Loser Study Guide

Loser by Jerry Spinelli

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Contents

Plot Summary

Loser, by Jerry Spinelli, follows the life throughout grade school of a boy named Donald Zinkoff, who has a hard time achieving success in anything he does, yet proves to be very successful at being a good person. Spinelli has written a number of children's books and is a winner of the Newbery Medal, one of the most prestigious awards given for children's literature. In this 2003 novel, he portrays a boy whose physical awkwardness and lack of aptitude for schoolwork gradually isolate him from his peers. However, the boy never loses what is most significant such as his love of life, his self-respect, and his desire to help others. Zinkoff, as he is called through most of the book, is a cheerful and loving boy who is so thrilled to be in first grade when the book opens that he can hardly stop shouting and laughing with glee. This exuberance immediately sets him apart from the other children, but they are too young to judge or scorn him for not being like them. Zinkoff is gloriously unaware that he is unusual. All the way through third grade, he maintains an almost unblemished joy in life and openness to relationships with people of all ages. Unfortunately, only a few adults seem to understand and appreciate his special nature and among other children his age, he makes virtually no friends. His father, mother, and younger sister are all very supportive but the boy next door and another boy in school whom Zinkoff attempts to befriend reject his advances.

During fourth and fifth grade, Zinkoff's good humor is severely tested as his classmates become more observant of others and more critical than when they were just starting grade school. When he gets his only "A" in a test during all his years at elementary school, the other children praise him endlessly, and he does not realize they are mocking him. After he fares terribly during a major school sports day, the others start calling him "loser," although not to his face and he remains half-unaware of the name. He joins the band but is also bad at playing music. He finds solace from the growing pressures of school in Willow Street near his home, where he once went with his father, a mailman. An old lady there speaks to him, as does the young mother of a small child named Claudia. Such everyday decencies carry great weight for Zinkoff. In sixth grade, when he enters a big Middle School, he goes beyond "loser" to being invisible or a nobody. During the first snowstorm of winter, the little girl, Claudia, runs away and is lost. Zinkoff hears about this and goes on a long, solo trek in the freezing weather, searching for her. He becomes disoriented and almost dies of exposure, only to discover later that Claudia had been quickly found in good health. This final failure, among a long string of failures, touches all the adults, especially Claudia's mother. By being true to himself, Zinkoff has become a hero even though the clueless kids at school still think of him as a nobody.

Chapters 1-3

Chapters 1-3 Summary

Chapter 1, "You Grow Up," discusses growing up with a kid and never really noticing him. You see him around all the time, but you do not even know his name. "He's part of the scenery," the author writes, "like the parked cars and the green plastic cans on trash day." As you pass through first and second grades, you see this kid regularly but you still do not know his name. You might go sledding one winter day and see this kid screaming with joy as he goes down the hill. That might annoy you because he seems to be having even more fun than you are. Anyway, you still do not know his name, until one day someone says a name. At that moment, you just know the name must belong to that boy. The name is Zinkoff. In Chapter 2, "The Bright Wide World," Zinkoff is introduced to the reader as one of the new group of boys who have been living at home all their lives, but now stand alone on their front steps, ready to go somewhere by themselves for the first time. Zinkoff is thrilled by this, and he laughs with joy. No grown-up is holding his hand and in front of him is the bright wide world.

He takes off running and can hardly believe how fast and free he feels. It seems he is going so fast that he is surprised when a car passes him. Thrilled by his freedom, he laughs, and stomps on the sidewalk as if it were a puddle. He cannot see his house. He turns right, running fast. It occurs to him that if he keeps turning right, he can run forever. He shouts with glee. In Chapter 3, "Win," the author notes that young children like Zinkoff will cross the street sooner or later. They will meet each other and they will begin to run with and against each other. They will begin to race. When their mothers tell them not to run in the streets, they will run in the alleys. They will race in winter and in summer, even in the rain or snow. They will forget that they are all really from the same group, like pups in a litter, and they will never again think of themselves as the same. They will compete over everything. It might be who weighs the most, who goes to bed latest, or who can burp loudest. Everything will be a contest, in every place they find themselves, and everyone will win at some time or another. Zinkoff is the only one who never wins and he never notices that he loses all the time. The other children do not notice this, either, for the time being.

Chapters 1-3 Analysis

The author chooses to begin Chapter 1, "You Grow Up," by speaking directly to the reader. Using the second-person "you" point of view, he writes that you can grow up with a kid and never really notice him. This is effective, because it makes the reader think of someone he or she actually knew but never really noticed. At this point, the main character in the novel, the child that nobody ever notices, has not yet been introduced. That gives the reader almost no choice but to think of a real person who fits the description of being unnoticed. This strategy, called foreshadowing, sets the stage for something that will happen later in the novel concerning the main character, Zinkoff.

It will turn out that Zinkoff is anything but the sort of kid whom nobody should notice. By the end of the chapter, however, all we know is that the character's name is Zinkoff. In Chapter 2, "The Bright Wide World," the writer begins to tell Zinkoff's story. He seems to be very young and about to walk somewhere from his front step, but the author does not say exactly where he is going. Zinkoff's first name has not even been mentioned. It is almost as if he is not important enough to have two names.

Zinkoff is interesting, though. Right from the start, he is so filled with joy about leaving the house without a parent and since he completely lacks any concern or worry about it, he is unusual. All that Zinkoff has done so far is run down the street and around the corner, laughing and shouting but he already commands the reader's attention. In Chapter 3, "Win," the author temporarily moves away from Zinkoff, and back toward general observations about young children, but he now uses the third person "them" point of view, because the second person "you" viewpoint has done its job. The reader, now in sympathy with the writer's opinions about how some children seem to be almost invisible to others, anticipates what will follow the author's comments on how quickly children learn to compete with one another. It seems inevitable that the chapter will end with the observation that Zinkoff is not a winner and that is the ending, with one addition. The author offers the surprise that neither Zinkoff nor his young friends even notice at this early stage in their lives that Zinkoff always loses. The problem is, the author warns, this ignorance will not last.

Chapters 4-6

Chapters 4-6 Summary

Chapter 4, "Zinkoff's First Day," establishes that he is beginning his first year of school, but right away he has trouble with his mother, because he leaves the house before she is ready to walk him to school. From upstairs she yells at him to wait, using his first name, Donald. He is gone by the time she comes downstairs. When she rushes after him, she sees the long neck of Zinkoff's giraffe hat above those of the other children, even though she told him time and again not to wear it to school. The school is only three blocks away and he will be there before she can catch him so she lets him go. The first-grade teacher, Miss Meeks, is a little worried to see the giraffe hat, because it makes the other students giggle. She has been teaching for three decades, will retire at the end of the year, and does not want a difficult student. Zinkoff cheerfully takes off his hat at the request of Miss Meeks and gives it to her for storage in his cubbyhole at the back of the room. When she asks his name, he jumps up and shouts, "Zinkoff!" This amuses everyone, including Miss Meeks. In Chapter 5, "All Aboard," Miss Meeks gives her annual opening day speech, in which she refers to the students as young citizens. She welcomes them to John W. Satterfield Elementary School.

She says they will be going to school for twelve years, during which they will learn to spell big words and write difficult sentences. The children are impressed, but Zinkoff starts giggling. Miss Meeks does the math on the greenboard to show that throughout 12 years, they will be in school 2,160 days. She puts on her train conductor's hat and asks who wants to jump aboard to learn to write their names. Everyone raises their hands, and Zinkoff shouts in glee. Chapter 6, "A Wonderful Question," begins with Donald Zinkoff tracing his first name, which Miss Meeks has printed for him on see-through paper. It seems to him that his name is himself, and he rushes to the teacher to show her his printing. She explains that his name represents him, but is not him. She cannot read his printing and hopes he does not have a problem with motor control. At recess, a child takes Zinkoff's giraffe hat and races around the playground, laughing. Zinkoff laughs, too. A fourth-grader claims that the hat belongs to him, and Zinkoff believes him, although he is sad to part with it. The third-grader, who expected Zinkoff to cry, throws the hat on the ground and steps on it. After school, Zinkoff tells his mother he had a good time and loves his teacher, and Mrs. Zinkoff gives him a star. His father comes home in his old car, the fourth old one he has bought in a row after each one dies, which is why Zinkoff and his mother secretly call it Clunker Four. At night, Zinkoff transfers the star to his pajamas and says his prayers. He believes the stars in his mother's plastic Baggie fell from the sky and were cooled by her in the freezer. He wonders which is greater: the number of stars in the sky or the number of days he will attend school.

Chapters 4-6 Analysis

In Chapter 4, "Zinkoff's First Day," Zinkoff races to school before his mother can accompany him, which indicates not only his enthusiasm but also his fearlessness. He is not a cautious boy, and does not suspect anyone will be mean to him. The giraffe hat he wears to school is significant, because it attracts attention and makes everyone laugh. Zinkoff likes this effect, because he wants everyone to be happy, and he is unaware that people might be laughing at him. It might seem odd that the author would choose to make Zinkoff stand out from the crowd, especially after the opening chapter has established that Zinkoff is the sort of boy people tend to regard as part of the scenery, but he also is a kind and loving soul. If such people do not protect themselves by blending into the scenery or by some other strategy, they risk being bullied or victimized. Zinkoff quickly displays his good nature in his willingness to take off his hat when Miss Meeks asks him to do so, but in identifying himself by his last name, he again stands out from the crowd. In Chapter 5, "All Aboard," Zinkoff's grinning, giggling, and shouting in class show his joy, but also underline the difference between him and the other children.

In Chapter 6, "AWonderful Question," Zinkoff's terrible handwriting foreshadows a problem with schoolwork that could create troubles for him. His sense that he and his name are the same is interesting, especially because he cannot write his name legibly. This is symbolic of young Zinkoff not yet having discovered who he really is. When the other children take his hat and run with it, rather than being angry, he is happy for them. When the fourth-grader claims that the hat is his, Zinkoff truly believes that the boy must have gotten it at the zoo, where Zinkoff's father got the hat for him. It must be a mix-up, he thinks, and his willingness to let the bigger boy have the hat infuriates the fourth-grader, who just wanted the fun of teasing him. So far, Zinkoff's kindness is an unexpected defense, but it seems unlikely to withstand the cruelties of elementary school children. Mr. Zinkoff's Clunker Four is another symbol. He keeps buying machines that are not up to the rigors of the road, which raises the question of whether his son is up to the rigors of the world. Mrs. Zinkoff's stars, on the other hand, represent hope and potential. The little boy's identification of these stars with the ones in the sky, and his wonderful question about whether there are more stars than days left for him in school show that if he can keep his optimism, maybe he will find a way to shine.

Chapters 7-9

Chapters 7-9 Summary

In Chapter 7, "Jabip," Zinkoff is delighted to discover that every day at school is as exciting as the first day was. He learns many new things and makes new friends. At dinner, his father always asks him what's new, rhyming the question with a silly word like, "Chickamoo" or "Boogaloo," which never fails to make Zinkoff laugh. He loves funny words, the best of which is one that Miss Meeks says in class one day. Trying to describe a billion basketballs, she says they would stretch from here to Jabip. This made-up place makes Zinkoff laugh so hard he falls off his chair. For the rest of the day, he giggles whenever the word pops into his head. When he tells his parents about it at dinner, his father says there is another place called Jaboop, which starts Zinkoff laughing again. He gets so out of control that his parents send him to his room. The rest of the week, Zinkoff periodically laughs in class when someone whispers "Jabip" to him, and Miss Meeks puts a button on him that says, "I know I can behave." Eventually, Miss Meeks realizes that Zinkoff considers it a badge of honor, and she gives up. One day, Zinkoff goes to school early. Nobody is there. His parents rush up, worried, and he proudly explains that he came by himself today. They bite their lips, and then tell him it is Saturday. When Zinkoff is passed on to second grade, Miss Meeks writes that she wishes he had a little more self-control, but he is happy and loves school.

Chapter 8, "Two New Friends," is about the arrivals of Zinkoff's new baby sister, Polly, and a boy his age next door, Andrew Orwell. Zinkoff is dismayed to see that Polly has two stars, although she has not done anything. His mother promises to save two stars that she will give him when he is having a bad day. Andrew Orwell and his family arrive the next month. Mrs. Zinkoff brings over a cake, but Mrs. Orwell says Andrew is sulking, because he did not want to leave their old neighborhood. Zinkoff rushes home and makes a giant cookie of his favorite type, a snickerdoodle. When he brings it back to Andrew, Zinkoff lifts it out of the pan, but it is so big it breaks and falls on the floor. Furious, Andrew rushes away. Zinkoff eats most of it, handing out pieces to anyone passing his house. When his father comes home, Zinkoff throws up in the empty mailbag of his father, who is a mailman. Zinkoff has an upside-down valve in his stomach, and throws up several times weekly. In Chapter 9, "Champions!", Zinkoff plays soccer with the Titans, who lose the first game of the season, but Zinkoff has a great time running around. He the only Titan to tell the other team, "Good game." He decides to practice becoming a more grumpy loser like his teammates, which startles his parents, but the Titans win the rest of their games. Zinkoff scores only once, the winning point in the last game, when a ball accidentally bounces off his head into the opponents' net. All the Titans get a big trophy, but Andrew is sad because he was on the losing team. Zinkoff tries to give his trophy to Andrew, whose mother declines it. At home, Zinkoff puts his trophy on the back step and when he checks later that day, it is gone.

Chapters 7-9 Analysis

Zinkoff's uncontrollable laughter at nonsense words becomes a problem in Chapter 7, "Jabip." Miss Meeks is right that he does have a problem with self-control but he is only a first-grader and the adults do not seem too worried. Even so, a child who acts differently than others and who cannot stop himself from being different is in a dangerous situation. The author is suggesting that to win, at least in a conventional way, demands conformity. Zinkoff loves school, though, which demands high conformity that ultimately can lead to conventional rewards. Chapter 8, "Two New Friends," introduces a baby sister, who represents a possible threat to Zinkoff because of the love and attention his mother will lavish on little Polly. His neighbor, Andrew, seems spoiled and ungrateful, which is perhaps not that unusual for an eight-year-old. Zinkoff attempts to cheer up Andrew by baking a giant cookie for him but after Andrew rejects this offering, Zinkoff creates a problem for himself. He gobbles most of the treat and then throws up in his father's mailbag, which is when the reader learns that Zinkoff has a medical condition that causes him to vomit regularly. This is the first sign that he is unusual in any physical way, rather than emotionally or perhaps psychologically.

In Chapter 9, "Champions!", Zinkoff's unconcern about the score in the soccer games goes to the heart of the novel. Here is a boy who simply does not care about winning. He participates with enthusiasm, and yet is not concerned about the score of the game. This might seem praiseworthy, but he also is of almost no use to his teammates, making only one goal all season, and that one by accident. On top of that, he gives away his trophy to selfish Andrew, who obviously takes it from the back step. The question raised by these actions is, again, one of conformity. Can Zinkoff play effectively on a team? Can he contribute meaningfully to a group effort? Is his different perspective of value, or will it doom him to a life as an outcast? The author has not finished addressing this central theme in his novel and the answers to the questions are still to come.

Chapters 10-12

Chapters 10-12 Summary

Chapter 10, "Atrocious," begins with Zinkoff asking his second-grade teacher, Mrs. Biswell, how many days are left in school, which is a mistake. She thinks he is being disrespectful. Assigning seats alphabetically, she puts Zinkoff in the last seat in the last row. Zinkoff laughs and cannot stop, which is bad. On the playground, a third-grader twists his arm and Zinkoff laughs, even through his tears. His classmates start trying to make him laugh, to get him into trouble. Mrs. Biswell does not like children, and sometimes wonders why she became a teacher. She despairs of Zinkoff's handwriting, which she calls atrocious. She does appreciate brilliant students, but Zinkoff is far from one of them. She does not like children to write on the greenboard or to use her special eraser. When she comes into the classroom one day, she finds Zinkoff writing on the board and shouts at him. Startled, he erases the words, which causes Mrs. Biswell to shout even louder. He drops the eraser and throws up on it. She kicks him out of class, and he runs home without his coat. Mrs. Zinkoff calls the school, and the principal scolds Mrs. Biswell in his office. In Chapter 11, "Mailman," Zinkoff wants to be absent from school for the special Take Your Kid to Work Day, but his father explains that he is not allowed to bring a child on his mail route. Mr. Zinkoff says instead he will make Sunday a special mail route day for his son.

Zinkoff and Andrew discuss their fathers and work. Andrew says his father is a banker who intends to get a raise and get out of this dump, but Zinkoff does not know what dump Mr. Orwell means. On Sunday after church, Zinkoff and his father grab their sack lunches and jump into Clunker Four. They drive a few blocks to Willow Street. Mr. Zinkoff gives his son a mail carrier hat and says he will be paid five dollars at the end of the day. Donald delivers letters he has written and put into envelopes with postage stamps drawn in crayon. Chapter 12, "The Nine Hundred Block of Willow," begins at lunchtime, during which father and son discuss weather. Donald admires his father's ability to deliver mail under all weather conditions. After lunch, he begins delivering letters again and sees the Waiting Man. Mr. Zinkoff says the Waiting Man always stands behind the window waiting for his brother, who has been missing in action from Vietnam for thirty-two years. Donald meets a lady with a walker who thanks him for the letter. Donald is so sad when the day's work is finished that he cries all the way home.

Chapters 10-12 Analysis

When Chapter 10, "Atrocious," begins, Zinkoff starts second grade on an unpromising note. He is misunderstood by his teacher, Mrs. Biswell, which shows that she is not likely to look deeply into his personality, even as it foreshadows a tough year for Zinkoff. He makes things worse by laughing, which might even frustrate the reader, because no explanation has been given for Zinkoff's uncontrolled laughter. When being hurt by a larger boy causes Zinkoff to laugh through his tears, it is the first suggestion that

Zinkoff's chronic laughter might not be entirely joyful. Mrs. Biswell quickly proves to be a bad egg who does not even like children. She brands Zinkoff's handwriting as "atrocious," and then completely loses control when she finds him writing on the greenboard. Mrs. Biswell symbolizes the arbitrary power of adults to shape the lives of children. Her appearance in Zinkoff's life is pure bad luck, but the larger question remains: is Zinkoff, with his strange ways, equipped to withstand the bad influence of people like Mrs. Biswell?

Chapter 11, "Mailman," establishes that Zinkoff's mother is not the only person from whom he got his kind and loving nature. Mr. Zinkoff, a man with a modest job who is a hero to his son, treats the boy with understanding and respect. When the rules of the larger world make it impossible for Mr. Zinkoff to bring his child with him to work, he figures out a way to bring the job to the child. The warmth between father and son in this chapter is signified by the gradual switch from calling the boy "Zinkoff" to calling him "Donald." Mr. Zinkoff's treatment of Donald also is in sharp contrast to the only statement Andrew Orwell's father makes to his son, which is that nothing would be better than getting out of this dump. Mr. Orwell, a banker, sees himself as a winner. The author's unspoken question is what does it truly mean to win? In Chapter 12, "The Nine Hundred Block of Willow," the Waiting Man is clearly a symbol or metaphor. He stands stock still every day, waiting for a family member who disappeared thirty years ago. He is passive and quiet. He does nothing but watch. He shows no ability to make anything happen, or to even try. This man is a victim, and a warning. He symbolizes what can happen to those who become overwhelmed by events. The old lady in the walker also has suffered, as her walker attests yet she goes out of her way to thank Donald for the letter. Kindness may expose people to cruelty, but it also can be repaid in kind.

Chapters 13-15

Chapters 13-15 Summary

By the start of Chapter 13, "Waiting," Zinkoff is in third grade and his neighbor, Andrew, has moved to a fancier neighborhood. Zinkoff has surgery to fix the upside-down valve in his stomach, which keeps him out of school for three weeks. His active nature rebels against this forced slowdown, and his mother worries that he will run outside, which would be bad for his recuperation. She puts Polly's crib across the front door as an alarm system, because one of Polly's few words is to yell, "Bye!" very loudly at anyone who leaves. Zinkoff feels like the Waiting Man. To combat the wait before he can return to school, he decides to make a school experience of his own by creating a test. In Chapter 14, "The Furnace Monster," Zinkoff confronts the only form of darkness that frightens him, which is the dark of the cellar. To be there is the most terrifying thing he can imagine, so he waits until Polly's nap, when his mother starts doing her telemarketing calls and he ventures down. He does this over several days, going a little farther down the nine steps each day, telling himself there is no furnace monster, and counting to a hundred when he reaches the bottom. He goes to the hospital for removal of his stitches. Then he turns off the weak cellar light and descends again in stages, with only the light from the doorway showing. At last, he pulls the door shut and goes down in total darkness. Despite a heroic effort, he cannot make it to the bottom. He fails his own test, ponders this for a while, and soon goes back to school.

Chapter 15, "Discovered," is about Zinkoff in fourth grade, when his classmates finally recognize or "discover" him. Zinkoff has not changed, but the observational skills of fourth-graders are more honed than they were in the earlier grades. Now, over the course of the year, they gradually notice his strangeness in all its detail, even to the extent of a birthmark on his neck. Luckily for Zinkoff, his teacher, Mr. Yalowitz, is awake to Zinkoff's potential and treats him well. Turning around the alphabetical seating, Mr. Yalowitz puts Zinkoff in the front row for the first time in the boy's school career. Mr. Yalowitz encourages the boy even when does not do well in his studies. In orchestra, Zinkoff's music teacher gives him a drum but his poor timing disrupts the band and she gives him a flute, which is less damaging. The chapter ends with the news that Zinkoff is most profoundly discovered in June, during Field Day.

Chapters 13-15 Analysis

"Waiting," the title of Chapter 13, has echoes of the Waiting Man, the symbol of helplessness and victimization. Zinkoff's operation has left him temporarily powerless to go anywhere or do anything outside the house, which is a huge burden for him. As he endures three weeks of recuperation, he feels like the Waiting Man, but he does not act like him. Instead of doing nothing, Zinkoff takes on his biggest fear and attempts to overcome it. This brave effort is true to Zinkoff's character, because he has never been one to shy away from trying something new or different. His mother knows how bold he

can be, which is what leads her to station little Polly at the door, in case Zinkoff tries to escape. In Chapter 14, "The Furnace Monster," Zinkoff's step-by-step approach to conquering his fear of the cellar is briefly interrupted when he gets his stitches removed, signaling the end of his medical condition. Anything that is different about him now can no longer be attributed to a physical ailment. He makes excellent progress in fighting his fear of the cellar darkness, even though in the end he is still a little boy afraid of imaginary monsters. He thinks about his failure, although the reader does not learn what Zinkoff's thoughts are. This leaves the reader to decide without Zinkoff's input on the usefulness of the experiment.

The appearance of Mr. Yalowitz in Chapter 15, "Discovered," is a breath of fresh air. This is clearly a teacher who is tuned-in to his students, and it comes not a moment too soon for Zinkoff. His value as an individual may have been discovered by Mr. Yalowitz, but his oddness also has been discovered by his fellow students. They have lost the all-consuming gaze of little children who do not make judgments, even as they have become more detail-oriented and more critical. Zinkoff continues to be mediocre in schoolwork, and he is terrible in the orchestra. An atmosphere of impending trouble is being constructed by the author, with his warnings that Zinkoff's classmates are about to turn on him in a potentially ugly way. This is a familiar moment in storytelling when the next part will not be pleasant but at the same time one rushes toward discovery of what will happen next.

Chapters 16-18

Chapters 16-18 Summary

"Field Day," the title of Chapter 16, describes an old tradition at the school, which began as a day of fun and continues as such for the small children, but now emphasizes races and winning for the older children. Mr. Yalowitz divides his class into four groups named by colors, putting Zinkoff with the Purple team. Probably the best runner in both fourth-grade classes is Gary Hobin, who is on the Purple team. Despite poor performances by Zinkoff, the Purples are in first place going into the final race, a relay. Mr. Yalowitz says Zinkoff must run the last leg and he tries valiantly but fails miserably, causing the team to lose the championship. Hobin and the other Purples file past Zinkoff, each of them whispering and muttering to him, "Loser." At dinner, when Zinkoff's parents ask about Field Day, he is afraid they will ask if he won, but they ask if he had fun. Polly asks, though, and Zinkoff runs from the table, crying. His father invites him to go for a drive, which they never do, because it wastes gas. On the way, Mr. Zinkoff mostly coaxes his old car, Clunker Six. When they return, Zinkoff realizes that he could lose a thousand races and his father would never give up on him. Mr. Zinkoff will be there to encourage and patch him up and keep him running. Zinkoff knows that to his dad, he will never be a clunker.

In Chapter 17, "What the Clocks Say," Zinkoff is in fifth grade, which is the highest grade at Satterfield Elementary. He loves being part of the oldest group of kids in the school, who also see themselves as the most important ones. A name is following him, however, that he does not see anyone call him, but that he hears from behind, as if it were coming from the walls or the clocks. The name is "loser." The students have decided that everything he does is evidence of Zinkoff being a loser, but he does not notice this directly. Zinkoff is too busy growing up, shedding superstitions and habits of early childhood, and even allowing his mother to sell his old giraffe hat at a garage sale. Occasionally, he goes to Willow Street and looks at the Waiting Man, who is older now, still waiting. The lady with the walker calls out, "Oh, Mailman," and Zinkoff visits with a mother who sits in the yard with her baby, Claudia, on a leash. Sometimes he rides his bike to Halftank Hill, and runs down it, relishing the freedom. In Chapter 18, "Best Friend," he takes a test at school that asks about his preferences. It asks who his best friend is, and he has no answer. He fills in the name of a boy he hardly knows, Hector Binns. Later, he tells Hector about this, and Hector says he wrote that his best friend was "Nobody," which is the name of his pet lizard. Hector reluctantly agrees to try a friendship but he is strange. He digs wax from his ear and saves it, intending to make a candle. Zinkoff thinks this is great.

Chapters 16-18 Analysis

Chapter 16, "Field Day," delivers the body blow the author had promised. Only the younger children manage to have fun anymore at this event, and Zinkoff's terrible

performance, despite his best efforts, earns him the name that is the novel's title. Zinkoff is no longer unaware of the cruelties of the other children, and he is so hurt that he bursts into tears the moment Polly mentions winning. The time that was foreshadowed previously has now arrived when a kind and happy child is faced with cruelty. He must now look within himself to find the strength to overcome the meanness of others. True to form, his father knows what to do. Mr. Zinkoff sacrifices precious gas to take his child on a drive for fun. It is poignant that something so simple as driving around the neighborhood could give the boy and his father such pleasure. A drive with no destination symbolizes that the journey itself is what really counts, not the goal that is reached. This is also the significance of Mr. Zinkoff coaxing his clunker along the way. His son later makes a comparison between the car and himself, in which he realizes that the shortcomings of the vehicle are not what counts. More important is the faith Mr. Zinkoff places in the car, and the care he gives to it.

Chapter 17, "What the Clocks Say," returns Zinkoff to the nastiness of his classmates who are now in fifth grade. They do not call him a loser to his face, which indicates cowardice and manipulation. It seems to him as though the word is coming from the clocks. This shows that Zinkoff still has some of the unawareness of a little boy, which will pass in time, represented by the clocks. Protected for now by the business of growing up, he visits Willow Street occasionally, which keeps him connected to an important day in his life, when he learned something from his father about the rewards of contributing to the world through work. The Willow Street visits also reintroduce the reader to the Waiting Man and the lady with the walker, as well as introducing two new characters in the little girl on the leash, Claudia, and her mother. Claudia, who is being tied up for her own good, is reminiscent of how Zinkoff's exuberant nature is reined in by others. In Chapter 18, "Best Friend," Zinkoff notices for the first time that close friendship is missing from his life. He does something about it. He identifies a potential best friend, approaches him, and immediately develops an appreciation of the other boy's preoccupation, even though it is a strange hobby. Just being in on Hector's secret is a reward for Zinkoff.

Chapters 19-21

Chapters 19-21 Summary

Chapter 19, "The Candy in His Hand," begins with Zinkoff announcing casually but proudly to his family that he has a best friend who loves black licorice and is making a candle out of his earwax. A few days later, he visits Binns at home, meets Nobody the lizard, and is shown a secret stash of earwax in a pill bottle. Determined to be an excellent best friend, Zinkoff spends a lot of time with Binns, begins eating black licorice, and decides Binns is the most interesting person he knows, alongside the Waiting Man. To be more interesting himself, Zinkoff decides to always carry a clump of petrified bubblegum that little Claudia picked out of the gutter and gave him as a present, which will be Zinkoff's lucky piece. Binns comes for a sleepover that does not work well, because Binns kicks and turns, forcing Zinkoff to sleep on the floor. Binns shows no interest in going to Willow Street to meet everyone there. When Zinkoff presents Binns with his own earwax, Binns rejects it. Chapter 20, "Nowhere," begins with Zinkoff not understanding for weeks that it is over. Binns does not want to be friends anymore. Not long afterward, Zinkoff gets his first "A" on a major test. The teacher, Mrs. Shankfelder, holds it up and says it is the only "A" on the geography test in the class, and he gets a standing ovation. All day, everyone congratulates him. They call him the Z man, the genius, and the Zinkster. It never occurs to Zinkoff that the children are mocking him.

When the others stop smiling at him, except for a few like Katie Snelsen, he thinks it is because Field Day is coming. He begins practicing races in the back yard. When Zinkoff and Gary Hobin are chosen for the same team, the Yellows, Hobin tells him he cannot be a Yellow. Zinkoff asks the other team captains if he can join their teams, but all reject him. He continues to practice, but does not know what to do. On Field Day, he skips school and walks to Willow Street. Nobody is around except the lady with the walker, who invites him inside. Chapter 21, "Something Hard and Thorny," describes his visit with the old lady, who moves extremely slowly. She makes them peanut butter and jelly sandwiches with no jelly, and they eat without speaking. Zinkoff tells her about the Waiting Man who awaits his brother, and she asks the brother's name, a question that Zinkoff has never considered. Fearing she will ask his name and stop calling him "Mailman," he starts speaking quickly, about being able to spell "tintinnabulation," and getting an "A" in geography, and he asks if she has any stars. She produces a turkey sticker, which he puts on his shirt. He tells her about his favorite teachers, Miss Meeks and Mr. Yalowitz, and Jabip, and Andrew Orwell and Hector Binns and the Furnace Monster. He shows her his lucky pink bubblegum stone. When he leaves, the school day is over and he feels refreshed.

Chapters 19-21 Analysis

In Chapter 19, "The Candy in His Hand," Zinkoff's poorly concealed happiness at having a best friend is evidence of his warm nature, as is his determination to be the best of best friends. The clump of petrified bubblegum that Claudia gave Zinkoff represents his interpretation of how to be as interesting as Binns, with his earwax collection, but it also is a new good luck charm that he treasures because it was a gift, even though it came from the gutter. This, too, is typical of Zinkoff's warmth of feeling. Binns does not reach such heights. He displays no interest in what Zinkoff likes to do, he wants to collect only his own earwax, and he is even such a "selfish" sleeper that Zinkoff cannot stay in the same bed with him. Chapter 20, "Nowhere," describes the inevitable decline of a one-sided friendship. Once again, Zinkoff has failed and he rebounds quickly by taking pleasure in the next good thing to happen, which is the "A" on the text. The novel's pattern of ups and downs continues as the congratulations of his schoolmates turn out to be a way of making fun of him, which, in his typical fashion, Zinkoff does not realize. When Hobin bans him from the Yellow team, Zinkoff approaches and is rejected by each of the other teams. In effect, the students have banned him from school for the day, and in his disappointment, he seeks solace in the place of good memories for him, Willow Street.

In Chapter 21, "Something Hard and Thorny," Zinkoff and the lady with the walker have a real conversation for the first time. Up to this point, the old lady has done little more than wave and call, "Oh, mailman," to him. In her house, the old lady's extreme slowness makes Zinkoff jumpy, but he gradually warms to her and begins telling her about his life. She does not have much to say in return, but shows interest, and that's all the support he needs. In the way of people with truly loving natures, Zinkoff does not demand much in return for the interest and emotion he puts into relationships. When all the recent events of his life pour out of him as she listens, it is a way for him to cope with sadness and disappointment. All he needs is a sympathetic ear from someone who he believes likes him, and the simple human interchange with that person is enough to give him renewed vitality.

Chapters 22-24

Chapters 22-24 Summary

At the start of Chapter 22, "Boondocks Forever," Zinkoff goes back to school the next day to discover that the Yellows won big, and all the team members are wearing gold medals that look just like Olympic medals except they're plastic. Gary Hobin is absolutely full of himself for the rest of the school year. During the graduation ceremony, Zinkoff sits with the orchestra and makes a couple of terrible squeaks with his flute. Awards are given, and Katie Snelsen, who has smiled at Zinkoff in the past, wins a prize for having the best grades. Zinkoff cannot see his family, but he spots Mr. Yalowitz, who does not have to be present, since he teaches fourth grade. It suddenly hits Zinkoff that he is graduating, and he feels tearful. His name is called last to receive his diploma, but on the way to receive it, he trips and sprawls, causing laughter. He laughs, too. He hears a voice shriek, "Go, Donald," and he spots Polly sitting on their father's shoulders beside their mother. At the back of the room, Mr. Yalowitz smiles and gives Zinkoff the thumbs-up. In Chapter 23, "Vanished," it is summertime. Zinkoff rides his bike, and plays Monopoly with whomever he can find, including his parents, his Uncle Stanley, the Oh Mailman Lady, and even Polly. The family goes on vacation to the beach, they return, and before he knows it, summer is over. He goes to Monroe Middle School, which is big and scary, with no playground or recess.

One day at school he sees Andrew Orwell, who is much taller now, and who looks down on Zinkoff with disinterest. He calls himself Drew now, he says. Zinkoff enjoys sitting anywhere he likes in class, and he goes early to get the front row, center seat. He joins many clubs, but drops them because of band practice. He is a terrible marcher. The kids play basketball outside the school, but no one ever chooses Zinkoff. He is unseen at this school, less than a loser. He is nobody. In Chapter 24, "Snow," the weather is changing with the season. When the first heavy snow comes, the kids start snowball fights, but they are interrupted by the flashing lights of police cars and emergency vehicles, all headed for Willow Street. He races there, and overhears talk of a little girl lost. It is Claudia, the girl on the leash, and the flashing lights are clustered at her house. He pulls off his wet woolen glove and reaches into his pocket for the lucky bubblegum stone, Claudia's gift. Zinkoff thinks of things the little girl has said to him, and of his conversations with her mother. He tries to put his glove on again, but it is too cold, so he takes off the other one and puts the pair on the step of a nearby house. He starts walking, ignoring the snowball fight that is continuing. He walks to the next block, which is quieter. He has only one thought in mind: he must find Claudia. He walks on.

Chapters 22-24 Analysis

Zinkoff's discovery at the start of Chapter 22, "Boondocks Forever," that the Yellows have triumphed in his absence is yet another blow to his self-esteem. Not only did Hobin and the others reject him as a teammate on the grounds that he make them lose,

but as if to prove their point, they won big without him. Hobin's delight in himself for his performance during the Field Day is typical of a child's egotism but it also is a familiar trait in adults who never learn humility and bodes ill for the sort of grown-up Hobin might become. At graduation, Zinkoff continues with his usual unwelcome disruptions by making people cringe at the mistakes he makes playing flute in the band. His main concern during the ceremony is that he cannot see his parents, which emphasizes his reliance on loved ones for emotional support. Zinkoff's tearfulness when the sight of Mr. Yalowitz makes him realize he will be leaving Satterfield Elementary seems almost astonishing, even at this late point in the reader's association with Zinkoff. How the boy could still feel love and attachment to this school after being ill-treated by students there for so many years seems hard to imagine, and yet, that capacity for selfless appreciation is typical of Zinkoff. By the same token, Zinkoff trips and falls when he goes to accept his diploma is true to his character, which makes the consolation all the more poignant when he sees Polly, his parents, and Mr. Yalowitz applauding him.

Chapter 23, "Summertime," provides a transition between elementary school and middle school that is necessary but not particularly noteworthy, except for the sense of freedom Zinkoff enjoys during the vacation. This suggests that one day, after his dubious pleasures and his difficulties in school are finished, he might have a chance to feel truly free and to enjoy life. His arrival at the middle school is immediately foreboding. It is big and impersonal, and he soon trades being a loser for being invisible. Chapter 24, "Snow," begins hopefully, because most of the children are looking forward to snowy weather and the fun it will offer. They do not have much chance to enjoy playing in the first snow of the season before trouble in Willow Street attracts their attention. By the time Zinkoff overhears that Claudia is missing, his hands already are wet and cold from snowball fights, and he removes his gloves, which foreshadows trouble. He begins to walk without gloves, alone, in a snowstorm to search for a missing little girl. It's a brave to thing to do, and his determination is praiseworthy, but the reader cannot tell whether the effort will end in discovery of Claudia or in some other way. The most dramatic part of the novel has begun.

Chapters 25-27

Chapters 25-27 Summary

In Chapter 25, "Claudia," Zinkoff whispers the little girl's name as he walks down the street in snow that is getting deeper, rising above his ankles. He crisscrosses the street, trying not to miss any place she might be. Occasionally, he looks behind himself and sees the spinning lights of the emergency vehicles in the distance, which reassures him that the others are still searching, too. Imagining Claudia, he can almost hear her voice, but the snow makes everything very quiet. A snowplow goes by, and he calls out for it to stop, because it might run over Claudia, but the driver does not hear him. Suddenly, it occurs to him that she would not be on the street. More likely, she would be in an alley, where children play. In Chapter 26, "What a Kid Is," Zinkoff is still whispering Claudia's name as he searches. He now cannot tell if it is snowing unless he turns his face skyward. He trips and falls. He clutches his lucky bubblegum stone. Zinkoff crosses one street after another to get into the darkness of the alleys. He goes behind Claudia's house, but sees nothing and trudges onward. His pockets have become as cold and wet as his hands. He thinks about how he used to love running free and how his sister Polly actually did run away once with heir father following at a safe distance until she finally noticed him, sat down in the street, and he carried her home on his shoulders.

In Chapter 27, "Himself," Zinkoff explores one alley after another, sucking on his bubblegum stone to keep it warm. He can no longer feel the snowflakes on any part of his face except his lips. Looking up, he thinks of the snowflakes as stars. He trips, falls, and suddenly screams Claudia's name into the silence. It occurs to him that his mother will be angry that he went out without his hat. Zinkoff thinks of the Waiting Man, and wonders if he ever went to Vietnam in search of his brother. Perhaps he did go, and was there for a long time. He daydreams about a voice from the future saying that everyone searched for Claudia, who was never found. He presses on, not feeling his feet anymore. His mind wanders, and then the snow turns to freezing rain that wakes him up. He did not realize he had lain down and fallen asleep. He jumps up, barks Claudia's name, and calls out to the other searchers. He thinks he calls out and he is not sure. He walks into a garage door and then imagines that the Oh Mailman Lady is inviting him in for cocoa. Through chattering lips, he spells and sings "tintinnabulation." His thoughts touch on many fragments of subjects, including Polly, snickerdoodle cookies, earwax candles, the Yellow team, Jabip and Jaboop, and his fourth-grade teacher, Mr. Yalowitz. Lights flare up, blinding him. He tries to get away, knowing he must continue his search for Claudia, but cannot move, and a voice says, "Hold on, son, I gotcha."

Chapters 25-27 Analysis

At first, during Zinkoff's search in Chapter 25, "Claudia," he only whispers the little girl's name as he wanders the streets, looking in every corner. He is comforted by the lights of the emergency vehicles and feels like part of the team. The reader gets the

impression of quiet determination, which creates a sense that maybe Zinkoff will succeed in his quest. His concern that the snowplow might run over her suggests that his thinking is not entirely clear, but then the reasonable idea comes to him that Claudia might be in alley. In Chapter 26, "What a Kid Is," Zinkoff still whispers her name but now he is clutching the bubblegum stone. Zinkoff identifies the stone with Claudia, who gave it to him, and until he can clutch her hand and lead her to safety, the next best thing he can do is hold the lucky stone. Now he begins to fall down and his pockets are wet and cold, which means he has no way to warm his hands. The harsh weather is slowly starting to overcome his body, if not his spirit. He begins to daydream, comparing his own joy of freedom when he was very young to that of Claudia escaping the leash, and of his sister Polly when she once ran away. Zinkoff understands the thrill of that early sense of freedom, and he identifies with Claudia. In a sense, saving her would be like his father saving Polly when she ran off. It would be like saving himself.

At the start of Chapter 27, "Himself," Zinkoff is now sucking on the bubblegum stone to keep it warm. In some part of his mind, Zinkoff must be reasoning that if he cannot keep Claudia warm, he at least will keep the lucky stone warm by putting it in his mouth, even though it came from the gutter. His identification with Claudia and his fierce desire to save her is frustrated by the darkness and the cold, but he will not give up. Even as his mind wanders and he begins to lose his grip on reality, Zinkoff does not lose track of his mission, to find the little girl. The only time he gives up the search is when he is completely overcome by the cold and falls asleep without even realizing it, and when the freezing rain awakens him, he is outraged. For the first time, his determination displays itself as anger, because that emotion has the best chance of keeping him awake. It is also a signal, however, that on some level he realizes his task is doomed to failure. Even when the rescuer takes Zinkoff in hand, he tries to back away and keep on going, although he cannot move. His body is exhausted but Zinkoff's will remains strong.

Chapters 28-30

Chapters 28-30 Summary

Zinkoff is warm and hears voices at the start of Chapter 28, "Grounded." His eyes are closed and he recognizes his father, his mother, and his Uncle Stanley talking to another man, who is telling them that Zinkoff did not say why he was walking in the snow. The adults think he might have been running away, which prompts Mr. Zinkoff to recall the time Polly ran away. Suddenly, Zinkoff remembers Claudia, and his eyes pop open. He is in his parents' bed and Polly is looking at him. Soon his whole family is around the bed, asking what happened. He explains that he was looking for Claudia all night, and they are amazed. Zinkoff is afraid they will say she is dead, but they tell him she was found in a neighbor's garage shortly after being lost. Zinkoff does not understand. The rescuers must have been looking for someone. His mother explains that they were looking for him. After this sinks in, Zinkoff asks if today is a no-school "snow day." When he hears that it is, he tries to leap out of bed but his mother says he is grounded until he recovers. Polly produces the bubblegum stone, and Zinkoff anxiously gets their mother to make her give it to him. She asks if he wants to explain why it was in his mouth and, after a moment, Zinkoff says no. The phone rings, and relatives and neighbors start coming to the house. Claudia arrives and pounces on Zinkoff, kissing him a dozen times. Claudia's mother says nothing. She merely pulls Zinkoff into an embrace and will not let go.

In Chapter 29, "Still There," the family stays up until almost midnight, talking. Zinkoff's parents tell him about the search party that was mounted after he did not come home.

Mr. Zinkoff asks where his son was looking, and he replies that he was mostly in the alleys. Zinkoff, who has asked to stay on the couch, cannot sleep. Finally, he sneaks outside, looks at the stars, and when he gets back under the covers, he is soon asleep. In Chapter 30, "Zinkoff," it is an in-service day at the middle school, and all the teachers are indoors while the students play outside. Two boys, Bonce and Tuttle, are throwing a football. Tuttle throws it to Zinkoff. When the ball goes through his arms and hits him in the chest, the boys laugh. They are joined by Hobin and a boy named Janski. Hobin explains that Zinkoff is a nobody. Janski remarks that Zinkoff was the kid who was out all night looking for Claudia. Bonce asks if he was frozen, but the other boys just think Zinkoff was stupid. When Tuttle and Bonce choose sides for a basketball game, neither one picks Zinkoff, but he will not go away. Zinkoff simply stares at Bonce, who reflects that he would like to ask Zinkoff what it was like, being out in the freezing cold for seven hours. He thinks of ways to reject Zinkoff but finally realizes there is only thing to do. He chooses Zinkoff, and the game begins.

Chapters 28-30 Analysis

In Chapter 28, "Grounded," the guess by Zinkoff's parents that he might have been running away is useful to the story for two reasons. First, Mr. Zinkoff's story of Polly running away serves to bring Zinkoff's sleepy mind back to Claudia, causing him to snap awake. Second, the guess that Zinkoff might have been trying to escape his home adds power to the real reason for his absence, which is just the opposite: he was trying to bring a child safely back to her home.

It is not surprising that Zinkoff's first thought is that Claudia is dead. He has not had a history of success in things he has tried to do, and it is perhaps natural that he would now fear the worst. At first, the news that Claudia was found very quickly seems to make Zinkoff's search meaningless. It was just another mistake, another failure, but events move too quickly for this idea to occur to him. His initial concern that Polly will not give back the bubblegum stone is followed by his mother's question about why he had it in his mouth. In deciding not to answer, Zinkoff keeps something of himself to himself. This is a sign of maturity. He does not need to confess everything all the time. His connection to Claudia and her mother goes beyond explanations. When Claudia arrives with the other guests and kisses him repeatedly, followed by the long, wordless embrace of her mother, everything important about what he did and what it meant is clear.

When Zinkoff and his family discuss the search and rescue in Chapter 29, "Still There," it is really just a lingering over the details of an amazing experience. His parents and Uncle Stanley are respectful and moved by Zinkoff's heroic effort. His failure to find Claudia is irrelevant. The attempt itself was gloriously triumphant. Zinkoff does not seem to fully understand this. He was just being Zinkoff, and yet, when he cannot sleep that night, the reassurance toward which he turns is his lifelong inspiration of the stars, and then he can rest. In Chapter 30, "Zinkoff," at first middle school seems no different after Zinkoff's adventure than it was ever was for him. The better athletes still make fun of him. He still stands on the fringes, looking in, but never accepted. Nobody thinks he is a hero. Everyone still regards him as a nobody, and Zinkoff gives no indication that he would expect otherwise. He does not think of himself as a hero. Even so, when Bonce thinks about Zinkoff wandering in the cold all that time, he is impressed. He wants to know more. Zinkoff's determination and his persistence are compelling. Bonce does not want to pick Zinkoff on his team, but Zinkoff will not go away. He stares, with that same persistence and determination that served him so well on his trek through the snow. Zinkoff failed to find Claudia, and when Bonce finally chooses him on the team, Zinkoff undoubtedly will play poorly. Nevertheless, the game begins, and Zinkoff is in it. Sometimes, just to play the game is to win. It is easy to imagine that Zinkoff, the loser, has a future ahead of him that will be victorious in the most important ways.

Characters

Donald Zinkoff

Donald Zinkoff, the main character, is beginning first grade when the novel opens, and he is in sixth grade when it ends. During those years, he changes and yet remains the same, as do all young people. the central trait in his personality is his kindness, which also could be described as his ability to love. This characteristic is perhaps overshadowed by Zinkoff's personal style, which is marked by naivety, physical awkwardness, and often inappropriate bursts of hilarity. In the early chapters, he has a physical condition that causes him to vomit unexpectedly. He is a mediocre student and terrible at sports yet he passionately loves school and games. As he and his classmates grow older, they develop scorn for him and he becomes the "loser" of the novel's title. Remarkably, Zinkoff never fully succumbs to the cruelties of his classmates. He often does not even realize they are making fun of him, because he always looks for the good in others and does not hold suspicion in his heart. If someone does succeed in hurting him, Zinkoff manages to overcome the pain by turning to his family or other friends for warmth and reassurance. True to the mean nickname he is given, Zinkoff generally does lose at almost everything at least in the usual sense of losing. The interesting thing is that he never stops trying and never loses faith in himself for long. In the end, his love of life, and of himself, and his desire to help others carry him to a triumph that goes beyond conventional definitions of winning or success.

Mr. Zinkoff

Mr. Zinkoff, Donald's father, is a mailman and a good family man. Donald can always rely on him in times of difficulty or need. Throughout the novel, Mr. Zinkoff is not only supportive and encouraging to his son, but he also makes good choices about how to react when Donald is sad or worried. Mr. Zinkoff is not the kind of person to discuss problems at length, but he understands that the best way to help his son is often simply to spend time with him. Mr. Zinkoff nurses a series of clunker cars throughout the years covered in the novel but he never seems to grow discouraged as one after another of them dies. In the same way, he sees and finds the best in his son, and never shows concern over Donald's shortcomings in school or on the athletic field. Mr. Zinkoff is an uncomplicated man who shows pride about his work as a mailman and who values his family life. He is a good, quiet and unremarkable man, but steadfast, and deserving of Donald's love for him, if not of the heroic image his son has of the letter carrier fighting all manner of obstacles to deliver the mail.

The Oh Mailman Lady

The Oh Mailman Lady is an old woman who lives on Willow Street, a few blocks from Zinkoff's house. Relying on a walker, she moves very slowly. Zinkoff never learns her

name and during the course of the novel, he switches from calling her the lady with the walker to the Oh Mailman Lady. Zinkoff first met her when his father took him on a pretend mail delivery run on a Sunday and always after that, the old lady calls out, "Oh, mailman," whenever she sees Zinkoff. The Oh Mailman Lady has watery eyes, white hair, and skin so thin and pale it seems almost transparent to Zinkoff. She is not very bright or chipper during the one lengthy encounter she has with Zinkoff but she is interested in him, which is what he needs from her. She is an important figure in the novel because of what she represents. Essentially, she is a stranger to Zinkoff but he feels as though she is a friend and she responds to him in a friendly way. That rarely happens to Zinkoff in this book. Most of the children his age treat him with barely concealed contempt and even some of his teachers do not care for him. The Oh Mailman Lady treats him with common courtesy just as people generally do with a mail carrier. It is not much to ask but Zinkoff treasures this decency in her.

The Waiting Man

The Waiting Man appears only behind the window of his house throughout the book. He never speaks to anyone and never moves. Despite this, he is an important character in the novel and a powerful symbol. Zinkoff's father tells his son that the Waiting Man is awaiting the return of his brother, who was reported as missing in action during the Vietnam War more than thirty years earlier. This idea, that a man would wait patiently in one place for so long, never losing hope that a missing family member might return, captivates Zinkoff's imagination. Such loyalty and determination strike him as surely worthy of reward. At one point, he even thinks of dressing up in a uniform to imitate the missing brother, until he realizes that would be cruel. To Zinkoff, the Waiting Man represents endurance against all odds, and fortitude in the face of pain. Zinkoff might not know it consciously but what he sees and admires in the Waiting Man is also the best in himself.

Mrs. Zinkoff

Like her husband, Mrs. Zinkoff is a good parent to Donald. To her falls the unenviable task of keeping her energetic son from running out in the street when he is too young to go by himself, or keeping him at home when he is recuperating from surgery. In much of the novel, she is preoccupied with Donald's little sister, Polly, who is born near the beginning of the story. Mrs. Zinkoff's role in the book is to be a supportive mother, which she does well, but without much distinction. She is more of a stereotype than a fully fleshed character.

Polly Zinkoff

Polly Zinkoff is Donald's little sister. She is a baby throughout much of the book and her role is limited to acting as an alarm system for her mother if Zinkoff tries to leave the house when he should stay home, because Polly always loudly yells, "Bye!" to

whomever goes out. Later, Polly becomes a typically loyal but mischievous little sister, who yells her approval from the audience when Donald graduates from elementary school.

Andrew Orwell

Andrew Orwell is Zinkoff's next door neighbor at the start of the novel. Orwell, also six years old at the time, is a spoiled and selfish child who says his father is just waiting to get them out of the neighborhood. Zinkoff meets Orwell years later, at middle school, when Orwell has grown much taller, has changed his name to Drew, and has no time for Zinkoff.

Hector Binns

Hector Binns is a boy in Zinkoff's class whom Zinkoff tries to befriend after being asked a question in a personality test at school that makes him realize he does not have a best friend. Binns, who is obsessed with collecting his earwax to make a candle, is evasive and indifferent throughout the boys' brief friendship. Binns soon avoids Zinkoff to end the relationship.

Mr. Yalowitz

Mr. Yalowitz is Zinkoff's fourth-grade teacher and the first teacher he has who truly seems to appreciate the boy's good qualities. Mr. Yalowitz is quick-witted and upbeat. He seats Zinkoff in the front row and encourages him frequently. Zinkoff loves him.

Gary Hobin

Gary Hobin is one of the best athletes at the elementary school. Zinkoff is on his fourth-grade team in the annual Field Day athletic derby, but in fifth grade, Hobin forbids Zinkoff to compete on the same team. In middle school, Hobin continues to scorn Zinkoff. Symbolic of the self-involved school athlete who thinks his prowess on the playing field means everything, Hobin never sees anything good in Zinkoff.

Claudia

Claudia is a little girl who lives on Willow Street and is kept on a leash by her doting mother. When she gets lost, Zinkoff walks for hours in a snowstorm to find her. Later, little Claudia kisses Zinkoff repeatedly in reward for his effort.

Miss Meeks

Miss Meeks is Zinkoff's first-grade teacher. A veteran of three decades' teaching, she will retire at the end of the year and does not want trouble from any students, but she grows to appreciate Donald and he considers her to be his other favorite teacher in elementary school after Mr. Yalowitz.

Mrs. Biswell

Mrs. Biswell is Zinkoff's second-grade teacher. She does not like children and especially does not like Zinkoff.

Katie Snelsen

Katie Snelsen is the best student at the elementary school and one of the few children to smile at Zinkoff.

Bonce

Bonce is one of the middle school boys who do not want Zinkoff to play pick-up basketball with them. Bonce is a little different from the others however. He is intrigued by Zinkoff's long trek to find Claudia. In the end, despite his own misgivings, Bonce picks Zinkoff to play on his basketball team, revealing a small but vital kindness.

Objects/Places

John W. Satterfield Elementary School

John W. Satterfield Elementary School is where much of the action of the novel takes place. It is a typical school with no distinguishing characteristics and minimally described.

The Zinkoff Home

The Zinkoff home is never described except for the cellar where Zinkoff tries to make himself go in the dark to rid himself of his fear of the Furnace Monster. The cellar has wires, strange machinery, and dark corners.

Willow Street

Willow Street is a street a few blocks from Zinkoff's house where he goes to visit with people he met as young boy one Sunday on a mock mail delivery run with his father. It is is more important as a representation of a happy place for Zinkoff than as an actual setting.

Halftank Hill

Halftank Hill is a hill in the neighborhood down which children sled in winter and bike or run in the warm months. Zinkoff goes there to feel free.

Heatherwood

Heatherwood is an upscale neighborhood to which Andrew Orwell moves with his family after his father gets a promotion at work. It is a neighborhood of houses that have driveways and a front tree in the yard. No scene in the novel is set there.

Monroe Middle School

Monroe Middle School is a big and impersonal school in Zinkoff's eyes when compared to Satterfield Elementary. He goes there in sixth grade toward the end of the book.

Snickerdoodles

Snickerdoodles are Zinkoff's favorite cookies. He bakes one for Andrew when the Orwell family moves to the neighborhood, and in one scene, Zinkoff discusses snickerdoodles with the Oh Mailman Lady. The cookie symbolizes the good things in life.

Clunkers

The clunkers are a series of used cars Mr. Zinkoff buys and attempts to keep in working order, which fail time after time throughout the novel. Mrs. Zinkoff and Donald call them clunkers, but not to Mr. Zinkoff's face, for fear of hurting his feelings. The clunkers symbolize the importance of hope, perseverance, and nurturing.

The Bubblegum Stone

The lucky bubblegum stone is a piece of hardened gum that little Claudia found in the gutter and gave as a present to Zinkoff. He keeps it as a lucky talisman, at first because he thinks it might make him more interesting but later because it represents friendship, which is an emotion he treasures.

Alleys

Alleys are places of freedom and exploration for Zinkoff in his early life but when he is in sixth grade and searches for Claudia in alleys during a snowstorm, an alley almost becomes his place of death. In the book, alleys represent the risks and rewards of being true to oneself.

Athletic Fields

Athletic fields appear periodically throughout the novel. They represent challenge to the physically awkward Zinkoff and also a kind of foreboding, because it never seems likely that they will yield anything good for him. Even so, on a basketball court at the end of the novel, he achieves the triumph of acceptance, which is more important than winning a game.

Themes

The Meaning of Success

The meaning of success is a particularly important theme in the literature of wealthy and capitalistic societies, of which America is perhaps the world's most prominent example. In childhood, before success is measured by the attainment of riches, power, and fame, it is measured in school accomplishments. Athletic ability, high grades, good looks, and popularity are the measures of success in school. Students with none of these qualities have little chance of being considered successful, and might well be labeled nerds, geeks, or, as in Zinkoff's case, losers. This novel questions the validity of those measures of success, and offers an alternative definition. In so doing, it challenges basic assumptions that drive our society. In America, much lip service is given to the value of being kind and caring, but examples can be seen on all sides of people who achieve wealth, fame, and power by being aggressive and self-serving. Indeed, it could be argued that sacrificing for others is a fool's errand. In this novel, Jerry Spinelli questions whether athletic ability or even good grades should be used in assessing a young person's success as a human being. The argument he presents through the novel's action is that all competitive measures of success, which pit a person's skills or gifts against those of others, are inadequate tools. Success is not a quality that can be determined through competition. It is a standard of goodness that has nothing to do with, say, sports or money. Through his novel, Spinelli suggests that success is spiritual in nature. The true measures of a successful person are kindness, loyalty, and a loving attitude toward oneself and others.

Never Give Up

Beset as Zinkoff is by failure at every turn in this novel, it would be easy to imagine him just giving up. He could stop playing sports. He could quit the band. He could muddle along in the classroom and live quietly at the margins of school. Not only does he continue to involve himself fully in school life, despite his recurring failures, but he keeps in his heart and mind an active love of all these experiences. Zinkoff does not realize he is a failure because he does not think of himself that way. When he finally recognizes that other students consider him to be a loser, he is saddened by their treachery and unkindness rather than by a sense of his own inadequacy. What he really fails to do is give up. The author, Jerry Spinelli, is not suggesting that perseverance will finally win the day by turning a school outcast into a hero and that does not happen in the book. What Spinelli does suggest, though, is that continuing to strive in life is a trait that provides personal strength. Never giving up means continuing to have faith in oneself. It is a recognition that the journey in life is more important than the destination, because people are defined by what they do on the journey. Those who do not give up display courage and self-confidence even in the midst of adversity and sooner or later, others will notice these qualities. Only through perseverance and not through any development

of his sporting prowess, does Zinkoff finally gain a measure of acceptance by the school's athletes. Through his perseverance, people finally begin to see his true worth.

The Pressure to Conform

Zinkoff's woes in school probably would be much lessened if he did not stand out from the crowd. On his first day at Satterfield Elementary, he wears a gigantic giraffe hat that sets all the children giggling and makes Zinkoff's teacher worry that he will have a disturbing influence on the class. Of course, it is not Zinkoff's fault that a physical condition makes him vomit unexpectedly several times each week but his shouting with glee in class seems like a trait he should be able to control. Likewise, his bursts of laughter are often disruptive and they happen frequently in his first years of school. Zinkoff shows little inclination to change. Once, he tries to imitate the poor sportsmanship of his teammates when they lose a soccer game but his heart is not in it. Whether he was born different or learned a different view from his parents, or for both reasons, Zinkoff is a nonconformist. A question that the author, Jerry Spinelli, explores in the novel concerns the importance of conformity and nonconformity. He shows that conformity can make life easier. By the time Zinkoff leaves elementary school and goes to middle school, he has dropped many of his odd habits, yet his branding as a loser is merely adjusted to that of a nobody. At least as a loser he was somebody. Spinelli seems to be saying that conformity has its place in society but nonconformity also can be of value. Nonconformists may suffer by being different but that very quality of nonconformity also carries with it the potential for new insights. In the end, the value of nonconformity is not so much in the external qualities that Zinkoff eventually abandons, but in the internal qualities of independent thought and self-determination that he retains.

Style

Point of View

The story is narrated by the author, Jerry Spinelli, looking through the eyes of Donald Zinkoff. All of the book is written in the third-person "he," except the very beginning, when the author addresses the reader in the second-person "you." Looking only into Zinkoff's mind gives the author distance from the thoughts of all the other characters, which means he can concentrate on a deeper exploration of Zinkoff's emotional and mental experiences. It also creates space for the author to interject opinions and ideas as the narrator, which he mainly does through commentary on what it is like to be a kid in elementary school, particularly one who does not fit into the mainstream. Such a point of view has the potential to become rather preachy if the author comments too much, rather than following the thoughts of his character, but for the most part Spinelli avoids falling into that trap. Not knowing the thoughts of other characters could become dull for readers but Spinelli gets around this problem through dialogue and action that show what other characters are thinking. Zinkoff is required to be in every scene, since everything that happens is experienced through his eyes. For that reason, Spinelli's chosen point of view plays a role in how the plot unfolds, and in keeping a quite narrow scope to the story. Spinelli's hope must be that this tale of one boy, told through one boy's experience, can be applied in some way to the childhoods of all the book's readers.

Setting

The novel's settings are very localized. They include an elementary school, a middle school, the Zinkoff home, the house of their next-door neighbor, a few houses on nearby Willow Street, and a place called Halftank Hill. Some settings are even more localized such as a classroom in school, the cellar of Zinkoff's house, the front yard of a neighbor on Willow Street, or the Pee Wee League baseball field. The state, city, and suburb in which the action takes place are never named. All these settings are iconic, in the sense that every American has seen them. The author makes very little effort to describe them, apparently on the assumption that it is not necessary. For example, simply writing that a grammar school has a chalkboard in the room and a playground outside is all a reader needs to envision an elementary school. The author obviously has decided that the narrow boundaries of a child's life in his or her elementary school years need little description. The places that one child goes in America during these grade school years are similar for all middle-class children. Generations of writers have used this minimalist approach to place description, which relies on readers to fill in details from their individual experiences and memories.

Language and Meaning

The vocabulary in this book is not complicated as befits a novel for young readers. The story moves along at an easy pace, and to help keep it from becoming dull, each school year passes fairly quickly. This means the author can deal almost constantly with the changes in Zinkoff and his classmates as they grow through the first six years of school. Objects, places, and even people in this novel are symbolic of ideas or attitudes. For example, the bubblegum stone symbolizes hope and friendship, Halftank Hill is a place of freedom, Willow Street is full of neighborliness, the cellar in Zinkoff's house symbolizes fear of the unknown, and the playing field stands for the pressure in American society to be a winner. The Waiting Man symbolizes loyalty and perseverance, while the Oh Mailman Lady represents common decency, and neither character is even given an actual name. Many of the students in the book are called by their last names, which might be not unusual among schoolboys, but it also represents a lack of camaraderie or personal feeling. Only Zinkoff's family and a few other adults call him "Donald." He even identifies himself as "Zinkoff," which suggests he has not yet formed a complete view of who he is. The scene in which he first calls himself "Zinkoff" is amusing and one of the novel's strengths is that it often is funny, even when it deals with sad or unfortunate circumstances. The wit and lightheartedness of the novel are aids in conveying its serious messages.

Structure

This novel's structure is simple. It has thirty chapters where each chapter begins with the chapter number and a title. The titles always relate to the contents of that chapter and the exact word or phrase in the title may be repeated in the body of the text. There are no subdivisions in the novel such as "books" or "parts." The story progresses in a linear fashion with no flashbacks or flash-forwards. Time is telescoped, as the years fly by in Zinkoff's life from age six to twelve. The familiarity of people and places around him during these years helps to make the book's chronological structure effective, by providing touchstones that prevent the changes in Zinkoff over the years from seeming too sudden or unnatural. It would be hard to imagine a more straightforward and clean structure for a novel than this one.

Quotes

"Recess turns out to be just another name for life as he has always known it" (Chapter 6, "A Wonderful Question," pg. 20.)

"Many things tickle Zinkoff, but nothing more than the sound of a funny word" (Chapter 7, "Jabip," pg. 28.)

"Not only do funny things make him laugh, but nearly anything that makes him feel good might also make him laugh. In fact, sometimes bad things make him laugh" (Chapter 10, "Atrocious," pg. 51.)

"Everyone wonders why someone who does not like children ever became a teacher in the first place. As the years have gone by, Mrs. Biswell herself has begun to wonder" (Chapter 10, "Atrocious," pg. 52.)

"The thought, if he could catch it, would go something like this: Behind the front doors of houses incredible, impossible things are happening, and as soon as you lift the mail flapper they all disappear and all you see is an ordinary living room" (Chapter 11, "Mailman," pg. 70.)

"He hates to wait. He hates waiting more than anything else" (Chapter 13, "Waiting," pg. 79.)

"This is how Zinkoff at the age of eight imagines the inside of his head: a moving part, like an elbow or knee" (Chapter 13, "Waiting," pg. 81.)

"Though he cannot put his understanding into words, he understands that time by itself is nothing, is emptiness, and that a person is not made for emptiness" (Chapter 13, "Waiting," pg. 82.)

"Little-kid eyes are scoopers. They just scoop up everything they see and swallow it whole, no questions asked" (Chapter 15, "Discovered," pg. 98-99.)

"He knows that if he ever springs a leak or throws a gasket, his dad will be there with duct tape and chewing gum to patch him up, that no matter how much he rattles and knocks, he'll always be a honeybug to his dad, never a clunker" (Chapter 16, "Field Day," pg. 108.)

"Halfway down the hill he can feel himself losing control, his legs cannot keep up with his speed. He feels as if he is coming part, running out of himself, leaving himself behind" (Chapter 17, "What the Clocks Say," pg. 117.)

"He loves everything and everybody. He wants to hug the walls" (Chapter 22, "Boondocks Forever," pg. 157.)

"Police cars, emergency vehicles: a parade of them up the street, the snowy humps of parked cars pulsing in the swirling lights, people shouting, running, watching from the steps" (Chapter 24, "Snow," pg. 173.)

"He saw that a kid runs to be found and jumps to be caught. That's what being a kid is: found, caught" (Chapter 26, "What a Kid Is," pg. 185.)

Topics for Discussion

Especially when Zinkoff is quite young, he laughs almost uncontrollably. He laughs when he feels joyful or excited and sometimes even when bad things happen. What do you think it means that his reaction to things is so often laughter? What might explain this behavior and what does it tell us about Zinkoff?

Zinkoff's classmates brand him a loser and a nobody. Obviously, they see that he is awkward, mediocre in schoolwork, and bad in the band, but he also does not act like the other students. How big is the role of conformity in the condemnation of Zinkoff? Why is it so important to fit in and what does this say about society?

Zinkoff rarely seems to be aware of the harsh treatment he receives from his classmates. Even when they call him a loser behind his back, he often appears to be uncertain that the taunt is directed at him. Why do you think Zinkoff is like this? Is he simply clueless or is something else going on in his mind? Could it be that he is not fully in touch with his own feelings and if so, what are those feelings he is missing?

Mr. and Mrs. Zinkoff do not seem concerned about their son's performance in sports or the band or even in school studies. Do you think they should try harder to help him improve or are they doing the right thing? What is your assessment of them as parents?

Mr. Zinkoff tells his son the story of the Waiting Man. Do you think it is true that the man is waiting for his brother to return from war? Would it make a difference if that were not true? Why is Zinkoff so fascinated by the Waiting Man?

Why does Zinkoff like the Oh Mailman Lady? She is aggravatingly slow and does not have much to say. She is not even a relative. Why does he keep going back to see her? What do Zinkoff and this old woman have in common?

After Zinkoff stays out all night in freezing weather, searching for Claudia, the adults are impressed by his resolve. Zinkoff never seems to think of what he did as anything special. Why not? He is humble, of course, but what else does his attitude say about the kind of person he is?