

Milkweed



By

Jerry Spinelli

A Novel Study
by Nat Reed

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About the author: Nat Reed was a member of the teaching profession for more than 35 years. He was a full-time instructor at Trent University in the Teacher Education Program for nine years. For more information on his work and literature, visit novelstudies.org.

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Suggestions and Expectations

This 70 page curriculum unit can be used in a variety of ways. Most chapters of the novel study focuses on four chapters of *Milkweed* and is comprised of four different activities:

- Before You Read
- Vocabulary Building
- Comprehension Questions
- Language and Extension Activities

A **portfolio cover** (p.7) as well as a **Checklist** (p.6) are included so that students may track of their completed work.

Every activity need not be completed by all students.

Links with the Common Core Standards (U.S.)

Many of the activities included in this curriculum unit are supported by the Common Core Standards. For instance the *Reading Standards for Literature, Grade 5*, makes reference to:

- a) determining the meaning of words and phrases. . . including figurative language;
- b) explaining how a series of chapters fits together to provide the overall structure;
- c) compare and contrast two characters;
- d) determine how characters ... respond to challenges;
- e) drawing inferences from the text;
- f) determining a theme of a story . . . **and many others.**

Themes which may be taught in conjunction with the novel include The Holocaust, the Warsaw ghetto during World War II, homelessness, racial prejudice, Jews / Jewish faith, Gypsies, courage and self-sacrifice, perseverance, the importance of family and friends.

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List of Skills

Vocabulary Development

1. Locating descriptive words/phrases
2. Listing synonyms/homophones
3. Identifying/creating *alliteration*
4. Use of capitals and punctuation
5. Identifying syllables
6. Identify *foreshadowing*.
7. Identify *personification*.
8. Use of singular / plural nouns
9. Listing compound words
10. Identifying parts of speech
11. Determining alphabetical order
12. Identification of root words
13. Identify/create *similes*
14. Working with *anagrams*.

Setting Activities

1. Summarize the details of a setting

Plot Activities

1. Complete a *time line* of events
2. Identify conflict in the story
3. Identify the climax of the novel.
4. Five W's Chart

Character Activities

1. Determine character traits
2. Protagonists
3. Relating personal experiences
4. Comparing two Characters

Creative and Critical Thinking

1. Research
2. Write a newspaper story
3. Create a Research Organizer
4. Complete an Observation Chart
5. Complete a KWS Chart
6. Conduct an interview
7. Complete a Comparison Chart
8. Write a book review

Art Activities

1. Design an Information Card
2. Create a brochure
3. Design a cover for the novel

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Synopsis

A stunning novel of the Holocaust from a Newbery Medalist

He's a boy called Jew. Gypsy. Stopthief. Filthy son of Abraham.

He's a boy who lives in the streets of Warsaw.

He's a boy who steals food for himself, and the other orphans.

He's a boy who believes in bread, and mothers, and angels.

He's a boy who wants to be a Nazi, with tall, shiny jackboots of his own-until the day that suddenly makes him change his mind.

And when the trains come to empty the Jews from the ghetto of the damned, he's a boy who realizes it's safest of all to be nobody. [The Publisher]

Author Biography

Jerry Spinelli

Born in 1941 in Norristown, Pennsylvania, Jerry Spinelli discovered his calling in 1957 when his high school football team won a big game. The town celebrated, his fellow students raced through the streets, but Jerry sneaked back home and marked the occasion in his own way. He wrote a poem. Later the town newspaper published it. "And," he reports, "I've been a writer ever since."

Married to Eileen Spinelli, who is also a writer, Jerry was for many years an editor for the Chilton Company. Now a full-time writer, he lives in Phoenixville, Pennsylvania.

Jerry Spinelli's immensely popular books include **Space Station Seventh Grade**, **Jason and Marceline, Who Put That Hair in My Toothbrush?** and **Maniac Magee**, which has won more than fifteen state children's book awards in addition to the Newbery Medal. [The Publisher]



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Student Checklist

Student Name _____

Assignment	Grade / Level	Comments

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Name: _____

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Chapters 1 - 4



Before you read the chapters:

The **protagonist** in most novels features the main character or “good guy”. The protagonist of *Milkweed* is quite unique – Misha (*Stopthief*), who is about eight years old when the story begins, and lives in the war-torn city of Warsaw, Poland. Think back on some of your favorite characters from past novels you have read or movies you’ve seen. What do you think makes for an especially intriguing **protagonist**?



Vocabulary:

Choose a word from the list to complete each sentence.

artillery	sausages	babka	matzoh	explosions
Gypsy	manikins	wheelbarrow	Sauerkraut	foothold

1. We were delighted that Melissa’s mother served a mouthwatering _____.
2. _____ is a Polish term which means “sour cabbage”.
3. The enemy army’s _____ terrified the villagers.
4. Misha learned that from the Jewish family that _____ is a type of bread.
5. The _____ people had a reputation for their nomadic ways.
6. When the grenades went off the _____ were terrifying to hear.
7. My older brother used a _____ to take the huge pumpkin to market.
8. A special ingredient in my aunt’s recipe for *toad in the hole* was _____.
9. When we entered the store, the lifelike _____ in the window startled us.
10. Jenna barely got a _____ before slipping and landing in a puddle.

Questions



1. The setting of the story describes both the time and place. Describe the **setting** of these chapters. (Turn to page 28 to get a more exact date.)

2. Investigate: Uri tells *Stopthief* that soon it will be the **Jackboots** chasing him. On the Internet or by using resources in your school library describe the appearance of a jackboot and tell who would be wearing them in this instance.

3. Describe the circumstances in which Uri and *Stopthief* met.

4. From the conversation of the boys that *Stopthief* meets in the stable, it becomes evident that most people share a common opinion about Jews. How would you describe this impression from what the boys say? Give one example from their conversation to support this.

5. Why did the boys assume that *Stopthief* was a Gypsy? Do you think this was a reasonable assumption? Why or why not?

6. The *boom boom* sound that Stopthief occasionally makes reference to is German artillery shelling the city. Although Stopthief does not yet recognize it as such, this represents a real **crisis** for all the people of Warsaw. Why do you think it is necessary for every good story to have an interesting crisis?

7. What ordeal did Uri put Stopthief through at the beginning of Chapter 4? How did Stopthief feel when it was all over?

8. What was Uri's philosophy regarding stealing?

9. Describe the circumstances which gave Uri the chance to drive the streetcar? What resulted from this little adventure?

10. Describe your impression of the novel to this point.

Language Activities



A. Warsaw, Poland

The novel takes place mainly in the city of Warsaw, Poland. Warsaw is the largest city and capital of this ancient country. Its present population is about 1.7 million, (2.6 million in the metropolitan area) although at the time of our story, it was much smaller. It is presently the tenth largest city in Europe. During the Second World War about 80% of its buildings were destroyed. Since then the city has been painstakingly rebuilt by the Polish people.



Your task is to investigate this remarkable city using resources in your school library or on the Internet. From the information gathered create a brochure advertising the highlights of the city (attractions, restaurants, accommodations, museums, historical sites, etc.) which would be of interest to tourists.

You may wish to obtain a few samples of brochures to get some ideas for your creation. Your brochure should contain at least one colored picture and four or more relevant pieces of information for visitors to take advantage of when visiting this amazing city.

B. Many words can be used as a **noun** or a **verb**, depending on the sentence. Use your imagination and write sentences to illustrate how these words can be used as both a noun and a verb.



BRUSH

Noun	
Verb	

FACE

Noun	
Verb	

C. A **simile** is a comparison using the words “like” or “as”. An example from this section is: *I saw spaces where stores should be. Like broken teeth.*



What two things are being compared in this example?

--	--

Invent your own **similes** comparing the following items with something from your imagination:

a) the screech of a street car

b) the noise made by a tiny field mouse

D. A **quintet** is a five-line verse that tells a story. The quintet has a syllable pattern and can bring an exciting scene to life. (It doesn't have to rhyme.)

Line 1 – tells when , 3 syllables Line 2 – tells where , 5 syllables Line 3 – tells what , 7 syllables Line 4 – describes activity , 9 syllables Line 5 – contains a thought , 3 syllables.	Now create a quintet poem using ideas from recent events in <i>Milkweed</i> .
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TITLE: _____

E. 5 Ws and an H.

Choose an event from this section that you thought was really important and/or exciting. Using facts that you gleaned from reading about this event, fill in the balloons below, summarizing what you learned.



WHO?



WHAT?



WHEN?



WHERE?



WHY?



HOW?