. Mr. Pignati invites them to his house to pick up the money. John wants to do it, and after he overcomes Lorraine's strenuous objections, they set out. Mr. Pignati, a chubby man with a huge smile, seems overjoyed to see them and serves them each a glass of wine. He says that his wife is away on a trip. He proudly teaches them a memory trick and invites them to go with him to the zoo the next day. They demur, and Mr. Pignati offers to write the check he promised them. He then ushers them down the hallway and shows them his extensive collection of pig figures in glass, clay, and marble. He makes a joke about his name, and it is after this incident that John and Lorraine give him the name the Pigman.

Chapter 6. Over Lorraine's objections John cashes the check and buys a six-pack of beer and some cigarettes. Parent-child **conflict**, a recurring element of the book, arises when Lorraine arrives home and is interrogated by her concerned mother, a private nurse, who complains to Lorraine about her trying day at work. Lorraine calls John, and they agree to cut school the next day and go to the zoo with Mr. Pignati. At the zoo they meet a smiling Mr. Pignati, who leads them to an exhibit on nocturnal animals that Lorraine finds creepy. They then proceed to the primate house, where Mr. Pignati introduces them to his "best friend," a baboon named Bobo. Mr. Pignati throws peanuts to Bobo, and they all join in making antic ape sounds in front of the gorilla cage.

Chapter 7. The next day, on the way to meet the Pigman after school, John and Lorraine run into Dennis and Norton, and they all go to the cemetery to hang out and drink beer instead. John ventures off by himself to seek out ghosts, hoping for some sign of life after death. Later, at supper, John's continual **conflict** with his father (whom John refers to as Bore) is emphasized when Bore ridicules his son's ambition to become an actor and suggests that John come to work with him, a thought that fills John with dread. After dinner John meets Lorraine at the home of the Pigman, who is pleased to see them and shows them his house, cluttered with junk, old clothes, photographs, and assorted collections. Rummaging around in some closets by himself, John discovers lots of old dresses and hats. Then in a drawer he finds a funeral bill for Mr. Pignati's wife.

Chapter 8. John tells Lorraine of his discovery. That evening she finds herself thinking of the Pigman and of his loving relationship with his wife. She wishes that her mother—a resentful, uptight woman burdened by a depressing job and loneliness—would pick on her less and could manage to find some of the Pigman's zest for life. The next morning she and John meet the Pigman at the Staten Island ferryhouse for the ride into Manhattan to visit a department store. The Pigman gives them the grand tour, beginning with the specialty foods department, where he treats them to delicacies like chocolate-covered ants and Jamboree Juicy Jellies. At the pet department the Pigman spends a half-hour talking to the monkeys. After the Pigman buys roller skates for all of them, they gleefully skate out of the store.

Chapter 9. John tells about his friend Norton Kelly. Norton played with dolls when he was a child and was so ridiculed for it that he went "berserk" and became a "tough guy" around the age of ten, constantly picking fights. Then he moved on to shoplifting, and now John considers him a potential career criminal. About a month after John and Lorraine first meet the Pigman, Norton invites John to the cemetery for a beer and expresses curiosity about why he and Lorraine are always hanging out with the "old guy." When Norton hears that the Pigman has lots of electronic equipment, he threatens to visit him himself, **foreshadowing** later events. John knows that he would kill Norton if the bully inflicted any harm on the Pigman.

Chapter 10. By December Lorraine's and John's visits to the Pigman have become a daily ritual. On one January evening Mr. Pignati is brooding over Bobo's failing health, and John, in a spasm of guilt, finally admits that he and Lorraine are not really charity workers. Mr. Pignati, in turn, admits that his wife, Conchetta, is dead, tearfully recalling their devotion and prompting Lorraine to think that the Pigman knows something important about love. The mood lightens when Lorraine and Mr. Pignati trick John into eating chocolate-covered ants. A bout of madcap roller-skating follows, which turns into a wild game of tag. Suddenly, Mr. Pignati grasps his chest and falls to the bottom of the stairs.

Chapter 11. An ambulance arrives to pick up Mr. Pignati, who has suffered a heart attack. John and Lorraine tell the police officers at the scene that they are Pignati's son and daughter. The next day they cut school to visit him at the hospital, where they find him looking as vigorous and energetic as ever. He is pleased with their visit and urges them to make themselves comfortable in his house. That evening they return to the house. Lorraine makes a spaghetti dinner, and she and John try on some old clothes. Finding each other unusually attractive in this raffish attire, they embrace and kiss for the first time.

Chapter 12. Still posing as the Pigman's children, John and Lorraine call the hospital and are told that he is

progressing nicely. They resume their visits to the Pignati house, quarreling like a married couple over taking out the garbage and doing the dishes. Lorraine notices that John is sulking and wonders if it stems from their kiss. As they clean the house in anticipation of Mr. Pignati's return, Lorraine recalls a nightmare she had about the "pig room," which she interprets as an omen, a **foreshadowing** of death. John announces that he has invited some friends to the house for drinks that night.

Chapter 13. About forty kids show up, most of them wondering how John and Lorraine got access to the house. A music group arrives and starts pumping out rock music, and wild dancing follows. Norton Kelly crashes the party and melts into the crowd. Later, amid the chaos, John notices that Norton has disappeared. John finds him upstairs preparing to steal one of Pignati's old oscilloscopes. Norton punches him and runs down to the "pig room," where John discovers him smashing the pig figures. Norton attempts to escape, but John hurls him to the ground, shattering both Norton's nose and the oscilloscope. John sees Mr. Pignati standing at the door and passes out.

Chapter 14. A police officer helps Lorraine get the still-unconscious John into the police car. As they leave, Lorraine asks about Mr. Pignati, and the officer tells her that he is upstairs weeping. The officer drives her back to her house and informs her mother about the party "at some old man's house." Lorraine's mother, enraged, slaps her in the face and breaks down in tears. Lorraine then tells her mother about her and John's friendship with the Pigman. She feels better afterward but recognizes that her mother does not really understand when she asks Lorraine if the old man "tried anything" with her. The next day she meets John at a street corner, and he informs her that his father wants him to see a psychiatrist. John calls Mr. Pignati from a pay phone, apologizes profusely, and offers to clean up and pay for all the damage. They ask him to meet them at the zoo, and he sadly agrees. When they meet, the Pigman looks weak and emaciated. The plot reaches its **climax** as they head directly for the monkey house to see Mr. Pignati's beloved Bobo, only to be told by an attendant that Bobo died of pneumonia the previous week. When he hears the news, Mr. Pignati emits a thin, eerie, high-pitched scream and then collapses and dies.

Chapter 15. Kneeling beside Mr. Pignati's lifeless body, John realizes that he really does care, that he is deeply bothered by a world in which people end up lonely and ill and desperate for companionship. The major **themes** of the novel emerge as John begins to think of the monkey house as his own tomb and reflects that his destructive behavior might be a slow flirtation with death. As attendants take away the body, John bids Mr. Pignati goodbye. Later he finds Lorraine sitting alone on a bench. She strikes out at him and screams, "We murdered him." As they leave, John realizes that the Pigman

had trespassed outside normal boundaries into the world of youth and that they had trespassed into the world of a lonely old man—but that the Pigman had paid with his life. Like baboons, like his parents, like Norton, John reflects, we all build our own cages, and only a sense of personal responsibility can show us the way out.

APPROACHES FOR POST-READING ACTIVITIES

The Pigman is a deft and pungent evocation of a powerful **theme**. Here we have the clash of generations—the pain of youth confronting what it sees as the tedium, sadness, and defeat of adulthood and old age, and the deafness of some adults to youthful yearnings for authenticity and joy. Discussion groups or students doing individual projects might focus on the following activities.

1. Investigating the Social and Cultural Background

Students might wonder what young people can do to help old people living in loneliness and isolation. That question could lead to an investigation of the following issues:

- The decline of extended families as a way of caring for old people
- The advantages and drawbacks of nursing homes
- Social and cultural attitudes toward old age in a culture obsessed with youth
- The role of government and social welfare agencies in addressing the problems of the elderly

2. Evaluating Credibility and Relevance

Discussion groups might focus on controversial aspects of the novel:

- How believable are the **characters** and their actions? Are most teenagers like this? Is the novel fair to adults?
- How credible is the **resolution** of the conflict? How would students rework the plot to make it more credible?
- Does the novel's **theme** connect with students' own experiences? What forms of generational conflict do students observe around them?
- How can people from different generations and different cultures learn to understand one another better? Is empathy an inborn ability, or can it be cultivated?
- Can students recall any movies, TV shows, or plays that relate to the themes of the book?
- Would students recommend this book to other readers? Have them write a preface to the book addressed to a would-be reader.

3. Responding to the Writer

At the back of the book, Zindel includes a personal note to the reader, with several questions he is often asked by students and his answers to them. Have students respond in some way to these exchanges:

They might respond by writing letters or essays or by engaging in debates.

MEET THE WRITER

Paul Zindel (1936–2003) was born on Staten Island and now lives in Connecticut. A chemistry teacher for ten years, he is the author of *The Effect of Gamma Rays on Man-in-the-Moon Marigolds*, a play that won a Pulitzer Prize and the New York Drama Critics Circle Award in 1971. His first two novels, *The Pigman* and *My Darling, My Hamburger*, were selected as Outstanding Books of the Year by *The New York Times*. *The Pigman* helped to establish the realistic teenage novel as a distinct genre.

READ ON

Paul Zindel, *The Pigman Legacy*. John and Lorraine are drawn back to the Pigman's abandoned house and are shaken to find another lonely old man living a desolate life. This sequel to *The Pigman* reveals to John and Lorraine the essence of the Pigman's legacy.

Paul Zindel, *The Pigman and Me*. An autobiography that tells about the teenage Zindel's meeting with his own "pigman."

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.

A. B. Guthrie, "Bargain." A classic western short story set in a town called Moon Dance. The good guys and the bad guys can be recognized at once, but will the good guys win out in the end?

Arthur Cavanaugh, "Miss Awful." A short story about an exceptionally dedicated but misunderstood teacher and the reluctant student who learns to appreciate her.

Tony Cade Bambara, "Raymond's Run." A popular story about an opinionated girl named Squeaky who looks out for the special needs of her brother.

Emily Dickinson, "If I Can Stop One Heart from Breaking." A famous poem about the importance of helping others.

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