

Onion John Short Guide

Onion John by Joseph Quincy Krumgold

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Overview

Exciting, suspenseful, and humorous, Onion John tells the story of a twelve-year-old boy, Andy Rusch, Jr., his father, and his adult friend Onion John.

In exploring the development of Andy's relationship with his father, the novel develops themes of the awakening of self-awareness, and of the need to accept persons with very different perceptions and opinions about life. The events in the book are realistic and believable, and the characters' actions and thoughts draw the reader directly into the plot, making the conflict come alive as a universal issue facing all youth.

About the Author

Joseph Krumbold was born on April 9, 1908, in Jersey City, New Jersey, to Henry and Lena Gross Krumbold.

Fascinated with his father's career as a film exhibitor, Joseph decided that he, too, wanted to work with movies. After receiving his bachelor's degree from New York University in 1928, he worked in the New York office of Metro-GoldwynMayer and later moved to Hollywood to begin a career as a screenwriter and producer with Paramount, Republic, RKO, and Columbia. His screenplays include *Lady from Nowhere* (1936), *The Blackmailer* (1936), *Adventure in Manhattan* (1936), *Lone Wolf Returns* (1936), *Join the Marines* (1937), *Jim Hanvey— Detective* (1937), *Lady Behave* (1938), *Speed to Burn* (1938), *Main Street Lawyer* (1939), *The Phantom Submarine* (1940), *The Crooked Road* (1940), *Seven Miles from Alcatraz* (1942), *Magic Town* (1947), and *Dream No More* (produced in Israel in 1950).

From 1940 to 1946, Krumbold produced and directed films for Film Associates in New York City and worked for the Office of War Information. He served as the president of productions for Palestine Films from 1946 to 1950, a time period that witnessed Israel's establishment as an independent nation.

In 1950 Krumbold opened Joseph Krumbold Productions; the company received an Academy Award nomination for one of its documentaries and first prizes at the Edinburgh, Prague, and Venice Film Festivals. Krumbold also worked as a writer, producer, and director for the National Broadcast Company, the Columbia Broadcasting System, National Educational Television, and Westinghouse Television.

Krumbold loved books, particularly stories that families could enjoy together, and was a prolific author. His novels include *Thanks to Murder* (1935), *Sweeney's Adventure* (1942), *And Now Miguel*, *Onion John*, *Henry 3*, and *The Most Terrible Turk: A Story of Turkey* (1969). He also wrote a historical book, *The Oxford Furnace, 1741-1925* (1976), a critique entitled *Where Do We Grow From Here: An Essay on Children's Literature* (1968), and numerous articles for periodicals. Krumbold received the Newbery Award from the American Library Association for *And Now Miguel* in 1954 and *Onion John* in 1960, becoming the first author to be honored with this award twice.

Krumbold married Helen Litwin on January 10, 1947, and had one son, Adam. He maintained a home on Shiloh Farm in Hope, New Jersey, and traveled and worked in New York, Hollywood, Israel, Paris, London, Turkey, and Rome. At home he served on the school board and was active in the Author's League, the Jewish Center, Pi Lambda Phi, Players, and the Screenwriter's Guild. He died of a cerebral hemorrhage on July 10, 1980, in Hope, New Jersey.

Setting

Onion John is set in the late 1950s in the quiet rural town of Serenity, near the Munkachunk Mountains and Musconetty Creek. This fictional community is patterned after Belvidere, New Jersey, a county seat near Krumgold's home with a population of about twenty-six hundred. This area, which was once settled by German Moravians, is near the edge of the Poconos Mountains.

A typical small town, Serenity boasts one hardware store, a drug store where boys congregate for ice cream, an amateur newspaper, an enthusiastic Little League baseball team, and an active Rotary Club. The surrounding land, while hilly and stony, supports flourishing orchards and gardens.

Onion John lives on the outskirts of town in a dilapidated house built of piled-up stones. This house has four bathtubs but no electricity or running water. The Serenity garbage dump, located next to the baseball diamond, is Onion John's source of food and supplies.

It is significant that Onion John takes place in the 1950s, for the scientific advancements and dreams of the era greatly influence the characters of the story. Technology, with new devices such as electric stoves and automatic door-openers, has changed many of the small details of daily life. The possibility of sending a man to the moon alters the characters' understanding of the universe and their vision of the future.

Some people, such as Andy's father, welcome these changes. Others, such as Onion John, find this changed world view incompatible with their happiness and safety. While technology brings the distant moons and planets into closer range, its emphasis on facts and automation depersonalizes many aspects of life, putting new distance between people.



Social Sensitivity

Some readers may feel that Krumgold portrays women negatively in *Onion John*. The main characters in the novel are all male. Andy's mother is pictured as a gentle but weak housewife who fears ghosts; her only significant role is to explain her husband's actions and feelings to her son. Andy appears to feel that women are not perceptive or bright.

He decides, for example, that it would be too difficult to explain Onion John's plan for a rain procession in a way that Eechee's mother could understand. The details of the rain procession also contain a stereotypical picture of women.

Ancient custom involved the sacrifice of a beautiful virgin, who was thrown into a river with a stone tied to her neck; but the "modern way" is to throw the most important man in the procession into a river without a stone so that he can "do the job" and still get out alive.

One could argue that Krumgold portrays immigrants in a negative light.

Onion John is superstitious, and many of the townspeople regard him as ignorant and stubborn. His eccentricity may stem from his unwillingness to take on new ways of life, or it might indicate a mental handicap. The adults in the story patronize him, treating him more as a "project" than as a person. But because Andy tells the story, readers are more likely to identify with his point of view, and he respects Onion John and resents the other adults' attempts to change Onion John's image.



Literary Qualities

Onion John is a humorous and fastmoving story peopled with vivid and lively characters. Written from the point of view of twelve-year-old Andy, the novel uses realistically boyish language; casual humor and colorful descriptions engage the reader in the actions and emotions of the story. The story includes bits of trivia, such as information about the origins of Halloween, which add to the lighthearted mood. The balanced plot unifies the novel; questions raised in the opening chapters are repeated and answered in the concluding pages.

Krumgold uses irony, particularly in relationship to Andy's father and Onion John, to reveal his characters' different attitudes. Mr. Rusch believes that the greatest gift he can give his son is to enable him to "go to the moon," while Onion John interprets that wish as an immeasurable insult: "I've never heard of any father who would send his only son to the moon!" It is ironic that Mr. Rusch, who has seemed very opinionated throughout most of the book, ends up advising others to "keep an open mind." While Onion John wishes to leave Serenity because of the evil he feels exists in the community, Andy's father says he should stay so that people will "keep on being goodhearted." Another example of irony is that Onion John's new house is destroyed when he attempts to use the electric stove, an appliance he had not wanted in the first place. Krumgold comments that the fire might have been the "best thing" to happen to Onion John.

Themes and Characters

Andy Rusch, an energetic and sensitive seventh-grader, plays Little League baseball with his friends Eechee Ries, Bo Hemmendinger, and Bitsy Scharz.

Andy is proud of his father's hardware store and looks forward to the day when the store will be his. His father, Andy Rusch, Sr., is president of the Serenity Rotary Club. A forceful and ambitious man, he looks at things "sensibly" and is unimpressed with superstition. Mr. Rusch dreams of the day when his son will attend the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and become one of the first persons to walk on the moon.

Andy's best friend, an eccentric European immigrant named Onion John, cannot speak English even though he has lived in Serenity for twenty-five years; only Andy understands what Onion John says. An excellent gardener and handyman, Onion John is also superstitious and odd: he eats raw onions for breakfast, ties rocks in apple trees to "shame" the apples into growing as big and heavy as the rocks, holds a procession to bring rain, and plans to "fumigate" Serenity of its evil spirits.

When the members of the Rotary Club learn about the unsafe condition of Onion John's home, they decide to build him a new house as their town project.

Ernie Miller, the editor of the Serenity newspaper, is the only member of the Rotary Club to openly question the wisdom of changing Onion John's way of life. Andy, who agrees with Mr. Miller, finds himself in conflict with his father for the first time in his life and decides to run away from home.

The conflict between Andy and his father centers on their differing attitudes toward the value of change. They also disagree on how a person can distinguish between coincidence and cause or between the ridiculous and the possible, and they hold opposite opinions concerning a person's right to make independent decisions. In discussing these conflicts, the novel explores the meaning of relationships and communication, self-identity and self-acceptance, and the importance of respecting people who hold very different values and views.



Topics for Discussion

1. How are the adult spectators at the Little League Pennant game inconsistent in their attitudes about winning and losing?
2. How does Andy's opinion about Ernie Miller, editor of *The Lamp*, change during the course of the novel? What brings about this change?
3. According to Andy's father, how can a person tell the difference between superstition and fact, coincidence and cause? Do you agree with him? Why or why not?
4. Onion John makes several references to "shadows." What do you think shadows symbolize for him, and how does he feel about them?
5. Why do you think Andy's parents approve of the magic show at the Rotary Club on Halloween but disapprove of Onion John's magic in their basement that night?
6. What do you think Onion John means when he says a bathtub is a "beautiful statue of a hole in the ground"? Why does he want to have so many bathtubs in his house?
7. How does Onion John feel about getting a new house? How does Andy feel about it? How does Onion John "ruin things" during the move? Why does he cry when he sees the new house?
8. Why do you think Andy insists that the newspaper reporter be told that Onion John has named Andy's father as his best friend? How do you think Andy feels about this? Who would you say is really Onion John's best friend?
9. Why does Andy say that he caused the fire at Onion John's house? Why does Andy say that the fire might be the best thing that could have happened to Onion John?
10. What is ironic about Onion John's thank-you speech?
11. Onion John wants to run away because he feels that the citizens of Serenity have "evil spirits," but Andy's father says Onion John should stay so that people will keep on being "goodhearted." Which person better understands the intentions of the citizens of Serenity? Why? Is it good to try to change another person's life without that person's consent?
12. Why does Mr. Rusch not want Andy to take over his hardware business?
13. Andy is very concerned with the concept of lying. Who does he think tells or lives lies? How does he determine the "truth"?
14. What impact does technology have on the characters in the story?



15. What is the significance of the town being named Serenity? Does the town live up to its name? Why or why not?

16. How does Andy feel about his father at the end of the story? Why does he say the day of the fish drive was his greatest day?



Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Trace the changes that Andy, Onion John, and Mr. Rusch undergo during the course of the novel. What causes these changes? Who would you say changes the least and why?

2. What does the moon symbolize in the story?

3. Research how people around the world, and throughout history, have tried to "make rain." How do they compare in method and degree of success?

4. Compare the attitudes that Andy and his father have toward the meaning of success and failure. What is the basis for each person's opinion?

5. Describe the relationship that exists between Mr. Rusch and Onion John.

How do they interact with one another?

How does this relationship affect their personal lives and the lives of people around them?

6. Do you think Onion John Day was a good idea? What were some positive and negative results of this project?

Overall, do you believe it did more harm or good? Why?

7. According to the various characters in the story, what are happiness and unhappiness? What causes these emotions?

8. What is Mr. Rusch's attitude about decision-making? What advice would he give on making good decisions? Do you think he follows his own advice in handling problems? Why or why not? What is his opinion concerning the ability of young people to make good decisions?

Do you agree or disagree?

9. Make a list of Onion John's superstitions and his reasoning behind each belief. How does modern society, especially as represented by Andy's father, respond to each of these ideas? Which of Onion John's superstitions appear to actually have the results he claims and which do not? What is the difference between a "foolish idea" and a "legitimate, but unusual, belief"? How does a person define what is "ridiculous" or "foolish," and what effect does that definition have on the meaning of growing up?

For Further Reference

Bordages, Asa. "Joseph Krumbold." In *Newbery and Caldecott Medal Books, 1956-1965*, edited by Lee Kingman.

Boston: Horn Book, 1965. This article provides biographical information as well as a detailed description of Krumbold's hometown, Hope, New Jersey.

Krumbold, Joseph. "Archetypes of the Twentieth Century." *School Library Journal* (October 1968): 112-115.

Krumbold explains the relationship between *And Now Miguel*, *Onion John*, and *Henry 3*, and compares these stories to well known fairy tales. This article gives an excellent summary of the themes of his novels.

"Newbery Award Acceptance." In *Newbery and Caldecott Medal Books, 1956-1965*, edited by Lee Kingman.

Boston: Horn Book, 1965. This speech explains Krumbold's philosophy about writing and gives the background for the writing of *Onion John*.

Related Titles

Onion John can be considered part of a trilogy that shows how boys grow up in three different areas of American society. Taken as a whole, the three books provide an intimate picture of the relationship between boys and their fathers. Each story shows how families can attempt to understand one another and can learn to respect the attitudes and values of persons who are very different from themselves.

While Onion John focuses on life in a small town, *And Now Miguel* is the story of Miguel Chavez, a thoughtful twelve-year-old shepherd from Taos, New Mexico. Miguel, who lives in a very religious family, longs to accompany the men when they take the sheep to graze on the Sangre de Cristo Mountains. In his adventures with his family and the flocks, Miguel begins to understand that the values and wisdom of past generations are important to his own life. This novel is noted for its simple and poetic dialogue and for its detailed information on sheep raising.

And Now Miguel is based on a true story. Krumbold visited Miguel's family, then wrote and directed a documentary film about them. The film, which was translated into fifteen languages, was distributed around the world by the State Department. In 1966 Universal Pictures remade *And Now Miguel* into a movie directed by James B. Clark.

In the third book of the trilogy, *Henry 3*, Krumbold centers on life in Crestview, a suburb of a large city. Henry Lovering III is a brilliant boy whose father is promoted to a prestigious job, but his father is ostracized by the community because of a conflict about installing a bomb shelter. Through his friendship with Fletch Larkin, a boy everyone in the town hates, Henry realizes that there is more to life than social climbing and knowing the "right people."



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