

A Piece of Mind Short Guide

A Piece of Mind by Phil Cummings

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Overview

Matt wants to be part of the group so he allows his friends Chunk and Fraser to talk him into doing things he really does not want to do, such as putting his hand in a dead cat's mouth, teasing an elderly neighbor's dog, and skateboarding down Devil's Hill. Hovering behind the moon in a spaceship, a group of Cartharians are waiting and looking for a new planet to inhabit now that theirs has been overtaken by an ice age of vast proportions. They want to use their mind web on someone easily led—someone like Matt, because if it works on him, they can use it on others until they control the planet. Matt finds himself acting in ways he never has never acted before, frightening himself, his family, and his friends. And above him, in the spaceship, he has a friend who does not want the mind web to work.

About the Author

Phil Cummings's *A Piece of Mind* is his second novel for young adults. *Angel*, his first novel, tells the story of Shane, who sincerely believes his dead brother David has returned. Cummings's picture books, for which he is best known, include *Midge*, *Mum*, and the *Neighbors*, *Marty and Mei-Ling*, and *Tully and the Claws*. Cummings divides his time between teaching and writing.

Setting

A Piece of Mind has two settings, one for each of the parallel and interacting plots.

Matt lives in Lorna Court, a neighborhood area of a larger town, probably in Australia or New Zealand, although the author does not give a precise location despite using specific place names such as Devil's Hill.

Since Matt and his friends have skateboards, money to buy candy, the freedom and safety to walk or ride their skateboards almost any place they want to go, and have working parents and nice homes, it is probably safe to assume that they live in a comfortable, middle class environment. Usage of a few words such as "telly" for television, "jumpers" for sweaters, "cubbyholes" for hideouts or playhouses, and "holiday" for vacation provides the only clear clues as to the actual setting.

The Cartharian spaceship provides the secondary setting in the novel. From the activities described, no specific design of the spaceship can be determined other than that it has places where children can explore undetected and places where the inhabitants can view precise activities on other planets. Jool and her friends Reo and Mag pretty much have the run of the entire ship as they explore restricted areas and spy on the adults. Since leaving their home planet Carth in search of a new place to live, the girls have become bored with their confined life. The adults searching for a subject for a mind web experiment do not notice the girls spying on them.

Social Sensitivity

Peer relationships and their influence on actions form the main socially sensitive issue. These relationships and influences impact the treatment of siblings, the elderly, and animals. Side issues of gun control and brainwashing or thought control might be discussed in connection with the book but would be adding more depth to the novel than is actually there.

The impact of peer pressure on the actions of individuals is the most important social issue. Both Matt and Jool follow the leadership of a stronger peer who encourages them to act in a manner contrary to their natures. Matt's actions under the influence of a peer lead him to physically hurt himself, harass an animal and an old man, steal, and place the lives of five other people in danger. Jool's actions are less overt; she usually just watches but does nothing to stop the actions or separate herself from the doers.

In Matt's case, peer pressure impacts his relationship with an old friend, a new friend, his parents, and his brother. When away from his friends, he enjoys the company of Libby, Tyson, and Mr. Chalmers, but when he is with Chunk and Tyson, his attitude and actions are less than kind. In the end, both Matt and Jool are able to overcome peer pressure and act in a mature and heroic manner. For Jool, the consequences are tragic but self-satisfying. Matt finds that he can be his own person and in doing so gain respect he did not have within the group.

Gun control and safety might be associated with the concluding incident where Chunk brings a gun to show his friends and Matt fires it. For the most part, though, it is a side issue and not an integral part of either the themes or the social issues. The same goes for mind control. While some may see this as an issue, in reality, it serves mostly to further the plot and emphasize the importance of having a strong will and sense of self.

Literary Qualities

Told mostly from an omniscient point of view, the two parallel plots move forward in a linear manner with very sparing use of either flashback or foreshadowing. Some terminology is consistent with the book's Australian location but these terms are generally standard enough that an American child could understand what the author means by their context.

Mart's story is extremely straightforward and linear. The plot begins with the challenge to stick his finger in the dead cat's mouth and ends with the gun incident and his decision to stand up to Chunk about meeting Mr. Chalmers at the library. The only significant use of flashback occurs when Matt gets in trouble with his father and remembers the only other time he saw his father angry. This occurrence, as well as several other minor uses of flashback, add little to the story other than to further explain a relationship, such as Mart's history with Libby and his conversation with Mr. Chalmers about old war planes.

Jool's story, although the plot is also mostly linear, needs the inclusion of flashbacks to explain why she and the others are hovering behind the moon in a spaceship.

Their need to find a new home and how they plan to go about getting it explains the reason for the use of the mind web. While this plotline is kept to a minimum, Cummings does a nice job of integrating the two stories into one. Focusing on Jool's emotions and actions allows for some sympathy for the aliens' actions, keeping the book from becoming a picture of good and evil.

Despite the dual plots, the novel is essentially a story of learning how to deal with peer pressure. The use of sci-fi elements adds interest and intrigue, but the plot itself is fairly simple. The exploration of types and depths of peer relations makes for interesting reading without becoming overly moralistic. The characters act in kid-like ways with the adults reacting in ways the reader would expect adults to react.

The use of British terminology is kept to a minimum and can be easily understood by an American audience. The only word that might be problematic is "jumper" but the contextual use gives enough clues for the incident to make sense without knowing the exact definition of the word.



Themes and Characters

The major theme of peer pressure is paralleled in the actions of both Matt on Earth and Jool in the spaceship. Both characters, since they want inclusion into the group, allow themselves to be led into actions they really do not want to do. Matt allows his friends to tease him into sticking his finger in the dead cat's mouth and teasing elderly Mr. Chalmers's dog. When not around Chunk and Fraser, he plays with his younger brother Tyson and with Libby, a neighborhood girl whom he has known almost his entire life, but if Matt is with his friends, he either ignores them or calls them names.

When Chunk dares him to skateboard down dangerous Devil's Hill, Matt accepts the challenge. The only thing that keeps him from killing himself is Lord Rah's mind web suggestion that he slide. Chunk, in a desperate attempt to be leader of the group, continues to challenge Matt to commit acts that he knows are wrong and Lord Rah continues to use these incidents to further his control of Matt's actions. Not only is he controlled by his friends, he is also controlled by strange voices in his head.

Jool has the same type of personality as Matt. She wants to be liked and to be part of the group—especially since only three children live in the spaceship—so she follows the lead of Reo and Mag. Reo, like Chunk, has a strong personality and exerts strong control over her peers. While Jool manages to escape the unpleasant situations that Matt puts himself into, she also lets her friends lead her rather than asserting herself by refusing to participate in their activities.

In the final climatic pages, Matt finds himself fighting against the mind web in what could be a tragic situation. Chunk has brought a gun to the creek where the boys are playing and Mr. Chalmers is walking his dog. While Chunk really just wants to show the weapon off, even he becomes somewhat concerned when Matt acts as if he intends to fire it. On board the spaceship, Reo has taken control of Matt through the mind web and wants him to shoot one of the others: Libby, Mr. Chalmers, the dog Sam, Chunk, or Fraser. Matt tries to fight Reo's voice in his head, but the mind web is too strong. In the end, Jool manages to break Reo's concentration as she screams and Matt hears her voice. Reo regains control and Matt fires the gun, but the bullet goes harmlessly into the air. In anger over Jool's interference, Reo messes with the controls and causes the spaceship to crash into the moon.

Jool and Matt both overcome peer pressure despite disastrous and near disastrous results. In trying to save Matt, whom she considers a friend, Jool breaks away from Reo's control. Although the control Reo exerted on Matt was stronger than he could handle, he tries very hard not to shoot the gun and aims it away from everyone. After the incident, he finds he can stand up to Chunk and makes plans to meet Mr. Chalmers at the library to learn about old war planes.

Another theme is that of the relationship between brothers. Tyson admires and tries to emulate his older brother. Matt, especially when he is with Chunk and Fraser, finds Tyson to be a royal pain and either ignores or makes fun of him. When his friends are



not around, Matt and Tyson do have good times such as when Matt pulls Tyson around on the skateboard. Tyson, like most younger brothers, takes the teasing and being ignored in stride and sincerely cares and worries about his brother.

When Matt injures himself skateboarding down Devil's Hill, Tyson rushes to his defense and tries to fight Chunk for daring Matt to perform the dangerous stunt. When the voices in Matt's head cause him to act irrationally and dangerously, Tyson allies himself with Libby and the two try to find out what is happening. After Matt shoots the gun, Tyson thinks that his brother has died and starts to cry. When Matt regains consciousness, he asks for Tyson's help and the two brothers finally connect in mutual need and love.

The relationships between young adolescent boys and girls also functions as a theme. Libby and Matt have a long history of friendship, but when Matt is with his friends, his actions towards Libby are frequently cruel. While hurt and disappointed, Libby seems to recognize that Matt really does not mean everything he says or does.

In fact, she stands up to Chunk in a way that Matt cannot. When he is not with his friends and has time to spend with her, she enjoys it and hides her hurt at his other actions.

Both times Matt hurts himself accepting Chunk's dares, Libby is close by to help him home. When he teases Sam, the dog belonging to Mr. Chalmers, and knows that he will face punishment when he gets home, Libby consoles him and offers her support. While Fraser and Chunk do not understand Matt's actions while under the mind web, Libby worries enough about him to talk to Tyson and enlist his help in discovering what is wrong. Libby accepts the fact that for the time being at least, she and Matt can only be friends when he is not with his male friends.

Science fiction themes of space travel and mind control play important roles in the plot development. Tool, Reo, and Mag, along with their families and others from the planet Carth, have left their home in order to search for a new planet. Despite having two suns, an ice age has made living on Carth impossible. The Cartharians plan to use their form of mind control—called the mind web—to conquer another planet.

Earth seems to fit their requirements, especially since the inhabitants have a similar shape and size despite having hair on their heads.

Lord Rah chooses Matt as the first being to test the mind web. If the experimental mind web works with him, the Cartharians will "blanket the planet" with their probes.

Lord Rah sees human as lacking in willpower to resist his control. With the help of Jool—and of Libby—Matt does resist the control and Reo's anger causes the alien spaceship to crash.

The characters in *A Piece of Mind*, are well developed but rather flat. Only Matt and Chunk show any degree of development or change. Still, since the actions of all the characters are typical for their age group, they have interest and appeal for the young reader.



Matt begins the novel as a basically good person who allows himself to succumb to peer pressure very easily. He really wants Chunk and Fraser to like him so he does whatever they challenge him to do. He feels sorry about teasing Mr. Chalmers and Sam, but is afraid to go against Chunk's wishes.

He even allows them to influence his relationships with his brother Tyson and with Libby, whom he has known since he was a baby. Matt's parents worry about the control his friends have on him, but allow him to make his own decisions until he begins to do things that hurt both himself and others.

Then they ground him for his actions. Matt is both frightened and upset by the voices he hears in his head. Not only do they cause him intense pain but he also does not understand why he acts the way he does in situations such as stealing the candy bars and teasing the dog. He thinks he is going crazy and tries to explain what is happening to Libby. In the end, thanks to Libby's caring, his own sense of right, and Jool's interference with Reo's plans, he is able to break away from the mind web a stronger person. Matt stands up to Chunk and asserts his independence and Chunk accepts it.

The Cartharian Jool is a parallel personality to Matt. From the beginning, she is sympathetic to his plight and sees him as a friend. Jool, like Matt, allows her friends to lead her. While she occasionally voices her disagreement, Reo and Mag belittle her and she goes along with their plans. When the three girls sneak to the control room and Reo decides to use the mind web on Matt to force him to shoot the gun, Jool intervenes and breaks Reo's concentration. Matt is then able to retake control of his mind. Jool's action results in the angry Reo crashing the spaceship and Jool dies with the words "Goodbye, Friend" on her lips. This benediction frees Matt from bending to the pressure of others. Both Jool and Matt, with far differing results, have learned to make their own decisions.

Chunk and Reo also have parallel personalities. Both are leaders who exert great influence over their peers. Both enjoy being in positions of power, Chunk to the point that he plans what challenge he will require next. Chunk's character is more fully developed than Reo's and so the reader understands that he acts at least partially from a sense of inferiority. Since his dad has lost his job, Chunk feels an even greater need for control. Both Reo and Chunk lead by disparagement and threats of exclusion from the group. For weak characters such as Matt and Jool, this threat is usually enough to make them cooperate. In the end, though, these two characters react completely differently. When Jool stands up to Reo, she grows angry and ultimately crashes the spaceship into the moon, killing all on board.

Chunk, though, seems to respect Matt for finally standing up to him and accepts Matt's decision to "do what you like."

Younger brother Tyson and old friend Libby portray two rather stock characters whose loyalty and steadfastness give Matt balance during the difficult time. Tyson admires Matt and tries to emulate him.



While hurt by his brother's frequent rejection, he recognizes that this is a typical big brother /little brother relationship. He welcomes the times when Matt will play with him and follows him around whenever he gets a chance. At times, he even assumes the role of protector as when he attacks Chunk after Matt's dangerous skateboard ride down Devil's Hill. When Matt gets into trouble with their father, Tyson confides in Libby, listening to her description of his brother's strange actions. He gladly joins her effort to both spy on and protect Matt.

Libby recognizes that at this point in his life, Matt's relationship with his male peers is more important than their old friendship.

While he hurts her with his words and actions, she, like Tyson is willing to wait for the times that he will spend time with her.

Chunk does not intimidate her and she tags along with the boys frequently. She is the one who recognizes that something is wrong and she is the one in whom Matt finally confides his fears about the voices. Her gaze first enables Matt to break contact with Reo during the gun incident. Loyal and steadfast, Libby's friendship has a stabilizing influence on Matt.

The other important characters, Mr. Chalmers and his dog Sam, provide a focus to show both the control that his peers have over Matt as well as his ability to finally break this hold. Matt enjoys talking with the elderly man about warplanes and looks forward to meeting him at the library. On the other hand, when Chunk wants him to tease the dog and annoy Mr. Chalmers, he does so. Lord Rah uses one of these incidents to deepen his control on Matt. This situation leads to Matt's punishment. When Matt fires the gun, he comes very close to shooting his friends, Mr. Chalmers, or the dog. The dog, like the old man, is willing to forgive and allow Matt another chance.



Topics for Discussion

1. Why do Matt and Jool always go along with the group rather than do what they want to do or what they know they should do?
2. Why does Chunk always have to be the one in control?
3. Compare and contrast Matt's father and Chunk's father.
4. The Cartharians use their mind web to control Matt's actions, but there are other ways of controlling people. What are some of these ways and why do they work?
5. How would you characterize Libby?

Consider the way she stands up to Chunk and sticks by Matt.

6. Why do the Cartharians choose to use a child as their first experiment with the mind web? Why was Matt chosen rather than one of the other characters?
7. Cite some examples of when Lord Rah uses the mind web and how Matt reacts.
8. Even at the beginning of the novel before the mind web, Matt's mother worries about Matt. Why is she concerned and what does she do about it?
9. If you could be a character in the book, who would you choose to be and why?
10. Both Reo and Chunk are leaders who have to be in control and are often cruel. Both of them have strong relationships with their fathers. How are their fathers alike and different and how are their relationships with their fathers similar?
11. What is the significance of the title A Piece of Mind?

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Draw a picture of how you think the Cartharians look. Explain why you think they look the way they do.
2. Find information about thought control and brainwashing. What is it used for and how does it work?
3. Matt does some very dangerous things on his skateboard. Find out what safety practices should be followed when skateboarding.
4. Describe an incident when peer pressure got you in trouble or an incident when you were able to withstand peer pressure.
5. What is the difference between science fiction, realistic fiction, and fantasy?
Into which genre does A Piece of Mind fit?
6. Why is NASA building a space station?
For what will it be used? How much progress have they made in building it?
7. Design your own spaceship for interplanetary travel.
8. What terms does the author use that are not the same terms that Americans use? What do these terms mean?

For Further Reference

Grumelart, Cecile. Review of *A Piece of Mind*. *Magpies* (September 1999): 34. A short but positive review of Cummings's novel.

"Phil Cummings." In *Something about the Author*, vol. 74. Detroit: Gale, 1993, p.

58. A brief overview containing biographical information, a bibliography of Cummings's work for children, and a quote from Cummings.

Related Titles/Adaptations

William Sleator has written numerous science fiction books, but three books in particular deal either with mind control or aliens. In *Interstellar Pig*, Barney becomes involved in playing a game about rival aliens who will stop at nothing to destroy every other creature in the universe. He soon discovers that it is not just a game. In *House of Stairs*, five sixteen-year-old orphans are placed in a house of endless stairs and subjected to experiments on conditioned human response, a type of mind control.

Monica Hughes's *Invitation to the Game* also looks at mind control in the year 2154 when a group of unemployed teenagers are invited to play a computer game but soon find out that it is not necessarily a game.



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