

Night of the Whale Short Guide

Night of the Whale by Jerry Spinelli

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Overview

Night of the Whale treats problems of growing up and coming of age. At the center of it lie the kinds of rituals in which many recent high school graduates participate. It includes some trivial aspects of coming-of-age, such as beer drinking and staying up all night, but its focus is the theme of humankind's relationship to nature, especially in connection with stranded pilot whales, the sea, and the interconnection between all human beings. The theme of the value of individual capabilities is developed through Helene Hallewagen, known as Wags, who is confined to a wheelchair.

About the Author

Jerry Spinelli was born on February 1, 1941, in Norristown, Pennsylvania, where he spent his childhood, living in a brick row house in the West End. At sixteen, he wrote his first poem celebrating a victory of his high school football team. After a local paper published it, he claims that he stopped wanting to be a major league baseball player and started wanting to be a writer. He graduated from Gettysburg College with a bachelor's degree in 1963. In 1964 he received a master's degree in creative writing from Johns Hopkins University. He also attended Temple University in 1964.

He married Eileen Mesi, the mother of six children and herself a writer, in 1977. He and Eileen have had one more child.

During the years 1966 to 1989, when he worked for a technical publisher, Spinelli continued his desire to be a full-time author. He began his career as an author of adult novels that no one, he says, wanted to publish. He started writing for young adults after one of Eileen's children stole from the refrigerator some fried chicken that Jerry was saving for his lunch the next day.

This episode became the basis of the first chapter in *Space Station Seventh Grade*.

In 1991, he won a Boston Globe-Horn Book Award in fiction and a Newbery Medal for *Maniac Magee*.

Setting

Most of *Night of the Whale* is set in Ocean City, New Jersey, a family resort on the New Jersey coast. The story takes place right after the central characters graduate from high school. The day after the graduation ceremony, they travel to Ocean City to stay at the beach house of the parents of Helene Hallewagen, editor-in-chief of *The Acorn*, the high school newspaper for which they all worked. The use of the house is part of Wags's graduation gift.

On a trip from Ocean City to Wildwood, New Jersey, on the fifth day after graduation, their car breaks down, and they find a beach nearby, which they call Acorn Beach, but whose real name is Nelson's Cove.

Since they cannot make it to Wildwood, they decide to have a party at the beach. During the party, Digger Binns discovers the stranded whales.

Another setting is the Marine Mammal Stranding Center in Brigantine, New Jersey. The final setting is Dickinson College in Carlisle, Pennsylvania, where Warren Umlau, known as Mouse, goes to college and where he is writing the story about their trip to Ocean City.

Social Sensitivity

Night of the Whale does treat some very important issues. Central to it is humankind's responsibility to nature.

The episodes dealing with the stranded whales are exciting. They are handled realistically: Spinelli does not underplay the suffering of the whales, and he definitely shows that trying to rescue them is a largely futile activity.

Still, most of the characters in the book, including Mouse, the narrator, are convinced that it is one's duty to try to rescue them anyway. Hacksaw represents the opposing point of view, although he is not treated sympathetically, and he never speaks for himself.

Nonetheless, the book does present some problems. Its central humor is scatological, and its ideas about maturity are open to serious questions.

Mouse's idea that maturity can be measured in terms of things like chugging beer and mooning someone is never refuted or even questioned in the course of the novel.

According to the publishers of the Laurel Leaf edition of the book, it has a reading level of grades 5 to 6. Even though the editors of Booklist recommend it for high school students, it seems aimed not at high school seniors, as the identity of the central characters might indicate, but instead at Spinelli's usual audience, students in the seventh through ninth grades, who may read this novel after reading some of Spinelli's other works. The scatological humor, Mouse's smallness, his naivete about sexual and physical matters, and his ideas about maturity all indicate that Spinelli really has a fairly young audience in mind, one young enough to believe that chugging beer, eating a whole medium or large pizza, mooning someone, and hanging around a frozen food section wearing a tank shirt are signs of maturity.



Literary Qualities

In *Night of the Whale* Spinelli uses many of the attributes of great literature, but he uses them in a superficial, often simplistic way. In a sense, the novel is what religious scholar Joseph Campbell calls a monomythic adventure: It is a kind of traditional hero quest in which a hero ventures forth into a wilderness, usually one with supernatural attributes, encounters marvelous adventures and challenges, often involving slaying a dragon, and returns home a hero, having saved his culture. In the course of his adventures, the hero usually grows considerably. In this novel, however, the adventurers try to save rather than destroy the monstrous beasts they meet—whales, not dragons, although it is interesting that when they first see them, they mistake them for sharks.

The theme of initiation also is central to *Night of the Whale*. Mouse is especially interested in undergoing a successful initiation experience. But the initiation he desires has nothing to do with becoming a responsible member of adult society. Instead, it has to do with performing actions that he associates with college students. In other words, he wants to initiate himself into a peer group that he thinks is concerned with mostly trivial things like chugging beer and vomiting quietly. In the course of the novel, however, he does mature. He at least discovers and his friends discover that he is capable of physical endurance, so much so that toward the end of the book Wags calls him "big boy." In the last paragraph of the novel he says of himself, "I felt as though I were returning from across the universe. From another time," indicating that he at least feels that he has been on some kind of journey into an extraordinary realm.

Others also mature somewhat. Lauren learns that good looks are not the most important thing on Earth and that she can be beautiful even without her makeup on. The one who supposedly matures most significantly is Digger, the most immature of the group. At the end of the novel, he decides to stay at the Marine Mammal Stranding Center to help keep the baby calf alive. According to Wags, from this particular stranding, "There might be one whale there, but there's two survivors."

Sandy is amazed at the profundity of Wags's statement.



Themes and Characters

The central characters in *Night of the Whale* are Helene Hallewagen, Timmi Romano, Lauren Parmentier, Digger Binns, Breeze Brynofsky, and Warren Umlau. All except Breeze have just graduated from high school in Avon Oaks, Pennsylvania. They are on a graduation trip to Ocean City, New Jersey, where they are staying at a beach house owned by the Hallewagens. All five were on the staff of *The Acorn*, their high school newspaper.

Helene Hallewagen, called Wags, is the leader of the group. Paralyzed in a skiing accident during her junior year, she is confined to a wheelchair, but in no way allows her inability to walk to handicap her. She is extremely pretty and resourceful.

Timmi Romano was business manager of *The Acorn*. She worked harder on the paper than anyone else, and she continues to work during the graduation trip, doing most of the cleaning and cooking. She always wears a No.

44 football jersey.

Lauren Parmentier was girls' correspondent for *The Acorn*, and she wrote a column called "Beverly on Beauty."

She is beautiful, having been named Homecoming Queen, Queen of the May, and queen of everything else at Avon Oaks High School. Her boyfriend, Paul, is a midshipman and is supposed to meet her in Ocean City, but he never arrives, and she knows that he is not coming.

Digger Binns, associate editor and photographer for *The Acorn* is the least mature of all five of the central characters. He gets great pleasure from teasing the others, from taking pictures of them in compromising situations, especially Lauren, and from passing gas.

The first to sight the stranded whales, he grows considerably in the course of the novel, especially in connection with the attempt to rescue the whales and to keep alive the one whale that survives the beaching.

Breeze Brynofsky is the contributing editor of *The Acorn*. He wrote a column called "Breezin'" and one of his articles won a medal from the Freedoms Foundation at Valley Forge. He did not have enough credits to graduate. He tends to go his own way and do what he wants without concern for conformity. Toward the end of the novel, he walks off in his bathing suit with his towel over his neck and a pillowcase holding his meager belongings slung over his shoulder. He has gone, "for good," as Mouse puts it.

Warren Umlau is known as Mouse because he is so small, weighing only 113 pounds. He is the narrator and the central consciousness of the novel. He was reporter-at-large on *The Acorn*. He writes the novel in September at Dickinson College in Pennsylvania,



approximately three months after the narrated events take place. He views his trip to Ocean City as an attempt to prepare himself for college by completing a list of assignments he has made for himself. His list initially consists of seven items: "Pull all-nighter (see the sun rise);" "Chug a can of beer;" "Eat whole pizza (med. or lg.);" "See girl for first time and ask her out;" "Totally lose control;" "Hang around Acme frozen-food section wearing tank shirt for 1 hr. (simulates watching football game in December in T-shirt);" "Optional: moon someone." To these items he adds three more: "Learn to vomit quieter," "Drink the Gallon" (a paper cup as big as a bucket), and "Buy colored underwear." His idea of college consists of "woolen scarves and football weekends, strolls across moonlit quads, trysts in the library stacks," things he associates with the waitresses at the College Grille on the Ocean City Boardwalk, all of whom are college girls. Toward the end of the book he feels that he has accomplished a great deal because he is able to let out a string of burps that, he feels, any college senior would admire. The book in no way indicates that he at any time changes his mind about any of these things being indications of maturity, although he does end up discarding his colored underwear.

Night of the Whale has several important minor characters. Eric Rantley, also known as Rocket, who was with Wags when she had her accident, wants to have a sexual relationship with her. Digger hates Rocket. Sandy and Jim Hennigan work at the Marine Mammal Stranding Center and devote their lives to trying to rescue stranded marine mammals, especially whales.

They admit that they are unsuccessful in rescuing mammals as they try to help the beached pilot whales. Also important is a man called Hacksaw who works for the government. He thinks the best way to handle stranded whales is to euthanize them as soon as they reach the beach since they suffer considerably before they die. He carries a hypodermic needle so that he can destroy the whales and a hacksaw so that he can cut off their lower jaws to make their teeth available for examination to determine their ages.

Several themes are central to Night of the Whale, yet all are treated superficially. As Mouse's ideas of maturation indicate, the theme of initiation is treated from a very immature point of view. The character that is supposed to mature most significantly is Digger, yet no real evidence is given that the experience in Nelson's Cove has caused him to change.

Another pervasive theme of the book is humankind's relationship to nature.

Wags believes in and preaches a watered-down version of Emersonian unity; and Mouse experiences that kind of unity when confronted with the ocean when Wags sends him to the end of a jetty to watch the sunrise. The book is more sensitive in exploring what the relationship between humankind and nature should be in relation to the stranded whales, although Mouse's narrative weights things very much in favor of trying to rescue the whales rather than immediately euthanizing them. Still, of the twenty-nine whales stranded, the rescuers manage to tow four out to sea, of which two immediately rebeach themselves. A fisherman finds both the remaining whales in a tidal

marsh. At the end of the novel, only a baby whale taken to the Marine Mammal Stranding Center remains alive.

Mouse describes in detail the suffering of the beached whales. Also, at most one out of twenty-nine whales survives, whereas the other whales suffer considerably before they either die by themselves or Hacksaw euthanizes them. Even Sandy Hennigan recognizes that the chances of the calf's surviving are so slim that she says of unweaned whales from strandings: "I don't think any have been known to survive." The whales' horrible suffering and deaths seem to contradict the idea that trying to rescue them is the humane thing to do.



Topics for Discussion

1. Mouse equates maturity with physical prowess. Why is this an indication of his immaturity?

2. Lauren is initially shown as being vain and shallow. She is especially upset about the idea that her friends might discover that Paul has dumped her. Yet she ends up being admirable.

What happens to her to cause the change in Mouse's and the reader's view of her?

3. Is the most admirable character in the novel Wags? Why?

4. The book's title as well as the last third of the book center on the attempt to rescue the whales. Should the people attempt to rescue them, or should they do what Hacksaw wants?

5. At the end of the novel, Digger will stay to help take care of the surviving calf. Yet Sandy has not yet told him that the calf has very little, if any, chance of surviving. Should she tell him at once, or is she right to let him remain hopeful for a while?

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. The central ethical question in the novel involves saving the whales. To help determine whether Hacksaw or Sandy and Jim Hennigan are right about what should be done with the stranded whales, do some research about whale strandings. Popular news magazines, like Time and Newsweek, periodically run articles about strandings. They are indexed in The Readers' Guide to Periodical Literature that may be in your school library. Also, articles appear from time to time in various newspapers about strandings. Some of these newspapers, like the New York Times, may also be indexed in your library. What kinds of facts and figures concerning survival rates do these sources present? What do they suggest is the appropriate action to take in connection with stranded whales?

2. Investigate what humankind's relationship to wild animals should be.

In connection with this topic, you may want to correspond with the National Parks Service about the way that animals are treated in the winter in Yellowstone National Park or with your own state's parks department.

3. Compare and contrast Night of the Whale to some of the more traditional stories of heroic adventure, such as "Jack and the Beanstalk" or even Homer's The Odyssey. Try to determine in what ways the characters in Night of the Whale, especially Mouse and Digger, resemble or do not resemble traditional quest heroes and in what ways their adventures are or are not similar to those of traditional quest heroes.

4. What is the role of the ocean itself in the book? In particular, what kinds of ideas does Mouse connect with the ocean? In what ways does the ocean become symbolic when Mouse views it at sunrise?

5. One of the most appealing aspects of this book is the way Wags is treated.

Examine her treatment carefully. What is her attitude toward her inability to walk? What are the attitudes of her friends?



For Further Reference

Campbell, Joseph. *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. New York: Pantheon, 1953. In this classic study of the quest hero, Campbell explores what he calls the monomyth from its origins in preliterate times through the great classical epics such as *The Odyssey* by Homer and the fairy tales up to the present. Spinelli seems to have gotten his structuring principles for part of *Night of the Whale* from this book.

Keller, John. "Jerry Spinelli." *Horn Book* 67 (July-August 1991): 433-436. A discussion of Spinelli's becoming a full-time writer and a writer of fiction for young adults.

R[ochman], H[azel]. Review. *Booklist* (December 1, 1985): 562. This is a brief, evaluative, balanced review of the novel.

Spinelli, Jerry. "Maniac Magee: Homer on George Street." In *Horn Book* 67 (January-February 1991): 40-41. This is the speech Spinelli gave when he accepted the Boston Globe-Horn Book Award for fiction. In it, he explains some of the timeless aspects of *Maniac Magee*, in part comparing it, as his title indicates, to the works of the ancient Greek poet Homer. Many of the things he says about his awardwinning novel also apply to *Night of the Whale*.

———. "Newbery Medal Acceptance."

Horn Book (July-August 1991): 426-432. In this acceptance speech, Spinelli reviews in general terms his career as a writer for young adults and the sources of his ideas for his works.

Related Titles

Night of the Whale is atypical for Spinelli in that its characters are older and it deals with humankind's relation to nature. Still, in terms of the interrelations of the central character and the other characters, one might profitably compare Night of the Whale and Maniac Magee. Like Mouse, Magee is an outsider, although he is a much more confident and capable outsider.



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Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction

Editor

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Cover Design

Amanda Mott

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction

Includes bibliographical references and index

Summary: A multi-volume compilation of analytical essays on and study activities for the works of authors of popular fiction. Includes biography data, publishing history, and resources for the author of each analyzed work.

ISBN 0-933833-41-5 (Volumes 1-3, Biography Series)

ISBN 0-933833-42-3 (Volumes 1-8, Analyses Series)

ISBN 0-933833-38-5 (Entire set, 11 volumes)

1. Popular literature—Bio-bibliography. 2. Fiction—19th century—Bio-bibliography. 3. Fiction—20th century—Bio-bibliography. I. Beetz, Kirk H., 1952-

Z6514.P7B43 1996[PN56.P55]809.3—dc20 96-20771 CIP

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Printed in the United States of America First Printing, November 1996