Wringer Study Guide

Wringer by Jerry Spinelli

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Overview

Wringer is about peer pressure. Palmer LaRue dreads his upcoming tenth birthday.

In his town, Family Fest is a yearly fundraiser that ends with an annual pigeon shoot, when entrants gun down five thousand live pigeons. Ten-year-old boys are "wringers."

It is their task to break the necks of wounded pigeons. Palmer is horrified by the event but convinces himself for several years that the pigeons are better off. He and his friend, Dorothy Gruzik, avoid the pigeon shoot, sometimes playing on the swings well away from the shooting field and other times staying away from the park on that day. But as Palmer's tenth birthday approaches he wants to join a gang led by Beans, whose whole purpose in life, since age four, has been to become a wringer.

Palmer gains acceptance in the gang and is nicknamed "Snots." He learns to join their harassment of his one-time friend, Dorothy. All this does not lessen his dread of his tenth birthday. Then like the Ancient Mariner's albatross, a pigeon pecks on Palmer's bedroom window. He tries to scare it away without success, and when he opens the window, "Nipper" steps into Palmer's room, and Palmer becomes its protector.

To make matters worse, the gang discovers Palmer is hiding a pigeon. Palmer must invent ways to divert their attention, and the stress of concealing Nipper from his parents and from Beans nearly overwhelms him. Finally, Palmer apologizes to Dorothy and confides in her. She takes Nipper with her on a family outing to the beach to release him and ensure his safety, but unknowingly releases him where pigeons are captured for the pigeon shoot.

The stage is set for high drama. Palmer turns ten. The day of the pigeon shoot arrives. Palmer refuses to attend, but against his will, some unseen force pulls him to the shooting field. Palmer watches in fascinated horror as birds are released and killed or wounded. He is unable to turn away as tenyear-old boys race onto the field and break the necks of wounded birds. Dorothy comes to stand with Palmer and tells him she released Nipper in the city at the railroad yards instead of at the ocean. Alarmed by her revelation, Palmer knows the peopletrusting Nipper is in one of the crates of pigeons waiting to be released. Palmer frantically searches the silent crates for Nipper.

The birds all look alike. After what seems like hours, a bird steps out of the crate rather than flying. The shooter misses, and the bird flies up, but instead of flying on to freedom it circles and starts down. It's Nipper. How can Palmer save his friend?

About the Author

Born in Norristown, Pennsylvania, on February 1, 1941, Jerry Spinelli's first taste of celebrity made him eager to continue writing: "After my high school football team won a big game, I went home to write a poem about it while the town celebrated and blared in the streets. The poem was published in the local newspaper, and I've been a writer ever since."

After high school, Spinelli continued his education with degrees from Gettysburg College (A.B., 1963) and Johns Hopkins University (M.S., 1964), and he attended Temple University in 1964. His career included editing an engineering magazine published by the Chilton Company and military service before becoming a full-time writer. In his job with Chilton his writing was of a technical nature, which helped him pay the bills, but he wanted to write novels. He spent his lunch hour in a small, private room writing adult fiction and continued to write in the evenings, even though publishers weren't interested in his choice of topics.

After marriage to Eileen, he discovered his narrative voice. He started writing about young people, and he says he began "to see that in my own memories and in the kids around me, I had all the material I needed for a schoolbagful of books." Space Station Seventh Grade, his first book, was inspired by one of his children, who ate a snack he had been saving for himself.

Spinelli says he has a general idea for his characters and develops them as the story unfolds. When asked where he gets his ideas, he replies, "From you. You're the funny ones." Living with his children, remembering his own growing up years, listening to young people and reading their letters all contribute to his storehouse of ideas.

Spinelli was forty-one when his first book was published. He persevered and continues to do so even now, when sometimes the reviews are not complimentary. He knows kids will identify with his characters. He has written twenty-three books, nineteen of which have been published. He continues to write in his home office wearing comfortable jeans, moccasins, and a flannel shirt.

Plot Summary

Wringer is the story of Palmer LaRue, a boy living in a small town named Waymer, which hosts an annual Family Fest. The culmination of the event is a Pigeon Shoot, where five thousand pigeons are shot for fundraising efforts to maintain the city's park. The book derives its title from the name given to the young boys who wring the necks of the pigeons who are only wounded, not killed, from the gunshots. Palmer witnesses this spectacle for the first time when he is four-years-old and the memory of the captive birds being killed for sport still haunts him.

Although it is considered an honor to become a wringer on your tenth birthday, Palmer dreads the day because of his horror of the event. Palmer is an exceptionally sensitive only child who finds it difficult to make friends. So when the local bullies named Beans, Mutto, and Henry befriend Palmer in his ninth year, Palmer feels acceptance for the first time ever. Up to this point, Palmer's only friend is a younger girl named Dorothy, who lives in the house across the street from Palmer.

When Palmer begins to spend time with Beans, Mutto, and Henry he starts to adapt their bullying ways which result in Dorothy's wounded feelings and Palmer's alienation from the girl he embraces. Palmer soon finds a friend in a stray pigeon that arrives at Palmer's bedroom window during a blizzard. It stays in Palmer's bedroom, where the boy and the bird become fast friends. Palmer names the pigeon Nipper and keeps the bird a secret from everyone, even telling his mother that he will be responsible for cleaning his room so that she will not enter and find evidence of Nipper's existence.

One day, Nipper lands on Palmer's head as he walks with his friends, and the boys realize that Palmer is hiding a pigeon in his house. Palmer's anxiety about the harm his friends will inflict on Nipper forces Palmer to seek out Dorothy, who understands Palmer's love for Nipper and his dread of becoming a wringer of pigeon necks. When the threats of Beans, Mutto, and Henry become too intense, Palmer gives Nipper to Dorothy so that she can release him at the seashore where her family will be vacationing.

During the weeks that follow, Palmer sinks into a depression over losing Nipper and his bad mood is deepened with the imminent Pigeon Shoot. Dorothy is the only person who understands Palmer's unwillingness to become a wringer so she seeks him out in the crowd during the big event. Palmer's horror at the event is accelerated when he learns that Dorothy released Nipper at a railroad yard where the shooting event organizers round up pigeons for the big shoot.

There is good and bad news when Palmer realizes that Nipper is in one of the crates at the Pigeon Shoot, recognizes Palmer, and returns to the killing field after having flown away. Palmer is able to rescue Nipper from being shot in spite of Beans' efforts to place Nipper in direct sight of a shooter and Palmer and Nipper walk home as loyal as two friends can be.

Chapter 1

Chapter 1 Summary

The novel begins with a feeling of dread experienced by Palmer LaRue, a boy who does not want to be a wringer. This dread is worse than any hunger pain and certainly lasts longer. Even when the boy is doing other things, the horrible feeling about being a wringer comes to him and he cannot escape it. The feeling is not aggressive and does not hurt him physically, but overrides most of his thoughts during the day and his dreams at night. In his dreams, the boy can see his hands around the neck of a pigeon which stares back at him with its unblinking orange eye. The boy can hear voices urging him to wring the bird's neck, but he cannot bring himself to do it. This feeling of dread does not actively pursue the boy who knows that it is coming after him slowly and silently, for no other reason than the boy is getting closer to his next birthday.

Chapter 1 Analysis

The author sets up the premise of the story by establishing the internal conflict experienced by a young boy whose dread about a public situation fills him with fear. The actual event has not yet been described, but the fear and dread surrounding the event are the main sources of angst for the boy who will become the main character.

Chapter 2

Chapter 2 Summary

Palmer LaRue's mother calls him downstairs because the guests for his ninth birthday party have arrived. Palmer questions his mother about the validity of her statement because he does not have any real friends and does not believe that anyone he has invited has actually come. When Palmer opens the door, he is thrilled to see Beans, Mutto, and Henry, three boys from the neighborhood whose presence here today validates Palmer as one of the boys' group. Palmer's mother thinks the three boys are a bit rough for Palmer and is not pleased that the gifts they have brought are a cigar stub, a rotten apple core, and an old sock. Palmer cannot tell his mother that these gifts mean more to him than the beautifully wrapped gifts she has offered because the boys' gifts stem from their ingenuity and their acceptance of him. Palmer's favorite gift, though, is the nickname bestowed on him by the boys today and from this day forward, he will be known as Snots.

Chapter 2 Analysis

Spinelli uses much descriptive language in the story, which is especially appropriate for young readers. Palmer is thrilled with his new nickname and "he moved his tongue silently over the name, feeling its shape." Obviously, a name does not have a shape and cannot be tasted, but the author uses the literary technique of a metaphor to indicate the process Palmer uses to adapt to his new name.

Chapter 3

Chapter 3 Summary

Palmer's mother does not approve of Palmer's new friends and ushers them outside to play when she can tolerate their antics no longer. Palmer, Beans, Mutto, and Henry head outside with Palmer's new soccer ball. Beans wants to know where Fishface lives and Palmer indicates the house across the street. Fishface is Beans' name for Dorothy Gruzik, a nice girl whom Palmer's mother is always encouraging him to befriend. When Dorothy does not emerge from her house, Beans gathers some mud and sticks from the sewer, places it in a plastic bag, and puts it on the front step of Dorothy's house in the hopes that she will think it is poop.

Chapter 3 Analysis

The story is told from the third person limited point of view, which means that the author provides, not only the plot line, but also access to Palmer's thoughts and emotions. This chapter also establishes another source of conflict for Palmer, who feels the need to defend Dorothy but also wants to be accepted by Beans, Mutto, and Henry.

Chapter 4

Chapter 4 Summary

When the boys tire of kicking the soccer ball in Palmer's yard, they decide to go to the park, a source of more distress for Palmer. Palmer has always hated going to the park, especially the soccer field, and feigns injury to avoid kicking the soccer ball with the boys. While Palmer watches from the sidelines, he is horrified when Henry begins to run around flapping his arms in a birdlike fashion. When Henry falls to the ground, Beans begins to call for a Wringer and Henry and Mutto grip Henry's neck in a fake stranglehold. Palmer's memory reverts to an event three years prior when he experienced a mass pigeon shoot where the necks of wounded birds were twisted to finish the killing the guns did not complete. This memory is so real for Palmer that he runs away from the soccer field and his friends who are still laughing at Henry's antics.

Chapter 4 Analysis

The author uses the technique of memory to help the reader understand Palmer's character. The antics of Beans, Mutto, and Henry who pretend to be wringers killing a wounded bird spark an incident Palmer experienced three years ago. The killing of pigeons seems especially brutal to Palmer. The experience he remembers is riveted in his brain and resurfaces continually as a source of mental anguish.

Chapter 5

Chapter 5 Summary

Palmer is able to re-join his friends later when they are playing at the playground. Palmer remembers his mother's warnings for safety but ignores them because he wants to be accepted by his new friends who do not heed many rules from anyone. The boys' play is interrupted by the arrival of an older boy named Farquar. Beans had arranged for Farquar to meet them and give Palmer "The Treatment," a friendly ritual of bonding that each boy receives on his ninth birthday. Palmer has heard of The Treatment and tries his best not to cry when Farquar directs nine strong blows to Palmer's naked left arm.

Chapter 5 Analysis

The author introduces another ritual into the story, this time the male bonding ritual known as The Treatment. Although Palmer is afraid of the pain, he is thrilled to receive his blows as acceptance into the exclusive group of survivors. This is another incident in which Palmer finds his internal voice in conflict with his public persona.

Chapter 6

Chapter 6 Summary

Later that day, Palmer's mother reacts in horror at the sight of Palmer's beaten and bruised arm. Palmer's father is less shocked and ruffles Palmer's hair in acknowledgement of Palmer's acceptance into the exclusive group of those surviving The Treatment. Palmer receives a birthday gift from his father who gives him a box of old metal toy soldiers, which had originally belonged to Palmer's great grandfather. Palmer's birthday has been a huge success with nice gifts, new friends, and The Treatment; but Palmer breaks down in tears and hears a voice in his dreams telling Palmer that he has run out of birthdays.

Chapter 6 Analysis

Although Palmer wants to grow up and has always enjoyed his birthdays, his internal voice always speaks to him of the impending dread related to the dead pigeons. The author helps to validate Palmer's growing maturity and responsibility with the gift of the toy soldiers from his father. According to Palmer, these soldiers are the most coveted possessions in the house and the gift validates Palmer's father's belief in him and his ability to care for something valuable.

Chapter 7

Chapter 7 Summary

In the weeks following The Treatment, Palmer revels in his newfound attention and the admiration extended to him by acquaintances and strangers. One person who is not so impressed by Palmer's bruises is Dorothy, who ignores Palmer until one day Palmer forces a conversation with her. Dorothy is hurt that she had not been invited to Palmer's birthday party and she is not comforted by the fact that it had been an all-boys party. Dorothy is even less impressed with Palmer's new nickname, so he leaves her to find his friends. When the boys return to taunt Dorothy during her hopscotch game, Palmer is not very upset when they ruin her game.

Eventually Palmer's bruises fade and he is forced to revive it with a purple crayon to keep the injury and his popularity alive. Palmer knows that the attention will soon fade away, but it is replaced by the horror that it is August, time for the Family Fest and the Pigeon Shoot.

Chapter 7 Analysis

The author uses the literary technique of simile as he opens the chapter describing Palmer's good mood about his bruised arm. "The following weeks were like a parade to Palmer, with himself as grand marshal. He felt as if he were marching down the middle of a broad boulevard with crowds of people cheering from the sidewalks." (Chapter 7, Page 33.) There is no parade taking place in the story, but the author uses this visual image to indicate Palmer's mood of notoriety and attention in a way that every reader will understand.

Chapter 8

Chapter 8 Summary

Palmer wishes that Family Fest would end on Friday instead of Saturday so that there would not be enough time to hold the Pigeon Shoot. Each year, during the first week of August, this festival begins on Monday and concludes on Saturday. Palmer cannot recall seeing any pigeons in town with the exception of this fateful week and learns later that the birds are purchased for the shooting contest to raise money for maintenance and upkeep of the park.

Palmer's first recollection of a pigeon shoot is when he was four years old and his mother told him that the wringers were just doing their jobs to put the pigeons out of their misery. Even at a young age, Palmer could not reason why there was not a better way to relieve misery and struggled with the source of pigeon misery in the first place. Palmer notes the gold pigeon standing on the mantel in his family's living room and learns that his father won the trophy for shooting pigeons. Much to Palmer's horror, he learns that his father was also a wringer and states with pride that Palmer will one day follow in his father's footsteps. Palmer recalls feeling a small amount of relief that he would not be called upon to perform his wringer duties until he reaches the age of ten.

Chapter 8 Analysis

Once again, Spinelli uses the tactic of memory to provide information about Palmer. The early recollection of the injustices done to the pigeons helps to underscore Palmer's disgust with the shooting event. In young Palmer's napve view, the pigeons do not seem miserable, and he reasons that when he is in misery, his parents provide comfort in many ways far less invasive than shooting. Palmer also sees the irony in people who purchase pigeons only to shoot them a few days later. Palmer is too young to rationalize it, but it seems that the money dedicated to buy the pigeons could just as easily be donated directly to the park maintenance fund without the need for any killing. Palmer is conflicted between the horror of what he has witnessed and the longing to be like his father who engages earnestly in the annual shooting event.

Chapter 9

Chapter 9 Summary

When he was six years old, Palmer attended the Pigeon Shoot with Dorothy and her family. Palmer is pleased to introduce Dorothy to the mechanics of the event, surprising her with details culminating in the death of five thousand pigeons in one day. When Palmer makes the hideous sound of a pigeon's neck being snapped, Dorothy runs away in horror and Palmer follows with tears in his own eyes too.

Chapter 9 Analysis

Palmer tests his constitution by attending a second Pigeon Shoot and asserts his maturity over the napve Dorothy who has never witnessed the event before. The author uses irony to show Palmer's true feelings of distress after coolly explaining the event's details to the horrified Dorothy.

Chapter 10

Chapter 10 Summary

The following year, Palmer avoids the Pigeon Shoot and plays with Dorothy at the playground all day while the sounds of gunshots punctuate the afternoon. Beans encounters Palmer and Dorothy at play and is incredulous when he learns that they are not going to attend the Pigeon Shoot. Even though he is too young to participate, Beans runs off to the soccer field to pick up wounded birds and is chased away by the legitimate wringers.

This is the year that Palmer remembers smelling the gun smoke on his father's clothes after the Pigeon Shoot. The usually familiar and comfortable security of his father's lap takes on a mildly threatening feeling in this aura of smoke. Palmer also remembers this as the year that his family took a family vacation to a large city where the pigeons stroll freely on the sidewalks, and as far as Palmer can tell, no one tried to shoot any of the birds. Palmer has a difficult time rationalizing this behavior with the activities of those in his hometown, including his father whose sharp shooting skills have earned him a gold pigeon trophy that now sits on the living room mantle.

Chapter 10 Analysis

The author uses the literary technique of metaphor in this chapter when he writes about the gunsmoke smell on the clothes of Palmer's father. At first, Palmer actually smells the smoke but months later, "... he began smelling the gray and sour odor even when his father wasn't there, even when Pigeon Day was over. It might happen in the morning as he sat in school or at night as he lay in bed. It could even happen in his father's lap in the middle of winter, when the shotgun had been locked away for months." (Page 50) The gunsmoke smell represents fear and death to Palmer, who can sense the stink months after any real residue has dissipated.

Spinelli also uses personification when describing the pigeons inhabiting the big city. "He was especially fascinated by how they moved. They did not hop, like sparrows or robins, but they *walked,* one pink foot in front of the other, just like people. With each step, the head gave a nod, as if to say, *Yes, I will. I agree. You're right.* As Palmer saw it, the pigeon was a most agreeable bird." (Page 52)

Chapter 11

Chapter 11 Summary

When Family Fest arrives, Palmer revels in the rides, food, and games but he cannot forget about the nearby soccer field, which will soon become a killing field at Saturday's Pigeon Shoot. In order to avoid the questions of his attending the event, Palmer takes special pains to avoid Beans, Mutto, Henry, and even Dorothy. The boys have plans to meet early Saturday morning to attend the Pigeon Shoot until the very end but Palmer has planned to feign illness, and falls asleep secure in his diversionary plan.

Chapter 11 Analysis

The author uses the literary technique, onomatopoeia, in this chapter to describe the sounds that Palmer hears at the Family Fest. Onomatopoeia means that the descriptive word actually sounds the same as the sounds the word describes. For example, "He loved the yelp and splash when a ball hit the mark at the Dunk-A-Kid booth, the pop of darted balloons..." (Page 55) *Yelp, splash,* and *pop* are all legitimate sounds as well as the words used to describe them.

Chapter 12

Chapter 12 Summary

One night Palmer dreams that millions of pigeons come to town, pick up the edges of the town, and fly away with it in their beaks. Suddenly Palmer feels warmth on his face and awakens to find Beans and Mutto shining a flashlight on him in his bed. The three boys escape out of Palmer's bedroom window and stealthily make their way through the silent town to the area where the five thousand crated pigeons are waiting for their dire fate. Beans and Mutto begin their harmless teasing by banging on the crates with sticks. This creates a cacophony of sounds in the still night. Palmer is suddenly aware of the ten thousand orange pigeon eyes on him and runs toward home using the excuse of an urgent need for a bathroom.

The following morning, Beans and Mutto do not come for Palmer, who stays in bed all day in compliance with his plan to fake illness to avoid the Pigeon Shoot. Palmer takes no chances of being seen by closing his window, pulling his shade, and playing cards and Monopoly with his mother. Palmer is able to fall asleep and put another year of the Pigeon Shoot to rest.

Chapter 12 Analysis

Spinelli uses figurative language throughout the book to add to the lyrical quality of his writing. For example, in this chapter, Palmer's dream includes the image of the pigeons that pick up the town as if they "plucked it up and flew away with it, as if it were a Christmas tree display on a tablecloth." (Page 59) In the scene when Palmer, Beans, and Mutto sneak out at night to see the crated pigeons, Spinelli writes, "They were a whisper through the nighttime town." (Page 61) This is much more interesting than merely saying that the boys were quiet when they ran in the dark town.

The author appeals to boys when he writes, "Jogging through the dark and sleeping alleyways, skirting pools of streetlight, he imagined he was a toy lead soldier come to life, following Sergeant Beans and Private Mutto on a mission behind enemy lines." (Page 61) This visual imagery helps the reader to understand the sense of camaraderie and adventure Palmer experiences on this unusual night.

Chapter 13

Chapter 13 Summary

The following Christmas, Palmer receives a sled as a gift but there is no snow until a blizzard hits two days after New Years. Palmer, Beans, Henry, and Mutto spend a deliriously happy day with the new sled and Palmer returns home that night content that all is right with the world. Before going downstairs for dinner, Palmer hesitates to look out his bedroom window at the sun casting a raspberry glow on the snow-topped roof of the house. Palmer's eyes land on the unmistakable bird prints in the snow, but he does not think anything more about it until he is awakened the next morning by the sound of tapping on his bedroom window. Palmer soon realizes that it is not his mother or his friends knocking on his door but a pigeon standing outside his window.

Chapter 13 Analysis

The author uses irony to describe the snow-filled world Palmer encounters on his last day of Christmas vacation when he has waited for a week to use his new sled. There is also a small element of foreshadowing in the bird prints outside Palmer's window, which indicate the coming of another gift into Palmer's life.

Chapter 14

Chapter 14 Summary

At first, Palmer is not sure that he has actually seen a pigeon because he has dreamed about the birds so many times. Palmer pulls down the window shade, waits a few minutes, and puts up the shade again to reveal that the bird is not part of a dream, but a real bird pecking at Palmer staring back at him. Palmer pulls down the shade once more, silently chastising the bird for being so stupid as to appear in a town where people shoot pigeons.

Palmer has no time to focus on the pigeon because he has to go to school and is happy to see his friends waiting for him at the corner. Along the way, the boys encounter Dorothy, who they consider the perfect target for their hastily formed snowballs. Dorothy ignores the snowball volleys, irritating the boys just a bit because she does not react like a typical girl.

Palmer has a hard time concentrating in school because his thoughts stray back to the pigeon at his window this morning. Later that night, Palmer uses his father's flashlight to inspect the rooftop outside his bedroom window and sees bird tracks, but no sight of any pigeon.

Chapter 14 Analysis

Spinelli draws an allusion to American Revolution history when describing the snowball volleys that Palmer and his friends fire at the back of Dorothy's red coat. This reference alludes to the red coats worn by the British during the Revolutionary War and positions Dorothy as an enemy to the boys, just as the British were enemies to the U.S. patriots.

The author also reinforces Palmer's typically male tendencies by talking about his snowball fights, wrestling in the snow, playing with toy soldiers, and harassing Dorothy with snowballs and verbal taunts. This shows Palmer's growth as a male to balance out and position his sensitive side, which abhors the killing of birds and the times when Dorothy ignores him.

Chapter 15

Chapter 15 Summary

The next morning, Palmer is once again awakened by the sound of tapping at his bedroom window. Palmer tries to reason with the pigeon outside his window by telling him that people in this town kill birds just like him. He pleads with the obstinate bird to fly away. During breakfast, it occurs to Palmer that the pigeon must be hungry, so he throws a handful of cereal out his window and the bird devours it. Palmer is reminded of warnings his mother gave him in the past about not feeding stray animals so that they will not stay. However Palmer feels sorry for the hungry bird and ignores his mother's cautionary words.

Palmer is distracted all day with thoughts of the pigeon and has bittersweet feelings when he returns home to find that the bird has flown away. Palmer lies on his bed wondering where the pigeon might be right now, hoping that the bird is not visiting somebody else. Palmer tries to play with his toy soldiers but is too distracted. He shoots some baskets and stops to watch TV, but cannot keep his mind off the pigeon. Suddenly the sound of someone hammering a coconut on *Gilligan's Island* seems to be coming from outside Palmer's bedroom window and he realizes that the pigeon has returned.

Palmer races around the room trying to find a leftover snack to feed the bird; but finding none, he realizes he must get something from the kitchen. Afraid that the pigeon will leave in his absence to get some food, Palmer abandons common sense and opens his bedroom window.

Chapter 15 Analysis

The author symbolizes Palmer's sensitive side by his distraction with typically male pursuits when he is concerned about the bird's welfare. Palmer also begins to see the pigeon as a beautiful creature, as opposed to the way that the others in town see the birds. "As the bird pecked at the Puffs, sunlight skipped off glossings of green and purple around its neck. Palmer counted: gray overall feathering (one), orange eyes trimmed in black (two, three), tan beak (four), pink legs and feet (five), green and purple neck (six, seven), white wingtips (eight). Eight! Who would have thought one miserable winged rat had so many colors?" (Page 78)

Chapter 16

Chapter 16 Summary

The pigeon walks onto Palmer's extended arm out the window, nips Palmer's earlobe, and proceeds to walk over the furniture in the bedroom as if trying to decide whether it likes the room. Palmer is able to hide the bird when Palmer's mother enters the room to announce dinner. Palmer eats quickly so he can return to see his new winged friend. Returning to his bedroom, Palmer does not see the pigeon at first, but finally spots the bird resting on a shoebox in his closet.

Palmer quietly completes his homework, watches TV, and works on his scrapbook while checking on the pigeon every few minutes. When Palmer's mother enters the bedroom to wish Palmer goodnight, he asks her to knock before entering his room from now on because of his increasing sense of modesty. Amused, Palmer's mother agrees to the request and Palmer falls asleep secure that his secret visitor will not be revealed.

Chapter 16 Analysis

Palmer's relationship with his mother is different from the one he has with his father, in that his mother is more sensitive to his needs without Palmer having to explain his feelings. It is Palmer's mother who removes him from the soccer field during his first Pigeon Shoot. She also plays games with him in his room when he goes into seclusion to avoid going to the shoot last year. In contrast to, Palmer's father, who expects Palmer to adopt traditionally male behaviors, Palmer's mother allows Palmer to exhibit his sensitive side without fear of reprisal.

Chapter 17

Chapter 17 Summary

Palmer awakes the next morning to the feeling of his earlobe being pinched and realizes that the pigeon is standing next to his head looking straight into Palmer's eyes. Palmer retrieves some cereal and spreads it on the snow outside his bedroom window through which the pigeon flies to get his breakfast.

During the next few days Palmer adjusts to life with his pigeon and even takes out a library book to become more familiar with pigeon behavior. Palmer immerses himself in pigeon details but cannot find any information about why people would want to shoot them. By the end of the week, Palmer assumes that the pigeon belongs to him and names him Nipper, based on the bird's quick nips on Palmer's ear as part of their wakeup routine.

During the days, Palmer lets Nipper out the window and is sure to leave some food on the roof so that Nipper won't be hungry while Palmer attends school. Returning home each evening, Palmer lets Nipper back into his bedroom where the two friends play until it is time to sleep. Amazingly, Palmer finds the most unusual part of his new routine to be acting normally, but wonders to himself how anyone can be considered normal in a town that kills pigeons.

Chapter 17 Analysis

Nipper is great company for a lonely, only child like Palmer and the boy quickly attaches to the bird. The author makes it clear that the pigeon has very human traits in its walk, the sounds it makes, and also in its comic antics. It is important to note that the bird begins to take on the role of a friend for Palmer, who notes in the bird book that "a pigeon's heart is about the size of an acorn and that a pigeon's heart, as measured against the size of its body, is one of the largest hearts in creation." (Page 90) The author not only creates human movements for the bird, but also provides it with the capability to form an important attachment to Palmer, due to its relatively large heart, which Palmer interprets as affection.

Chapter 18

Chapter 18 Summary

Palmer's mantra of acting normally and trying not to arouse suspicion is in conflict with his happiness at having a pigeon for a friend. Palmer's mother is more than a little suspicious when Palmer announces that from this point on he will change his own bed linens and clean his own room making it unnecessary for his mother to ever enter his room again. Palmer is amazed at the changes in himself, but he will go to any lengths to protect the secret of Nipper.

Chapter 18 Analysis

The author uses repetition to drive home the obsession Palmer has about not arousing suspicion in his behavior. "Act normal... act normal...," Palmer repeats in his head all day long so that he can keep a low profile on his clandestine activities.

The author also presents the irony of two pigeons in the household: one live - playing and sleeping in Palmer's room, the other one in the shape of a gold trophy awarded for accurate shooting of live birds.

Chapter 19

Chapter 19 Summary

Nipper's presence becomes a source of anxiety for Palmer, who must take special care that the bird is never seen by his mother or his friends. Palmer considers options to keep Beans and Mutto away by telling them that the room has cooties or that a ghost lived there once, but discards those ideas because Beans would find them very appealing. Instead, Palmer becomes an expert at diversion, and each time Beans suggests going to Palmer's house, Palmer quickly suggests something else such as bombing Dorothy's house with snowballs. Tormenting Dorothy becomes a major source of entertainment for Palmer, Beans, and Mutto. One day, when Dorothy is home sick and the boys run out of things to do, Beans suggests going to Palmer's house but Palmer quickly diverts the group to Beans' house instead.

Chapter 19 Analysis

The author uses foreshadowing in the seemingly harmless acts of teasing Dorothy who will soon question her likeability and her former friendship with Palmer. In his zeal to be accepted by his new friends, Palmer is hurting Dorothy, who was loyal to him when Beans and Mutto wanted nothing to do with Palmer. Palmer will soon learn a valuable lesson; but unfortunately, Dorothy's feelings are wounded in the process.

Chapter 20

Chapter 20 Summary

Palmer is surprised that Beans agrees to take Palmer and Mutto to his house because Palmer has never been to Beans' house and cannot recall Beans ever talking about his family. Palmer half expects Beans' house to be a shack, or maybe even a hole, and is surprised again to find that Beans lives in a very nice house. Beans guides Palmer and Mutto to the kitchen where Beans retrieves a taped frozen dinner box from the back of the freezer. Beans pulls out the contents of the box to reveal a frozen muskrat and the boys recoil in horror. The muskrat had been presented to Beans by his cat, Panther, and Beans thought the dead animal too good a gift to discard.

After Palmer and Mutto have exhausted their examination of the frozen carcass, Beans has a brilliant idea with which they can further torture Dorothy. Beans places the muskrat in the microwave oven for several minutes and then joins Palmer and Mutto who are waiting outside to escape the horrible smell of the dead animal. When Beans is satisfied that the muskrat is sufficiently thawed, he joins Palmer and Mutto and they race toward Dorothy's house.

When the trio reaches Dorothy's block, Palmer and Mutto duck behind a parked car while Beans proceeds to nail the dead muskrat to the front door of Dorothy's house, ring the doorbell, and run. The boys stay hidden but the screams emanating from Dorothy's mother tell them that their mission has been successful. As Palmer, Beans, and Mutto lie on the ground laughing, Mutto remarks on the pigeon flying overhead.

Chapter 20 Analysis

The author draws an analogy between Mark Twain's literary character, Huckleberry Finn, and Beans. Up until this point, Palmer has never heard Beans mention any family members and has never been to Beans' home, much like Huckleberry's itinerant lifestyle. Beans is also like Huckleberry in a love of adventure and pranks and with a distaste for structure and order. When Palmer arrives at Beans' home, he is "surprised to discover that Beans did not live in a lean-to or a hole, after all, but in a house. And from the looks of it, a fine house, with a front porch and a shiny brass doorknob." When Palmer enters the house, he "looked about for signs of primitive living - mud, piles of rubbish - but saw nothing but clean furniture, carpets, pictures on the walls. A regular house." The author has fun writing about Beans and his orneriness, and the likeness to Huckleberry Finn is too irresistibly fun to ignore.

Chapter 21

Chapter 21 Summary

Beans follows the pigeon to Palmer's house where it hovers for a while and then flies away. Palmer acts incredulous at the thought of a pigeon at his house and diverts by offering to buy Beans and Mutto a treat at the deli. Later that night, Palmer collapses in tears from the day's stress until he hears the familiar sound of Nipper tapping at his bedroom window. Palmer opens the window and Nipper walks in to resume his normal evening routine.

From this point on, Palmer considers Nipper to be his bird and wonders about Nipper's activities during the day. Deep in his heart, Palmer wishes that Nipper would stay in another town that does not shoot pigeons; but he also wants Nipper to stay with him forever. When Nipper leaves each morning, he circles the house once or twice before flying off. Palmer has read that this is the way pigeons orient themselves to their return destination, but Palmer chooses to think that Nipper is simply hesitant to leave every day.

Fortunately, Palmer has been able to keep Beans and Mutto from seeing Nipper, and the boys keep up their relentless pranks on Dorothy. So far, there have been no repercussions from the muskrat incident, and Dorothy has not created any problems for them. That situation, though, is about to change.

Chapter 21 Analysis

Palmer's sensitivity is something he keeps hidden from Beans and Mutto, but the muskrat incident at the Gruzik household coupled with Beans' sighting of Nipper strains Palmer's nerves. It is only Nipper's return that changes the complexion of the day, and Palmer considers Nipper to be his own bird from this day forward. Palmer shows maturity for a boy his age by considering that it would be best for Nipper to find another boy in another town that does not shoot pigeons. Ultimately, however, Palmer reacts like any boy who has strong feelings for a friend, even though that friend is a bird. Ironically, it is the issue of sensitivity and hurt feelings that will soon create a climax in the story, but the wounded party will not be Palmer.

Chapter 22

Chapter 22 Summary

Palmer, Beans, and Mutto begin to torment Dorothy by "treestumping" her, meaning that they would throw themselves in front of her on the sidewalk, refuse to move, and force her to walk around them. Some of the other boys at school begin to mimic this new harassment with some of the other girls at school. After a while, Beans is no longer satisfied simply to treestump Dorothy because she does not respond in any way. Even if Beans would stand inches away from Dorothy's face, she does not say a word.

Eventually Beans begins to toss Dorothy's school papers to the wind and a new daily ritual of stealing Dorothy's hat begins. That hat is hung on car antennas, tacked to a telephone pole or tossed into a dumpster, along with many other indignities. Still, Dorothy says nothing. Finally, one day Beans confronts Dorothy face to face and she finally speaks. Only she directs her anguish to Palmer, not Beans. Dorothy removes herself from Beans' presence and demands to know why Palmer is allowing his friends to torment her. The tears in Dorothy's eyes communicate to Palmer that Dorothy is more wounded by Palmer's betrayal than anything Beans could do to her. Palmer cannot think of anything to say and Dorothy walks home crying openly.

The following day, Nipper does not come home and the bird's absence, coupled with Dorothy's hurt feelings, keeps Palmer in a low mood. After dinner, when Nipper has still not returned, Palmer walks out into the backyard silently pleading with Nipper to fly home; but there is no sign of the bird. Palmer does not sleep well that night and is overjoyed to hear Nipper's tapping at the bedroom window in the morning. After their Saturday morning ritual of eating and games, Palmer lets Nipper out to fly for a little bit and heads across the street to tell Dorothy about his feathered friend.

Chapter 22 Analysis

Spinelli clearly enjoys writing for young people. He immerses himself in the characters of Palmer and his friends by playing with words just for fun. For example, in this chapter, he uses words like "treestumping" to describe the human obstacles created on Dorothy's path to school; and "herkyjerking" to describe Beans' frenetic movements when trying to annoy Dorothy. This clever language not only perfectly describes the activities of the boys, but also creates interesting, amusing reading.

Chapter 23

Chapter 23 Summary

Palmer attends Beans' tenth birthday party and Beans can hardly wait for the event to end so that he and his friends can run outside and find Farquar, who will administer The Treatment. Farquar is not in any of his normal locations and Beans begins to frantically call out for the older boy, as if receiving The Treatment is the only way that Beans will officially be ten. Finally, Farquar is located at the soccer field and Beans does not flinch during his dose of The Treatment. At the end, Beans throws up his hands with joy proclaiming his official status as a wringer.

Chapter 23 Analysis

The author introduces another conflict for the characters in their acceptance of The Treatment on each birthday. "Among the four friends, there was the feeling that neither calendar nor cake made a birthday, not officially. For it to be official, your arm had to feel the sting of Farquar's knuckle. It was a dilemma: you wanted to be a year older, you did not want The Treatment, and you couldn't have one without the other. At the very least, it slowed you down. For once in your life, you were not in a hurry." (Page 120) The Treatment is another step toward becoming a man and a wringer in this small town.

Chapter 24

Chapter 24 Summary

Later the same day, Dorothy waits for Palmer in his bedroom so that she may witness Nipper's nightly arrival. Palmer and his mother are happy that Palmer is spending more time with Dorothy and not as much time with Palmer's "hoodlum friends" as Palmer's mother calls Beans, Mutto, and Henry. Nipper arrives in his usual style, and Palmer opens the window to allow him access to the room.

Dorothy wants Nipper to stand on her head like he stands on Palmer's head but Nipper is resolute on his perch of Palmer's scalp. Palmer can tell that Dorothy is not mad that Nipper seems to like Palmer better, and he feels like he is floating in Dorothy's easy company. Palmer recalls the swimming lessons he had taken a few years ago and how he learned to float on the first day. He is happy to feel this way again with Dorothy here.

Since it is easy to be with Dorothy, Palmer breaks down and reveals his dreaded secret, that he does not want to be a wringer and does not know how to get out of it. Dorothy's matter-of-fact style tells Palmer to announce the fact and not give it another thought, but Palmer is haunted by the taunts and harassment he will receive from his other friends if he does not participate in the Pigeon Shoot. Palmer accuses Dorothy of not fully comprehending the situation because she is a girl and does not have the pressure of the expectation to become a wringer. Realizing that Palmer is intent on making himself miserable about the subject, Dorothy kisses Palmer on the nose and diverts Palmer into playing games with Nipper all afternoon.

Chapter 24 Analysis

The author uses flashback to describe Palmer's memory of his swimming instructions. This allows the reader to understand Palmer's thinking based on this important event. It provides insight to Palmer, which the reader would not have had otherwise. Extending out of the flashback is a metaphor describing Palmer's sense of floating with Dorothy. "He lay back, he tried to trust. He could see nothing but the instructor's face and, beyond, the vast blue sky. And then the instructor's face was gone, his hand was gone, and his voice was saying, 'You're floating.' Palmer got the same feeling with Dorothy. He knew that he could let go, and she would hold him up." (Page 128) Palmer and Dorothy are not in the water; but the author wants to share Palmer's feeling of security and peacefulness in Dorothy's friendship, and provides the floating instruction for reference.

Chapter 25

Chapter 25 Summary

About a month before the end of the school year, Beans, Mutto, Henry, and Palmer are walking home when Nipper suddenly swoops down and perches on Palmer's head. Palmer tries to shoo the bird away and eventually gets free of Nipper to the amazement of his friends. Palmer's attempts to pass the event off as a freak circumstance are only half-heartedly received by Beans and the others. Suddenly, Beans announces that he knows that the pigeon belongs to Palmer who launches into a monologue about his hatred of pigeons and his longing to be a wringer. The boys walk home in silence after Palmer announces that he will be the best wringer the town has ever seen.

Chapter 25 Analysis

In this chapter, Spinelli uses irony in Palmer's reaction to Nipper's landing on his head. Irony is a disparity between what a character is saying in contrast to what he truly believes. When Palmer spews forth his hatred for pigeons and his anticipation for becoming a wringer, he is defending himself in front of his friends by denying the truth. The reader, though, knows that Palmer's words convey the opposite of what he truly believes.

Chapter 26

Chapter 26 Summary

When Palmer arrives home, Dorothy and Nipper are waiting in Palmer's bedroom. Palmer's anxiety has him in an agitated state and he paces the room without interruption as he ponders what Beans and the others will do to him now that they suspect that Palmer has a pigeon. While Palmer paces, Dorothy writes Nipper's name on a Nerf ball that the bird plays with in the bedroom. Palmer sleeps fitfully that night and is anxious to release Nipper into the sky after breakfast.

Palmer determines that the best way to avoid any more incidents of Nipper landing on his head in public is to disguise his own appearance. Palmer's mother is shocked but does not say much when Palmer leaves for school with a winter coat, hat, and scarf on a beautiful May morning. For the first time in his life, Palmer thinks the school day passes too quickly and he invents an incident of spitting on the floor so that the teacher will keep him after school.

Palmer's attempts to avoid Beans, Mutto, and Henry after school are thwarted when Palmer finds the boys waiting for him outside school. The floor-spitting incident is of immense interest to the boys and Palmer is pleased that he has diverted their conversation from the topic of Nipper.

Chapter 26 Analysis

This chapter is filled with examples of exaggeration due to Palmer's activities. First, he dresses in heavy winter outer garments on a warm May morning so that Nipper will not recognize him and create another distraction. The image of Palmer zipped up to his chin, when the other boys are in spring clothes, is an amusing one. Later in the day, Palmer fabricates an incident of spitting on the floor so that he will be detained and not be forced to encounter Beans and the others. When punishment is not inflicted, Palmer actually does spit on the floor warranting his writing on the blackboard until he has learned his lesson. Both Palmer's teacher and his mother are shocked to learn of Palmer's indiscretions because his behavior is out of character for the usually well-behaved Palmer.

Chapter 27

Chapter 27 Summary

School is not out for the summer for another month and Palmer faces the dual challenge of avoiding Nipper in public and keeping Beans and the others from being angry with him. Palmer's tactic of spitting on the schoolroom floor earned him both punishment and celebrity status, so he invents even more ways to create the same results. Palmer manages to get detentions for the balance of the school year with the exception of the last day of school. So Palmer determines to wear an elephant mask to avoid Nipper's recognizing him on the way home.

On the night before the last day of school, Dorothy, Palmer and Nipper are in their usual location in Palmer's bedroom. Palmer shares his conflict with wanting school to be over vs. his approaching birthday signaling his eligibility to be a wringer. Dorothy tries to calm Palmer's anxiety telling him that he is doing a good thing by wearing disguises and being kept after school, since the efforts are protecting Nipper from Beans and the others.

Palmer's elephant mask is a huge success on the last day of school, yet Palmer is immensely relieved to have made it home without incident from Nipper or Beans.

Chapter 27 Analysis

The author uses humor in this chapter to highlight Palmer's coping mechanisms. The antics at school such as tickling the teacher and wearing an elephant mask are humorous and creative in Palmer's situation, and the author has fun in telling about Palmer's new personality.

Chapter 28

Chapter 28 Summary

One night after dinner Beans, Mutto, and Henry arrive at Palmer's house to take him to wringer school. Palmer blanches at the mention of the word, but accompanies the boys to the soccer field where wringer instruction is about to begin. The wringmaster instructs the boys on the operations of the Pigeon Shoot and cautions them about their responsibilities on the big day. The instructor produces a stuffed gray sock and lets each boy practice wringing the neck of this imaginary pigeon. Palmer takes his turn with the sock-bird, throws it down in disgust, and stomps off the soccer field.

Chapter 28 Analysis

In keeping with his love of word play, the author uses a play on the word "ringmaster" when he calls the wringer instructor a "wringmaster." This is an appropriate term given the circus-like atmosphere surrounding the Pigeon Shoot and the weeks leading up to it.

This chapter is important because it marks the point when Palmer faces his fear and goes to wringer school, ultimately rejecting what the instructor has to say symbolized by throwing down the sock pigeon whose neck he has just wrung.

Chapter 29

Chapter 29 Summary

The next day Palmer, Dorothy, and Nipper are playing in Palmer's bedroom and Dorothy advises Palmer to just tell everyone that he does not want to be a wringer. Dorothy offers to make the revelation for Palmer, but he adamantly forbids her to do so. Dorothy changes the subject and asks if Palmer is going to invite her to his birthday party this year. Palmer has not yet decided if he is going to have a party because Dorothy is actually his only real friend now. He has begun to fear Beans and Mutto because of what they would do to Nipper if they should ever see him.

Palmer's fears about Beans and Mutto are confirmed a few days later when Palmer's mother tells him that a stray yellow cat has been lurking around the house. Palmer knows instantly that Beans has brought his cat, Panther, to the house to catch Nipper, and Palmer now has one more source of anxiety.

Chapter 29 Analysis

Palmer reaches another turning point in his maturity when he weighs the value of Dorothy's loyalty over the untrue behavior of Beans, Mutto, and Henry. Palmer has almost reached a critical point in addressing his personal battle about revealing that he does not want to be a wringer in spite of what his friends and town people think.. For such a young boy, Palmer processes some very mature thoughts about the value of true friendship and loyalty to his own personal code.

Chapter 30

Chapter 30 Summary

Palmer invites Dorothy to his tenth birthday party; but she decides not to attend at the last minute leaving Palmer to celebrate with Beans, Mutto, and Harold. Beans is especially interested in Palmer's father's experience at the Pigeon Shoot and Palmer has a hard time imagining his father with a rifle killing the helpless birds. After the party, Palmer, Beans, Mutto, and Harold go in search of Farquar but the administrator of The Treatment is nowhere to be found today.

Later that night, Palmer plays quietly with Nipper and goes to the kitchen to get a piece of birthday cake. Palmer catches his breath when he sees the word "Tonight" written in the cake's icing.

Chapter 30 Analysis

Palmer is surprised that Dorothy does not attend his party. Yet the bigger surprise is his own mother's absence, leaving his father in charge while she shops at the mall. His mother does not like Beans, Mutto, and Henry for their negative influence on Palmer and her absence sends Palmer a huge message of disapproval. Palmer is reaching the point of rejecting his old friends on his own terms; and his lack of interest over getting The Treatment symbolizes Palmer's growing rejection of the quality of friendship represented by Beans, Mutto, and Henry.

Chapter 31

Chapter 31 Summary

Palmer surmises that it had been Henry who wrote the word "Tonight" in the icing of Palmer's birthday cake. Palmer remembers that Henry rushed back into the house for a few moments before the boys went in search of Farquar and Henry must have done his handiwork at that point. Palmer knows that this is a warning that Beans, Mutto, and Henry will be coming back late tonight to catch Palmer with his pigeon, but Palmer outwits them by hiding behind the couch in the living room with Nipper all night. At one point, Palmer can hear the noise of his friends outside and is able to fall asleep only after he is certain that they have left the yard.

Chapter 31 Analysis

To add to the literary interest of the story, the author uses the technique of anthropomorphism, which means that he attributes human characteristics to inanimate objects. In this chapter, he writes, "He could feel the cold, golden gaze of the trophy pigeon two rooms away. The silence of the house at night was not total. Somewhere a clock was ticking. Cricks and creaks came from nearby and distant quarters, as if the house were twitching in a sleep of its own." (Page 172) Obviously, trophies cannot gaze and houses do not sleep and twitch; but by crafting the sentences this way, the author provides a fuller understanding of what Palmer experiences by putting it in terms that everyone can understand.

Chapter 32

Chapter 32 Summary

The next morning, Palmer is able to return to his room before his parents discover that he and Nipper spent the night behind the living room couch. Palmer thinks that his secret is safe because Beans and the others did not find any evidence of Nipper in his room last night, but the sound of the doorbell announces Beans, Mutto, and Henry. Palmer realizes that he has been discovered as soon as he sees Nipper's Nerf ball in Beans' hand meaning that Beans had taken it from Palmer's room last night. Palmer tries to pass off the nickname "Nipper" written on the ball as his own when he was a small boy, but Beans does not believe the story.

Beans drops the topic temporarily and the boys set out to find Farquar to deliver Palmer's birthday Treatment. Palmer tries to conjure up the memory of the pride he felt with his first Treatment last year but the magic has faded and he does not proceed with the ritual this year. Palmer runs away from his friends screaming that he does not want the Treatment; he does not want to be a wringer; and he does not want to be called Snots anymore. Palmer runs as the boys taunt him with threats against his own and Nipper's lives.

Chapter 32 Analysis

This chapter signifies the climax of the book, which means the point in the story when the plot line reaches a dramatic peak and the end of the story is now inevitable. Palmer finds emotional release from all his pent-up anxiety by rejecting The Treatment, announcing his unwillingness to be a wringer, and his distaste for the nickname "Snots." This outburst symbolizes Palmer's rejection of Beans, Mutto, and Henry for their cruelty toward Dorothy and their potentially harmful behavior toward Nipper and himself. There is also relief in the fact that Palmer has announced his plan to not be a wringer. Although Palmer suffers some momentary discomfort, he will ultimately realize that he has made the right choices.

Chapter 33

Chapter 33 Summary

Palmer takes temporary refuge leaning against a garbage dumpster behind a grocery store. The hot weather and Palmer's running for several blocks demands that he rest for a while. He is grateful when a store employee realizes his discomfort and provides a cold soft drink. As Palmer crouches on the ground he weighs his options and thinks that he could stay in this spot and run home in the dark when his risk of detection would be less, but Palmer is afraid that Beans and the others will go to his house and harm Nipper. Palmer decides to take his chances for Nipper's sake and runs the five remaining blocks home. Breathless, Palmer reaches home, dashes upstairs and finds Panther looking fixedly at Nipper tapping on the outside of the window.

Chapter 33 Analysis

Although Beans, Mutto, and Henry are not at Palmer's house, their presence is felt through the ominous presence of Panther, watching the vulnerable Nipper through the closed window. Palmer now understands why his mother has never liked Beans and the others because of their cruelty, and this harassment validates that Palmer has made the correct decision in rejecting his friends.

Chapter 34

Chapter 34 Summary

Later that day Palmer informs Dorothy that he must send Nipper away in order to protect him. Now that Palmer has raised Beans' ire he knows that Beans will stop at nothing to harm Palmer's bird. The imminent date of the Pigeon Shoot is another reason why Palmer thinks it best if Nipper were to leave town for good.

Early the next morning, Palmer and Dorothy tell their parents they are going on a breakfast picnic and leave on their bikes with Nipper secure in the shoebox in the basket of Dorothy's bike. Riding out into the country, further than either has ever ridden, Palmer takes Nipper into a wooded area, emerges in tears, and hops on his bike pedaling as fast as he can. Dorothy eventually catches up to Palmer. It is dusk when they return home to find Nipper waiting at Palmer's windowsill.

Chapter 34 Analysis

The author uses irony in this chapter to contrast the elaborate, all-day operation Palmer and Dorothy undertake to remove Nipper from harm only to find Nipper waiting for them when they return home. This is irony because the result is radically different from the expectation of the actions of the characters. There is also a humorous element in the thorough preparations carried out by Palmer and Dorothy, who are outsmarted by a little bird with a mind of his own.

Chapter 35

Chapter 35 Summary

For a moment, Palmer considers not feeding Nipper or not opening the window so that the bird will eventually fly away and end all the problems. Dorothy is naturally appalled by Palmer's suggestions, just as Palmer knew she would be. Palmer paces the room wondering how Beans and the others will try to kill Nipper. When Palmer stops for a moment Dorothy breaks out into a huge laugh because Nipper has been pacing along with Palmer, stopping when he stops, turning when he turns. Palmer is both thrilled and sad at this humorous moment.

The next day Palmer's mother visits his room to tell Palmer that she and his father have known about Nipper for quite awhile. Palmer protests thinking that he had kept his secret admirably, but Palmer's mother is not angry about Nipper and tells Palmer that the pigeon can stay. Palmer is concerned for Nipper's safety due to his father's propensity to shoot pigeons; but according to Palmer's mother, Palmer's father has changed since the days when he won the pigeon-shooting contest.

Palmer would like nothing more than to keep Nipper. but life is too stressful for Palmer trying to protect him. So Palmer gives Nipper to Dorothy, who is going to the seashore tomorrow and who promises to let Nipper out there so he can fly away and be happy and free. The day that Nipper leaves Palmer stays in bed all morning.

Chapter 35 Analysis

In this chapter there is a range of emotions for Palmer, who struggles with the conflict of how to manage life with Nipper now that Beans wants to kill the bird. The situation where Nipper mimics Palmer's pacing movements is very humorous and creates a funny scene in the reader's mind. By the end of the chapter, Palmer decides to let Nipper go free, and even though Palmer knows Nipper will be happy at the seashore, Palmer is very sad to be losing his bird friend. This range of emotions shows the scope of Palmer's sensitivity and his maturity at wanting the best thing for those he loves.

Chapter 36

Chapter 36 Summary

Beans and Mutto continue to torment Palmer until one day he yells at them that Nipper is gone. The friends do not believe Palmer, so he offers to let them look in his bedroom. Palmer remembers that his mother will not allow Beans and Mutto into the house anymore, so Palmer suggests that Henry come as their representative to check out the situation. Henry arrives, searches Palmer's bedroom, and reports back to Beans and Mutto that the bird is no longer in Palmer's house.

Chapter 36 Analysis

In spite of not being friends with Beans, Mutto, and Henry any longer, Palmer must still interact with them until he can prove that Nipper is no longer in his bedroom. Palmer suffers the same harassment that the boys inflicted on Dorothy all winter. He realizes the cruelty of unrelenting teasing and has a newfound empathy for Dorothy.

Chapter 37

Chapter 37 Summary

Fortunately, Beans and Mutto stop teasing Palmer after Henry's inspection of Palmer's bedroom. Palmer stays close to home and does not even see Dorothy much anymore. Sometimes Palmer plays with his toy soldiers and his father even shows him official military placements and movements of soldiers. Eventually Palmer tires of the soldiers and buries them in the backyard. Palmer accompanies his father to a baseball game out of town and Palmer cannot decide if he has had a good time or not. As Palmer and his father drive home that night, Palmer holds the foul ball that Palmer's father caught at the game and Palmer swears he can feel a tiny heartbeat.

Chapter 37 Analysis

The author uses anthropomorphism in this chapter when he assigns human characteristics to a pink eraser and a hippo slipper that Palmer uses as enemy targets in his make believe battle against his toy soldiers. "...Yet somehow the wicked eraser managed to stay alive, managed even to crawl through the front lines, only to be greeted by the backup platoon." (Page 200)

The author also uses descriptive language to help convey Palmer's obsession with thoughts of Nipper, even at the baseball game. "The uniforms of the Titans were orange. The shirts were orange, and the socks and the T on the cap. A black and orange stripe went from the belt to the top of the stirruped sock. The catcher's chest protector was orange, and so were the shortstop's shoelaces." (Pages 201-202) The orange and black remind Palmer of Nipper's orange eye and the bird's black and white coloring, and it seems as if Palmer is reminded of Nipper everywhere he goes.

Chapter 38

Chapter 38 Summary

As the day of the Pigeon Shoot approaches, Palmer realizes that he had let Nipper go for Nipper's sake but also for his own because there has been less stress in Palmer's life. Palmer wonders why he does not feel better since the problem is supposedly solved. Palmer attends the Family Fest with his parents since he no longer has Beans and the others as friends. Palmer notes that his father sensitively walks past the shooting gallery where little yellow ducks float as targets for zealous boys with the play rifles.

The day before the Pigeon Shoot, Palmer rides his bike to the train station where the crates of pigeons sit waiting to be transferred to the soccer field tomorrow. An old man tries to shoo Palmer away but Palmer sits for a long time just listening to the sound of the pigeons. That night, the duck shooting gallery is packed with shooters and Palmer notices that the golden pigeon trophy is gone from the mantel.

Chapter 38 Analysis

The author utilizes figurative language in describing Palmer's acceptance of his father's affectionate gestures during this trying time for Palmer. When Palmer's father ruffles Palmer's hair or squeezes his shoulder, Palmer instinctively knows that "Each of these things had a different meaning to Palmer yet the same - a language unlearned, of words unheard, that came to roost at some warm and waiting perch far below his ears." Obviously, words do not roost and Palmer does not have a physical perch near his ears. but the author uses words that relate to Palmer's feeling of loss of his bird, Nipper, and Palmer understands his father's support during his sadness.

Chapter 39

Chapter 39 Summary

In spite of his apprehensions, Palmer wakes the next morning and walks toward the soccer field where the Pigeon Shoot is being held. The crowd is already huge and it parts to let Palmer pass thinking that he is a wringer who is arriving late. Palmer can see the line of shooters waiting to take their turns and witnesses the pigeons being released into the air. Some of the birds do not understand the nature of the event and simply walk out of the box onto the field until some wringer grabs the birds and throws them up into the sky and their violent demise. Palmer can see Beans, Mutto, and Henry zealously pursuing their wringer duties and notices the big gold pigeon trophy waiting to be presented later to the best shooter.

Dorothy quietly moves up to Palmer, grabs his little finger, and stands beside him squeezing his finger with every wring of a pigeon's neck. Suddenly Beans runs over to Palmer and Dorothy and wrings the neck of a wounded bird right in front of them. Dorothy wants to leave but Palmer needs to ask her the details of Nipper's freedom at the seashore. Palmer is appalled to learn that Dorothy's family let Nipper loose at a railroad yard in a big city because the organizers of the Pigeon Shoot gather pigeons from rail yards for the shooting event. Dorothy is upset because she did not know this and runs away in tears.

Chapter 39 Analysis

Palmer learns an important lesson of true friendship this morning when Dorothy goes to Palmer's house, learns that Palmer is at the Pigeon Shoot, and then joins Palmer at the field. Dorothy and Palmer had not been spending much time together but Dorothy knows that this morning is a difficult one for Palmer and makes the effort to be with him in support.

Chapter 40

Chapter 40 Summary

Instinctively, Palmer knows that Nipper is in one of the crates waiting to be set free only to be shot out of the sky. Palmer even imagines how Nipper will feel when he is unexpectedly shot when he is just trying to fly. Palmer imagines that Nipper will see Palmer's face in the crowd and that the bird will be killed while trying to limp toward Palmer.

Before long, Palmer's worst fear comes true as he watches a pigeon that looks like Nipper being released from the white box. Amazingly though, the shooter misses and the pigeon soars toward the trees only to circle back. Palmer covers his face with his hands so he will not serve as a lure, inviting Nipper back toward the field where the shooter will surely kill him.

Palmer steps onto the killing field and waits for the inevitable, and soon Nipper is standing on Palmer's head. Palmer can hear the shooter reloading his gun and soon Beans is on the scene, swatting Nipper off Palmer's head. Beans throws Nipper on the ground in front of the shooter giving the shooter permission to kill Nipper because he had flown back. Palmer races toward the shooter, throws himself to the ground, pulls Nipper to his chest, and waits for the shot. The shot does not come, so Palmer rises and walks off the field with Nipper held close to his heart.

Chapter 40 Analysis

Palmer imagines himself in Nipper's situation and can feel empathy for Nipper's confusion and fear. Palmer is suspended in an almost unimaginable state of horror but pushes past his fear and is able to rescue Nipper from death. The author shows the stark contrast between Palmer, who has unconditional love for his pigeon, and Beans, who maliciously and deliberately throws Nipper in harm's way despite the fact that Beans knows that Nipper is Palmer's bird. The ultimate lessons of love and loyalty lie within each person, and Palmer shows maturity in his conduct and his selection of friends both human and birds.

Characters

Palmer LaRue

Palmer LaRue, also known as Snots, is the main character of the story. Palmer is an only child whose intelligence and sensitivity alienate him from other children his age. Palmer finds a friend in Dorothy Gruzik, who lives across the street, but by the time Palmer is nine-years-old he wants to distance himself from the younger girl and aligns with the local hoodlums, Beans, Mutto, and Henry. Palmer's core values of loyalty and sensitivity are in conflict with his new friends, but he encourages the friendships because he wants to belong to a group. Palmer is constantly preoccupied with the horror of the Pigeon Shoot because he cannot tolerate cruelty. Yet he knows he should anticipate the event as the other boys do. Palmer eventually distances himself from his hoodlum friends and invites Dorothy back into his life when the boys threaten his pigeon, Nipper. Dorothy understands Palmer's sensitivity and remains true when Beans, Mutto, and Henry perpetrate cruel harassment. Ultimately, Palmer's ability to love and remain loyal win out. He rescues Nipper, and the two friends sink back into their friendship.

Palmer's Mother

Palmer's Mother does not like Palmer's new friendship with Beans, Mutto, and Henry because they are aggressive, mean-spirited boys. She prefers that Palmer associate more with the gentle Dorothy from across the street. Palmer's mother supports Palmer's emotional needs and tries to shield him from the reality of the Pigeon Shoot when he is very small. When Palmer declares his independence and demands privacy, Palmer's mother acquiesces quietly, and ultimately reveals that she and Palmer's Father have known about Nipper yet have let Palmer keep his secret. Palmer's Mother completely understands Palmer's horror of the Pigeon Shoot and supports his unwillingness to become a wringer and to keep Nipper as a pet.

Palmer's Father

Palmer shares a typical father-son relationship with his father driven by male rituals of baseball games and wrestling in the house. Palmer's Father gives Palmer his coveted toy soldiers on his ninth birthday as a sign that Palmer is old enough to care for the antique toys in a gesture of bonding and acceptance. Palmer's Father is a sportsman who also participates in the Pigeon Shoot, as evidenced by the gold pigeon trophy in the living room. At first, Palmer's Father is unaware of the inner conflict Palmer suffers over wanting his father to approve of him but being repulsed by the shooting that his father embraces. Ultimately, Palmer's Father accepts Palmer's sensitivity about the pigeons and does not force Palmer to participate as a wringer when he is eligible.

Beans

Beans, whose real name is Arthur Dodds, is the self-appointed leader of the hoodlum boys with whom Palmer begins to associate. Beans receives his nickname because he likes to eat baked beans directly from the can and his breath always smells like beans. Beans loves adventure. He also has a cruel streak, which allows him to initiate cruel teasing of Dorothy and eventually Palmer, when he discovers that Palmer is harboring a pigeon in his room. Beans' dirty, disheveled character is in stark contrast to the orderly, tidy Palmer who cannot help but be disgusted by Beans' lack of personal hygiene. Beans' deliberate cruelty ultimately ends the friendship between he and Palmer.

Mutto

Mutto has no real character traits and no dialogue in the story, as he serves as a sidekick to Beans who gives the directions for all the group activities. Mutto may not be as deliberately cruel as Beans, but his lack of questioning any of the cruel tricks puts him in alignment with Beans.

Henry

Henry is another of Beans' sidekicks who simply takes directions on all the group's activities. Henry may have some redemptive qualities, though, as it is he who warns Palmer by writing in the birthday cake icing that Beans and Mutto plan to search Palmer's bedroom for evidence of Nipper.

Farquar

Farquar is the older boy in town who administers blows with his bony knuckles on the arm of each boy on his birthday. This ritual is known among the boys in town as The Treatment.

Dorothy Gruzik

Dorothy lives across the street from Palmer and, although she is a bit younger, is the only true friend that Palmer has. Dorothy is able to keep Palmer's secret about Nipper's existence and is the one who agrees to release Nipper into safety when Beans and the others threaten the bird. Dorothy is as strong-willed as Palmer and has her own internal code of conduct that will not be reduced by the cruel antics of Beans and the others. Dorothy appreciates Palmer's love and devotion to Nipper and protects Palmer's secret despite her wounded feelings over Palmer's treatment of her when he was with Beans and the other boys. Dorothy's strength of character aligns perfectly with Palmer's own, and the two remain friends secure in their mutual admiration and trust.

Nipper

Nipper is the pigeon that arrives at Palmer's bedroom window unexpectedly one winter morning and stays with Palmer for many months, forging an unusual friendship.

Wringmaster

The Wringmaster is the man who instructs Palmer, Beans, Mutto, and Henry on how to be a good wringer at the Family Fest Pigeon Shoot.

Objects/Places

The Soccer Field

The Soccer Field is the location where the Pigeon Shoot is held at the end of the Family Fest Celebration.

Family Fest

Family Fest is the annual festival held for six days in August in Palmer's town, the culmination of which is the Pigeon Shoot.

Palmer's Bedroom

Palmer's bedroom is his refuge from the world. It is the place where Nipper first appears and their friendship blossoms.

Dorothy's House

Dorothy's house sits across the street from Palmer's house and is the site of many pranks played on Dorothy by Palmer, Beans, and Mutto.

The School

Palmer, Beans, Mutto, Henry, and Dorothy spend much of their time together walking to and from school. The school is also the scene where Palmer spits on the floor to incur punishment in order to be kept after school and unavailable to Beans and the other boys.

Gold Pigeon Trophy

The Gold Pigeon Trophy sits on the mantel in Palmer's living room as evidence of his father's skill as a sharpshooter at a previous Pigeon Shoot.

Nipper's Nerf Ball

Nipper's Nerf Ball has his name written on it in black marker and is the only evidence of the pigeon that Beans can find in Palmer's bedroom.

Toy Soldiers

Palmer's father presents the shoebox of antique toy soldiers to Palmer on his ninth birthday as a gesture of bonding and maturity.

The Baseball Game

Palmer's father takes Palmer to a baseball game out of town to help keep Palmer's mind off Nipper, who has been taken away for his own safety.

The Treatment

The Treatment is the male birthday bonding ritual inflicted by Farquar, who pounds the bare arms of his victims with his sharp knuckles.

Setting

Wringer is set in Waymer, a small community of quiet neighborhoods, neat houses, and friendly people. The time is contemporary. Waymer's community spirit is exhibited in the residents' concern for a good park for their children. Each summer a Family Fest raises money to maintain ball fields and playground equipment and purchase new equipment. Spinelli develops a strong contrast to the peaceful park setting with the annual pigeon shoot. Participants pay entry fees. Soccer fields become battlefields with the explosion of guns aimed at defenseless pigeons. The sky is turned gray from the gunfire —"smokesun" as Palmer calls it—the air is filled with the acrid odor of gunpowder, and the field is littered with feathers.

Social Sensitivity

Spinelli bravely addresses the issue of cruelty to animals. Cruelty to animals dulls the senses of the perpetrators so that their cruelty may turn toward humans. Caring for others and caring for animals help to form compassion in human beings. Some of the descriptions used by Spinelli in the pigeon shoot and the acting out by the gang may be offensive to some readers, but it must be viewed in the larger context of the message.

Literary Qualities

Spinelli's writing accepts young people for what they are. According to Ethel R. Twichell in a Horn Book review of Dump Days, Spinelli "neither judges nor berates but shakes everyone up in his own bag of tricks and watches to see what will spill out."

He develops a strong person-againstself conflict with the opening sentence of the story, "He did not want to be a wringer."

This simple statement pulls the reader in at once. Who is he? What is a wringer? Why does he not want to be a wringer? This conflict is supported throughout the story as Palmer inevitably approaches age ten, the age of wringers. From time to time he is able to push the thought from his mind, forgetting it "for minutes, hours, maybe even for a day or two," but it always returns, and it seems there is no one he can talk to about his dread of the role he thinks he is expected to play. It becomes a consuming thing, creating a mood of dread and apprehension.

Older readers will understand Spinelli's use of the albatross motif from Samuel Taylor Coleridge's Rime of the Ancient Mariner.

Nipper becomes an intolerable burden for Palmer as he tries to protect the bird and keep it a secret from his parents and the gang.

Spinelli's use of imagery paints vivid pictures for the reader. One example is his description of the pigeon's eye, which he uses throughout the story: "The pigeon's eye is like a polished shirt button.... The pigeon's eye is orange with a smaller black button in the center. It looks up at him. It does not blink.... He opened one eye to find an orange button staring back.... The bird's orange button eye blinked.... Orange eyes flashed in the dark .. . orange eyes dead as buttons." The reader is drawn into Palmer's mind through this effective use of imagery.

Themes

Self-Knowledge

The most important theme in the book is self-knowledge. Even as a very young boy Palmer recalls the horror of the Pigeon Shoot and cannot understand why all the other people enjoy it. As Palmer grows up, the memory of that first Pigeon Shoot haunts him. He is in conflict with others around him, especially his father whose skill at the event is evidenced by a trophy sitting on the living room mantel. The conflict that Palmer experiences is due to his sensitivity and compassion for all living things while living in a town which encourages killing for profit.

Even the milestone of a tenth birthday is not something to be celebrated in Palmer's mind, as that day will signify his eligibility to participate as a wringer in the Pigeon Shoot. Palmer's sensitivity is extended to Dorothy, too, as he ultimately rejects Beans' method of cruel teasing and aligns with his only true friend, Dorothy. Palmer shows the courage of his convictions by remaining true to his own feelings in spite of his wanting to belong to a group of boys who will include him. As an only child, Palmer spent much time alone, which may have provided him more opportunity than most children to explore his inner thoughts and feelings.

Palmer is also completely loved by his parents, and his sense of security allows him to test out his feelings and accept the ones which are truly his own. Eventually, Palmer's internal code surpasses his need to belong to Beans' group or to the group of wringers and he stays true to his own moral and ethical compass.

Selfless Love

Another important theme in the book is selfless love. Palmer's parents love him unconditionally, which buoys up Palmer's sense of security and confidence in himself. Although Palmer's mother does not like Beans, Mutto, and Henry, she allows them to attend Palmer's birthday party because it is what Palmer wants. Later in the book, Palmer's mother reveals that she and Palmer's father have been aware of Nipper, but have kept Palmer's secret out of deference even though they would never have encouraged their son to adopt a pigeon for a pet. Palmer's parents indulge Palmer's unusual activities with Nipper because the bird clearly makes Palmer happy and they selflessly abandon their own wishes for Palmer.

As a result of the security and unconditional love bestowed by his parents, Palmer has the confidence to exhibit selfless love toward others, such as Dorothy and Nipper. When Palmer realizes Dorothy's anguish as a result of the intense teasing by Beans and the others, he rejects the boys and engages again in his friendship with Dorothy. This abandonment of his own need to belong to a group because of harm done to Dorothy is a noble act of selfless love. Palmer exhibits this trait of selfless love when he allows

Dorothy to take Nipper to the seashore to be set free so that Beans, Mutto, and Henry cannot harm the pigeon. Palmer suffers terribly at the loss of his bird friend but realizes that the loss is necessary so that Nipper may live. Palmer exhibits great maturity and selflessness in this act, which causes him so much personal pain.

Peer Pressure

The third most important theme in the book is peer pressure, which is the main source of internal conflict for Palmer. As an only child, Palmer spent much time alone or with the younger neighbor girl, Dorothy, but wishes he were part of a group of boys who would seek him out for fun and adventures. When the group consisting of Beans, Mutto, and Henry accepts Palmer, he abandons Dorothy in preference for this male companionship. In their company, Palmer learns the pain of The Treatment, a male ritual experienced on each birthday when the birthday boy offers his bare arm to the knuckle blows of Farquar, the icon of male cruelty among the boys in town.

The most pervasive form of peer pressure is the much-anticipated eligibility of being a wringer in the Pigeon Shoot. All the boys in town wait impatiently for their tenth birthdays to join this club of wringers whose duties are needed only one day each year. In spite of his dread for this so-called celebratory milestone, Palmer attempts to join in the anticipation by feigning excitement for the horrible job of wringing the necks of wounded pigeons. The peer pressure exerted by his male friends is subliminally supported by Beans' admiration for Palmer's father's prowess in the shooting event. Palmer dreads disappointing his friends and his father. The pressure creates internal conflict which creates the premise for the book.

Themes/Characters

Peer pressure is a major theme found in Wringer. Like all young people, Palmer wants to belong, but he makes a poor choice about the group in which he seeks membership. An only child, Palmer is a compassionate, intelligent, thinking young person with a strong moral compass. He does well in school, is obedient to the authority of his parents, enjoys a close companionship with his father, and abhors cruelty to others and animals. It is his strong morality that produces the conflict in which Palmer finds himself. He is filled with dread about being a wringer. He doesn't want to be a wringer, but he does want to belong.

Arthur Dodds, better known as Beans, is all the things Palmer is not. With teeth every color of the rainbow because he says he never brushes them, Beans gets his nickname because he loves baked beans and eats them directly from the can. Beans, Mutto, and Henry form a gang whose goals include becoming wringers at age ten, harassing younger kids, and making trouble at school. Beans has no compassion or mercy for anyone who does not share his opinion about pigeons. Mutto and Henry are followers and do Beans's bidding. Palmer's mother forbids their presence in her home after their attendance at Palmer's ninth birthday party. She calls them "hoodlums." It is hard for young people to be different and march to the beat of a different drummer.

Palmer isn't like Beans and his gang, but he wants to belong. For Palmer, belonging means denying that part of himself that is gentle and kind.

Friendship is another theme found in Wringer. Dorothy lives across the street from Palmer and has been his friend since they were toddlers. Like Palmer, Dorothy is different, and is determined not to cave in to the harassment she endures from the gang. They dump disgusting stuff on her doorstep, treestump her journey home from school, call her "fishface" and other awful names, and alienate her from Palmer. Palm er must decide if he is going to deny his friendship with Dorothy because the gang does not like younger kids, especially Dorothy. It is a difficult decision for Palmer, but his desire to be her friend isn't as strong as his desire to belong to the gang, so he turns his back on Dorothy and joins in taunting and harassing her with the gang. When Palmer needs a friend who understands how he feels about Nipper, Dorothy accepts his apology and becomes his ally, although it is a friendship kept in secrecy.

Dorothy is a true friend because she is willing to forgive Palmer for everything.

Seeking parental approval is a subtle theme in Wringer. Palmer's loving parents are in the background. Palmer is more like his mother in temperament and personality. His father teaches him how to position the toy metal soldiers that become Palmer's on his ninth birthday. The two of them play with the metal soldiers, and we see Palmer comparing himself to his father, who was a wringer when he was ten. Then in adulthood his father was a sharpshooter at the pigeon shoot, winning the trophy one year.

Palmer thinks his father wants him to follow in those same footsteps. This becomes a haunting refrain in Palmer's mind as the year advances toward his tenth birthday, but when Palmer's father tells Beans that Palmer can decide for himself whether or not to be a wringer, Palmer sees something in his father that says he doesn't like destroying pigeons either.

Wringer also is a book about love. In the end Palmer's love for Nipper conquers all his other fears. A near tragedy for Nipper finally convinces Palmer to be himself and refuse to become a wringer.

As Palmer struggles to make sense of his situation, he learns about himself. He grows and changes when he finds himself with the responsibility of another life in his hands.

He learns what a friend really is when he receives forgiveness from Dorothy and their friendship is restored. His view of his father matures from that of a young child who adores and believes in his father to one of understanding and respect for who he is.

Style

Point of View

The story is told from the third person limited point of view, which means that the author shares the plot line in addition to the thoughts and feelings of Palmer, the main character. There is no identified narrator and the main character does not tell the story in his own words. By utilizing this style, the author is able to tell the events of Palmer's life, both in the present and in the past, as well as share Palmer's thoughts and emotions. This added dimension of emotional revelation helps to further Palmer's character in a way that a pure narrative would not be able to do. This technique is especially important in the telling of Palmer's story, which is based heavily on the boy's sensitivities and easily wounded feelings. The author could have told the story from the third person omniscient point of view, which means that he would have shared the thoughts and feelings of some of the other characters in addition to Palmer's thoughts. However he chose to develop Palmer as the main character and chooses to retain the focus on him. Had the author opted to tell the story from a strictly narrative point of view, the reader would never understand Palmer's internal conflict evidenced through flashbacks and descriptions of feelings and emotions.

Setting

The book's setting is in the fictional American small town named Waymer. The state and year are not identified because Spinelli wants his story to exist as a universal story of a young boy growing up and finding his own way based on his internal compass. It is understood that Waymer is a small rural community based on a newspaper clipping announcing the details of the next Pigeon Shoot. Other indicators of Waymer's size are the freedom with which Palmer and his friends roam the town and ride their bicycles. There is no danger from high traffic areas or less than friendly neighborhoods to be avoided. The Pigeon Shoot, which is the source of Palmer's distress, is held at the only soccer field in town to raise funds for the town's only municipal park.

The author provides images of small town America with the boys climbing up the side of Palmer's house to reach his bedroom to retrieve him for a midnight adventure. Palmer and his friends live close enough to the only school so that they are able to walk. Even the town's grocery store is a short five blocks from Palmer's house, indicating a low-key village atmosphere. Ironically, the peaceful environment is destroyed one day each year when the residents engage in killing pigeons on the soccer field.

Language and Meaning

Spinelli enjoys writing for young people, as evidenced by his choice of nicknames for the characters and the fun words he invents in keeping with the boys' search for fun. The author knows what it means to be a boy and assigns appropriate nicknames such

as Beans, Snots, and Fishface to add a level of humor to the story. The author also mimics the style of young boys by inventing words such as "treestumping" or "loppysided."

There is also a liberal sprinkling of figurative language throughout the story in the form of anthropomorphism, onomatopoeia, similes, and metaphors. Spinelli uses humor in the story to lighten anxiety and to provide simple camaraderie between Palmer and his friends. For example, the mental images of Palmer traipsing off to school on a hot May day dressed in his winter coat and hat is amusing. When Palmer wears his elephant mask with the long trunk to school on the last day, it conjures up images that amuse the reader for their genuine affection for Palmer. It is obvious that the author has accurately captured the language style and mannerisms of ten-year-old boys through the dialogue and character traits exhibited.

Structure

The book begins, and ends, with newspaper clippings related to the Family Fest Pigeon Shoot. The first clipping announces the Pigeon Fest details as part of the city's annual fundraising efforts for the city park. At the end of the book, a second clipping appears noting Palmer's interception of Nipper on the killing field during the Pigeon Shoot. The first chapter of the book establishes the premise of internal conflict experienced by a young boy, but does not name Palmer specifically. The author's intent is to explain the disgust over the shooting of pigeons and the unrealistic expectation that every boy will want to participate in the event.

Beginning with the second chapter, the author tells Palmer's story through dialogue and plot line description. The author also utilizes flashbacks to when Palmer experienced previous Pigeon Shoots to help supplement Palmer's feelings of horror of the annual event. The flashbacks and memories also help to define the long-standing fear Palmer has experienced by the trauma of the Pigeon Shoot. The story is told in forty brief chapters, which is a popular style consistent with juvenile literature.

Quotes

"He did not want to be a wringer. This was one of the first things he had learned about himself. He could not have said exactly when he learned it, but it was very early. And more than early, it was deep inside. In the stomach, like hunger." Chapter 1, Page 3

"It was pointless to say more, pointless to say, I like their presents just as much as yours, because they did it themselves. That means something. It means we came into your house. We gave you a cigar butt. You are one of us." Chapter 2, Page 9

"Palmer tried to hold the moment there, but it would not stay. It tunneled back through time and burst up onto this same field three years before, the first Saturday in August, when the grass was streaked with red and guns were booming and birds were falling. From the treetops, from the clouds they plunged to earth, thumped to the ground, sometimes with a bounce. And still some of them lived, flopping drunkenly across the grass until a wringer grabbed one by the neck and twisted and that was that." Chapter 4, Page 17

"New birthday. New friends. New feelings of excitement and pride and belonging. His mother was wrong about the guys never playing with him. He had had a lot to overcome, that was all. Being the youngest, the shortest. And his unusual first name, he took lots of teasing there. But that was all over now. He fell back on his bed, he grinned at the ceiling. Life was good." Chapter 6, Page 31

"During the following year Palmer thought about that quite often. If the wounded pigeons were in misery, he wondered, why put them there in the first place by shooting them? Why not just let them fly away?" Chapter 8, Page 41

"But the questions did not stop. Killing the pigeons and putting them out of their misery stubbornly refused to mean the same thing. Palmer thought about misery, and it seemed to him that a shotgun was not the only way to end it. When Palmer was miserable, for example, his mother or father would hold him close and wipe his tears. When Palmer's mother or father put him out of his misery, they did not shoot him, they offered him a cookie. Why then on Pigeon Day did the people bring guns instead of cookies?" Chapter 8, Page 43

"For among all the changes in his life, one thing stayed the same. It was something he had known since his second Pigeon Day, when he sat with Dorothy Gruzik on the swings: He did not want to be a wringer." Chapter 10, Page 54

"What a stupid pigeon! A million towns to choose from all over the country, and this birdbrain picks the one that shoots five thousand of them every year. And of all the houses in town!" Chapter 14, Page 72

"He had found out that there just wasn't room in his life for both Dorothy and the guys. Like peanut butter and pickles, they didn't mix. It seemed like everything the guys liked,

everything they stood for, she did not. Thanks to the guys, he finally saw her for the pooper she was. She never laughed, never had any fun. Even now, look at her - just crouching there, not a peep, no screaming, no crying, no running away like any normal girl. Always had to act so big. And three weeks ago, for the first time ever, she had not invited him to her birthday party." Chapter 14, Page 73

"Palmer knelt at the window. He talked to the orange eye. 'Don't you want to live, you dumb stupid cluck? Go look at the soccer field. This town kills pigeons. There's a guy named Beans. He's my friend, but he's not your friend. He hates you. If he ever sees you he'll wring your neck. And if you don't care about yourself, how about me? What do you think's going to happen to me if people think I have a pigeon?'" Chapter 15, Page 76

"The hardest part of the routine came each day when he left the house: *Act normal*. How was he supposed to act normal in a town that murdered pigeons?" Chapter 17, Page 93

"He wondered where Nipper went during the day. Did he fly around town, oblivious to the danger? Did he go to the park? Steer clear of the soccer field? Did he fly to other towns? For Nipper's sake, Palmer knew what he should wish. He should wish that Nipper would find another boy in another town, a town that would not run screaming after him, a town that would not hate him, would not shoot him. But Palmer could not bring himself to make that wish." Chapter 21, Page 107

"And just like that, the girl in the red coat and floppy hat was no longer a target. She was Dorothy, there were tears in her eyes, and she was saying to him, not to anyone else, but to him, to Palmer, 'Why are you doing this to me?' And he knew that through these last weeks she had been hurting after all, and that it had been himself, not Beans, who had hurt her the most. She turned away then, not bothering to wipe her eyes, and walked home." Chapter 23, Pages 112-113

"Tears filled his eyes. He let go. 'I don't want to be a wringer. But everybody else is a wringer when they're ten, and I'm going to be ten in seventy-one days, and then I'm going to have to be a wringer too but I don't want to. So what kind of kid am I? Everybody wants to kill pigeons but me. What's the matter with me?'" Chapter 24, Page 129

"Palmer laughed. 'You're crazy! Why would I have a pigeon? I hate pigeons. I'm gonna be a wringer. I'm gonna wring their necks. I'm gonna whack 'em.' An empty soda can was lying in the gutter. He stomped on it with all his might, stomped again and again, crushed it, flattened it. He picked it up and dashed it to the sidewalk and stomped on it some more. 'Whack 'em! Whack 'em! I hate pigeons! I hate 'em all!' He looked up at the staring, glaring eyes. He clenched his fists, he screamed: 'I'm gonna be the best wringer there ever was!'" Chapter 25, Pages 134-135

"'Know what?' said Dorothy. 'What?' 'You're a hero.' 'Huh?' 'All this stuff you're doing. You're probably the naughtiest student there's ever been in our school. And you're doing

it all to save him.' Palmer frowned. 'That's no hero. I just live in the wrong town, that's all.'" Chapter 27, Page 149

"The man held the gray thing above his head. 'One hand here, one hand here, and twist in opposite directions. You do it hard, you do it quick. We're not here to torture these animals. We're here to kill them humanely. Hard and quick. That's all it takes. Into a trash bag. Go to the back of the line. Next time you're up, somebody else gets the box. Keep rotating. Everybody gets a chance. What's the magic word? Fast!'" Chapter 28, Page 156

"It was becoming harder and harder to do, for in these recent weeks Palmer had come to realize that, with the possible exception of Henry, the guys whose company he had once craved he now feared. If they ever found out for sure that he was a traitor, Farquar's Treatment would feel like baby's play compared to what they could do. He imagined hem torturing him until he led them to his forbidden pet. At that point Nipper was as good as dead." Chapter 29, Page 161

"They talked through much of the morning. Palmer told her everything. Nipper's arrival after the snowstorm. The daily wake-up ear peck. The guys and their growing suspicions. Treestumping Dorothy. Spitting on the classroom floor. (He wished he had a camera to preserve the look on her face.) Refusing The Treatment. When he told her of his lifelong fear, that he dreaded the day he would become ten and a wringer, his lip quivered and she made a sound of pain and squeezed him tight to her and stroked his head and his back." Chapter 35, Page 194

"It was as if he could smell into the future. The gray, sour odor of gunsmoke came to him a full week before Family Fest was due to begin. There were shots too: the popping of cap pistols from four- and five-year-olds practicing to one day be wringers and shooters. All things in their gunsights became pigeons: grasshoppers, mailboxes, yellow squash, each other." Chapter 38, Page 204

"Standing there in feathers up to his sneaker knots, Palmer felt a peace, a lightness that he had never known before, as if restraining straps had snapped, setting him free to float upward. For a moment, feeling in his fingertips the quick beating of Nipper's acorn-size heart, he believed he could fly. Through a pigeon's eye he looked down from the sky upon the field, the thousands of upturned faces, and saw nothing at all to fear." Chapter 40, Page 228

Topics for Discussion

1. Palmer is filled with dread and apprehension at the approach of his tenth birthday. How can the perceived need to do something you don't want to do create these emotions?

2. Palmer's initiation rite into the gang was "the treatment" administered by Farquar. Have you ever experienced an initiation rite? Describe the rite.

3. What makes young people pick on others, call them names, harass them? What is a bully? Why does Palmer become a bully toward his friend Dorothy? Why doesn't Dorothy retaliate?

4. Explain what Spinelli means by the statement "Palmer had the sense that he was seeing more than a game, that Henry was not just a member of the group, but also its prey" (pages 16-17).

5. Explain the reactions of Palmer, his mother, and his father to "the treatment" Palmer received from Farquar.

6. Spinelli uses imagery to create a picture of death and a callous, almost festive, attitude toward it in chapter 8. How does he accomplish this? Why does he do this?

7. On Palmer's ninth birthday his father makes him a gift of the toy metal soldiers. Palmer had been allowed to play with them only with his father's permission before, and now they are his to keep in his room. Up until this time they have been a source of pleasure, but as Palmer becomes more aware of the fate of the pigeons, his view of guns begins to change. Explain the evolution of that change.

8. On pages 112 and 113, Dorothy finally reacts to the treestumping, but not the way Palmer expects. What does she mean when she asks, "Why are you doing this to me?"

9. How has Nipper complicated Palm-er's life?

10. On page 129 Palmer finally expresses all he has been thinking and feeling for years. Why is he suddenly able to tell Dorothy he does not want to be a wringer when he has never been able to talk about it before?

11. In chapter 25, Palmer really has a problem when Nipper lands on his head in front of the gang. How would you advise Palmer? Do you think he did the right thing? Explain your answer.

12. Why doesn't Palmer just tell the gang he is not going to be a wringer, as Dorothy has suggested he do, instead of staying in bed? Does his mother know what is happening to him? Does his father know?

Wringer 477 13. Palmer's friendship with Dorothy has some twists and turns in it. What is friendship? How does friendship change for you? Compare Palmer's friendship with Dorothy and his friendship with the gang.

14. Spinelli has written a very dramatic ending. Palmer's relief gives way to panic and sorrow and finally joy and unconditional love as he rescues Nipper from the shooting field. Was this a satisfying ending to the story? Explain your answer.

15. Spinelli addresses some contemporary issues involving cruelty to animals, cruelty to humans, gang membership, and the unconditional love of a friend. What is your reaction to these issues in the book and in your own life?

Essay Topics

Why does Palmer feel like he has to become a Wringer at the Pigeon Shoot?

Discuss Palmer's sensitivity and compassion for animals which is the basis for his disgust about the Pigeon Shoot.

Why do all the boys want Farquar to give them "The Treatment" on their birthdays?

Dorothy offers to tell the world that Palmer does not want to become a Wringer. Why won't Palmer let Dorothy take care of this? What problems does Palmer anticipate if Dorothy were to make this announcement?

Do you think that Palmer is more sensitive than other children or has he simply been raised in an environment that allows for freedom of expression?

If you were in the same situation as Palmer, would you want to be a Wringer? Why or Why Not?

What lessons does Palmer learn from the appearance of Nipper in his life?

More than once in the story, Palmer asserts his dislike of cruelty even though he knows he will be ostracized from his group of friends for doing it. Would you be able to do the same things Palmer does to be true to his own conscience?

Why does Palmer bury his toy soldiers in the backyard after Nipper is set free? Does this act mean Palmer is too sad to play, or is this a symbolic rejection of violence of any type?

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Find someone who raises pigeons or another kind of bird. Prepare interview questions and conduct an interview to learn why this person raises them. What equipment is necessary? What does he need to know about health, diet, exercise, etc.? Choose a method to record your findings and share them with your peers.

2. Research the carrier pigeon. Prepare a report to share in class.

3. Find out about pigeons. Use research tools in your library. Prepare a documentary-style video or other media of your choice to share your research.

4. Take a video camera and a bag of popcorn to a city park. Feed the pigeons.

Record their behavior and the sounds they make. Compare what you observe to what Palmer observed about Nipper and the pigeons he saw one time in the city.

5. Conduct a survey among students about friendship. Create a list of questions and a rating scale by which you can record student responses. Make a chart of your findings and write an interpretation of your findings.

6. Dramatize your favorite portion of the story.

7. Invite a member of a gun club into your classroom to speak on safety rules for using guns.

8. Gun ownership is a volatile issue in this country. Choose friends to help you prepare and present a debate on the issues of gun ownership.

Further Study

Cheever, Benjamin. "Wringer." New York Times Book Review, November 16, 1997, 52. Cheever says that he believes Spinelli has presented "a moral question about the duty of ten-year-old boys who do not want to be wringers .. . with great care and sensitivity."

Keller, John. Horn Book, July/August 1991, 433-436. This is the text of John Keller's speech about Jerry Spinelli. It was given at the Newbery Awards at the meeting of the American Library Association in Atlanta on June 30, 1991.

Kirby, Mona. Mona Kirby's The Author Corner. www.carr.lib.md.us/authco/spinelli.

Web site linked to www.acs.ucalagry.ca/ -dkbrown/authors.html. Information about many authors is available at the University of Calgary site.

Learning Works. "Jerry Spinelli; Learning Works Meets the Author." Learning Works, 1999.

Random House, www.randomhouse.com.

Readers may search this site by book, title, or author and find a short bibliography of titles by Spinelli and a short biography.

Spinelli, Jerry. Horn Book, July/August 1991, 426-432. This is the text of Spinelli's Newbery Medal acceptance speech for Maniac Magee given June 30, 1991, in Atlanta at the meeting of the American Library Association.

Spinelli, Jerry. Knots in My Yo-yo String: The Autobiography of a Kid. Knopf, 1998.

Spinelli has written about his life from early childhood through young adulthood. The text reads like his prose fiction.

"Spinelli, Jerry." In Something about the Author, ed. Anne Commire, vol. 71. Detroit: Gale Research, 1993, 180-183. This is an article detailing Spinelli's life and work.

It includes a photograph of the author, pictures of two book jackets, and an illustration from The Bathwater Gang.

Review of Wringer. Amazon.com The reviewer said, "Wringer will appeal to preteens and younger teens who love to read suspenseful books on their own, but it would also be a good story to read aloud to spark discussion about the perils and nuances of peer pressure."

Review of Wringer. Horn Book, September/ October 1997, 58. The reviewer has warm and positive words for Wringer: "Spinelli's story is honest but not without hope."

Review of Wringer. Kirkus Reviews, June 15, 1997. The reviewer says Wringer is "A story both comic and disturbing."

Related Titles

Spinelli has written many coming-of-age books for young readers with strong protagonists who are "regular" kids. His books also draw on humor as young people look at themselves and see that they are really more like each other than they are different from each other.

Space Station Seventh Grade is a humorous look at seventh grade and how kids survive the weird things happening to their bodies. Who Put That Hair in My Toothbrush?

describes sibling rivalry between twelveyear-old Megin and her older brother, Greg.

Jason and Marceline is a humorous sequel to Space Station Seventh Grade. Jason is now falling in love with his old friend Marceline, who rejects him. Unlike Marceline, Dorothy likes Palmer and startles him when she kisses him on the nose in Wringer. In Maniac Magee, Jeffery Lionel is an orphan seeking a home. Jeffery is a runner who can outrun dogs and tie a knot no one can undo. He confronts racism in a small town.

In Do the Funky Pickle, Eddie performs a new dance, the Funky Pickle, at school in hopes it will help him win Sunny's heart.

His scheme backfires when he attracts the girlfriend of Weasel Munshak, who decrees Eddie must fight him. In the sequel, Picklemania, Sunny takes karate lessons so she can defend herself, and Eddie does not want to be the skinniest kid in school so he tries to bulk up his body. The Library Card may have an eerie quality; thanks to a magic and mysterious library card, the young people in these four stories face varied turning points as they move toward adolescence. In Crash, one of Spinelli's characters is a bully, similar to Beans in Wringer. Seventh-grader Crash Coogan is a jock, a jokester, and a tormentor of dweeb Perm Webb. Unlike Beans, Crash discovers a vein of empathy that he didn't know was there.

Compassion rather than competition comes to the surface for Crash: he holds back in a race against Perm when he knows Perm's great-grandfather is there to watch Pernn race. Eighth-grader Maisie Potter moves against the flow when she joins the school wrestling team. The law in Pennsylvania and her parents are on her side, but little else. She is not a quitter and works hard to win the respect of her teammates and coach in There's a Girl in My Hammerlock.

Spinelli has written an autobiography of his early life with all the humor, warmth, and drama of his fiction. Knots in My Yo-yo String: The Autobiography of a Kid recalls his first memories from childhood on through high school: his first kiss, first trip to the principal's office, and first humiliating sports experience. Spinelli's life is like his book kids' lives and like the lives of his readers.

Readers will identify with the universality of his life.

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