

Teacher Guide

Grades 7–8

Freak the Mighty

Rodman Philbrick

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FREAK THE MIGHTY

by
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Teacher Guide

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Note

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Please note: Parts of this novel deal with sensitive, mature issues. Please assess the appropriateness of this novel for the age level and maturity of your students prior to reading and discussing it with them.

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Skills and Strategies

Comprehension

Creative thinking, identifying attributes, supporting judgments, cause/effect, sequencing

Literary Elements

Genre, figurative language, character analysis, conflict, point of view, dialect, author's purpose, theme

Vocabulary

Definitions, application, target words, personal dictionary

Listening/Speaking

Discussion, oral presentation, dramatization

Writing

Creative writing, essay, poem, dialogue, news article, short story, eulogy, report, short biography

Critical Thinking

Brainstorming, research, compare/contrast, analysis, evaluation, inferences, drawing conclusions, predictions

Across the Curriculum

History—King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table; Science—robotics, ornithopters, bionics/biomechanics; Research—good-luck superstitions; Art—*Mutt and Jeff* comics, pyramid box, poster, scrapbook pages, sympathy card, pamphlet; Health—bullying, learning disabilities, learning styles, Morquio Syndrome, effects of worrying, self-esteem; Literature—*Max the Mighty* (preview); Viewing—*The Mighty* (1998), Sting's "Freak the Mighty" video

Chapters 1–5

The first time Max saw Freak was in day care—a difficult time for Max, as he had just moved in with Gram and Grim. Known as “Kicker” then, Max remembers he refrained from kicking Freak because he thought Freak’s leg braces and crutches were cool. The summer before eighth grade, Freak moves into Max’s neighborhood. Freak visits the basement where Max lives and talks excitedly about robots and King Arthur’s knights. Max, a large boy who resembles his father, frightens Freak’s mother, Gwen. As an apology for her abrupt reaction, Gwen invites Max over for dinner. Max, his loneliness and low self-esteem banished by the pleasant evening, returns home and cries from happiness.

Vocabulary

unvanquished
 departed
 mainstream
 fiend
 unimpaired
 lunkhead
 propulsion
 sobriquet
 quest
 invincible
 ignorant
 functional
 sophisticated
 disabled
 abide
 tenements
 spastic
 flinch

Discussion Questions

- Based on the novel’s first sentence, how does Max feel about himself? What other information does Max reveal about himself in the novel’s opening paragraph? *(Answers will vary. Max once considered himself unintelligent. He was insecure, angry, and defensive—more afraid of what others than to resolve situations any other way. However, Max implies that Freak helped him learn new things and raised his self-esteem.)*
- What does Max mean when he says, “...one year Gram and Grim took me over” (p. 1)? What can you infer about Max’s life from this information? *(Max went to live with his grandparents at a very young age. Answers will vary but should include that something happened to Max’s parents.)*
- Review Max’s description of Freak in day care. How do you think Freak got his name, and what can you infer about him from his description? Why might he have stopped attending day care? *(Answers will vary. Freak’s nickname developed based on his physical handicaps that force him to wear braces and walk using crutches. Dubbing himself “roboban” might have been Freak’s way of coping with his handicaps. He protected himself from bullies by being assertive. Freak’s disappearance from day care was most likely due to his handicaps. Doctor appointments, surgeries, or poor health may have prevented him from attending anymore.)*
- What do you learn from Grim’s conversation with Gram regarding Max and his father? How do you think overhearing this conversation affects Max? *(Max’s mother and Grim and Gram may blame Max’s father for her death. Max’s father is a frightening man. Grim believes Max not only looks like his father but acts like him and even worries that Max might harm him and Gram while they sleep. Answers will vary. Hearing Grim’s concerns probably lowers Max’s opinion of himself. Discussion might cover how one’s self-image affects how others view that person and how others’ opinions can have a considerable impact on a person’s self-esteem.)*
- Chapter 2 is titled “Up from the Down Under.” What is significant about the chapter title? *(Answers will vary. Max lives in his grandparents’ basement, “down under” the house [p. 5]. Max likes having a place to “veg out” and hide. The chapter title implies Max will soon be leaving the safety of his hideout to venture into the world. Referring to his living quarters as the “down under” might also be a reflection of Max’s low opinion of himself.)*

6. Analyze Max and Freak's encounters near the moving van and in Freak's backyard. What can you infer about the characters from their interactions? *(Answers will vary. Near the moving van, the look in Freak's eyes and his "earthling" comments seem defensive because he likely thinks Max intends to tease him. However, the oddity of Freak's comments scares Max. Freak's comments also make Max think, and his thoughts eventually drive him from his room. When Max enters Freak's backyard, Freak again acts defensive. But Freak is trying to reach his ornithopter in the tree, which demonstrates his determination despite his handicaps. Freak relaxes when Max retrieves the ornithopter and expresses interest in it. Max is surprised by Freak's vocabulary, yet he also surprises Freak by calling his room at Gram and Grim's the "down under." The two encounters highlight each character's strengths and vulnerabilities. Max is slow and a slow learner, while Freak is small and extremely intelligent.)*
7. Why do you think Freak uses such an intellectual vocabulary? *(Answers will vary. Freak may use his advanced vocabulary to demonstrate that he is only physically, not mentally, handicapped. He might also use it to prove he has a big personality, even though he is a small person. Freak's handicaps limit his physical activities, leaving him a great deal of time for studying. He is well-read, questions the world around him, and seems eager to apply his knowledge to the real world.)*
8. Explain Freak's fascination with King Arthur, knights, and robots. *(Answers will vary. Being small and disabled, Freak can identify with Arthur—the "limpy" boy who pulled Excalibur from the stone when brawny men could not. He associates the knights' armor with his leg braces and considers the knights to be the first robots, mankind's first attempt at improving the human body. Freak hopes that someday robotic science will improve his body.)*
9. Do you agree with Freak that TV is the "opiate of the masses" and "books are like truth serum" (p. 19)? Why or why not? How do you think Freak would describe the Internet? *(Answers will vary. Discussion might cover TV, books, and the Internet as sources of information, including each medium's accuracy, trustworthiness, and timeliness.)*
10. Why do the Gwens invite Max to dinner? Why doesn't Max want to go? *(Gwen wants to apologize for offending Max by acting afraid of him. Answers will vary, but Max is understandably uncomfortable with being reminded that he is physically intimidating and reminds his father.)*
11. Why do you think Max's mother is in prison? What clues from the novel support your answer? *(Answers will vary. Clues include: Max lives with his grandmothers. Max's mother is dead. Gwen says Max's mother made it difficult for Max's mother to have friends.)*
12. Explain Max's tears of happiness at the end of Chapter 1. *(Answers will vary but should include that Max has a great time with Freak and Gwen, who accept him wholeheartedly. Max is relieved to finally have friends.)*
13. **Prediction:** How will Max and Freak eventually become "Freak the Mighty"?

Supplementary Activities

1. Character Analysis: Begin Characterization charts like the one on page 27 of this guide for Max and Freak. Add information about each character as you read the novel.
2. Writing: Rewrite the scene where Freak moves into Max's neighborhood from Freak's point of view. Include Freak's memories of life at day care.
3. Science: Prepare a time line highlighting the history of robotics. Include brief reports about each development.
4. History: Research King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table. As a class, discuss whether you think King Arthur was a real person in history.

Characterization

Directions: Place a main character's name in the center circle. Write words that describe him in the ovals around the name. List details from the story that demonstrate each quality in the rectangles.

