



**TEACHER GUIDE**

**GRADES 6-8**

COMPREHENSIVE CURRICULUM BASED LESSON PLANS

# Milkweed

Jerry Spinelli



**READ, WRITE, THINK, DISCUSS AND CONNECT**

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Jerry Spinelli

## TEACHER GUIDE

### NOTE:

The trade book edition of the novel used to prepare this guide is found in the Novel Units catalog and on the Novel Units website. Using other editions may have varied page references.

Please note: We have assigned Interest Levels based on our knowledge of the themes and ideas of the books included in the Novel Units sets, however, please assess the appropriateness of this novel or trade book for the age level and maturity of your students prior to reading with them. You know your students best!

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## Skills and Strategies

### Thinking

Interpreting, research,  
compare/contrast,  
forming opinions,  
brainstorming

### Comprehension

Cause/effect, details,  
generalizing, inferring,  
main idea, predicting,  
summarizing

### Writing

Article, description, list,  
narrative, letter, report,  
story

### Listening/Speaking

Discussion, oral report,  
interviewing

### Vocabulary

Parts of speech, prefixes,  
categorizing, visualizing,  
definitions

### Literary Elements

Characterization, setting,  
descriptions, theme, plot  
development, point of view,  
figurative language

### Across the Curriculum

Art—drawing; Science—  
plants, building materials,  
lice; Technology—Internet  
research; Social Studies—  
maps, history, politics;  
Music—traditional Jewish  
songs, appropriate selections

**Genre:** young adult fiction

**Setting:** Warsaw, Poland and the United States, 1938–2003

**Point of View:** first person

**Themes:** coming of age, survival, personal responsibility, family values, courage, empathy

**Conflict:** person vs. society, person vs. person, person vs. self

**Style:** narrative

**Date of First Publication:** 2003

## Summary

A young orphan boy who calls himself Stopthief struggles to survive on the streets of Warsaw, Poland, at the dawn of World War II. As the Nazi invasion begins, a streetwise older boy named Uri befriends Stopthief, renames him Misha, and teaches him survival skills. Misha soon meets a young girl named Janina Milgrom and joins her and her family in their forced march into the Jewish ghetto. There, Misha forges an identity as a brave and selfless thief and is accepted into the Milgrom family. The horror of day-to-day existence is detailed in beatings, starvation, and the deaths of Misha's friends, yet Misha never sees himself as helpless or hopeless. Eventually Misha is left on his own when many Jews are transported to death camps and he loses his adoptive family. As an adult, the weight of his past nearly crushes him, but he perseveres and is granted a new lease on life by a daughter and granddaughter he never knew he had.

## About the Author

Jerry Spinelli was born on February 1, 1941 in Norristown, Pennsylvania. He graduated from Gettysburg College in 1963 and earned a master's degree in creative writing from Johns Hopkins University in 1964.

Spinelli has loved writing since he was in high school. As a college student he worked on a literary magazine, and as an adult he worked for many years as an editor at magazines for the Chilton Company. He served in the United States Naval Reserves from 1966–1972.

Spinelli's books are typically filled with humor and fun, as well as the angst of adolescence. In 1991, his book *Maniac Magee* won the Newbery Medal, and in 1998 *Wringer* was named a Newbery Honor Book. *Milkweed's* somber tone is a marked departure from Spinelli's usual style. It won the Society of Children's Book Writers and Illustrators' Golden Kite Award in 2003. It was also named a Notable Children's Book of the Association of Jewish Libraries.

Jerry Spinelli lives in Pennsylvania with his wife, writer Eileen Spinelli. They have six children and 16 grandchildren. His official Web site is <http://www.jerryspinelli.com> (active at time of publication).

## Characters

**Stopthief/Misha Pilsudski/Misha Milgrom/Jack Milgrom:** a small, naïve orphan boy who does not remember his family; first believes he is a Gypsy but later accepts he is a Jew; selfless; expert thief; narrator of the story

**Uri:** an older, streetwise red-haired boy; takes Misha under his wing; passes as a non-Jew and leads a double life to help those in the Warsaw ghetto

**Janina Milgrom:** a young Jewish girl who befriends Misha; courageous; impulsive; sensitive

**Mr. Milgrom:** Janina's father; pharmacist; benevolent; treats Misha like his own son

**Mrs. Milgrom:** Janina's mother; emotionally fragile; unable to adapt to harsh ghetto life

**Uncle Shepsel:** Janina's uncle; selfish; fearful; renounces Judaism

**Boys in the gang:** smoke-blowing Ferdi, one-armed Olek, Kuba the clown, grim-faced Enos, Big Henryk, and gray Jon

**Jackboots:** Nazi soldiers

**Buffo:** a Jew who works as a guard for the Nazis; enjoys killing young Jews

**Doctor Korczak:** befriends Misha; a kind man who takes care of a large group of orphans

## Background Information

The following information will enhance students' understanding of the book.

In the aftermath of Germany's loss in World War I, the Nazi Party preached a doctrine of anti-Semitism and promised to restore Germany to greatness. Led by Adolf Hitler, the Nazis blamed the loss of World War I and Germany's subsequent economic troubles on Jews. By 1933, the Nazis had gained enough support that they were able to seize control of Germany's government. On November 9, 1938, German anti-Semitism culminated in a series of riots during which 1,000 synagogues were set aflame and thousands of Jewish businesses and homes were destroyed. This event is known as *Kristallnacht* ("The Night of Broken Glass") and is generally regarded as the beginning of the Holocaust, a mass "ethnic cleansing" in which the Nazis attempted to eliminate non-Aryans and other groups they viewed as inherently inferior. An estimated six million Jews and an estimated six million non-Jews (homosexuals, Gypsies, non-Jewish Poles, Russian prisoners of war) were eventually executed through various means such as gas chambers, firing squads, and starvation. The bodies were disposed of using crematoria and mass graves. The Nazi invasion of Poland on September 1, 1939 marked the start of World War II. Together with Italy and Japan, they formed the Axis Powers and sought world domination. World War II lasted until 1945, when the Axis Powers were defeated by the Allies (which included such major powers as the United States, France, Britain, and Russia).

## Supplementary Activities

1. Literary Analysis/Symbols: Begin a list of symbols that occur in this book, and add to it as you read.
2. Literary Analysis/Similes: Begin a list of similes you find in the novel, and add to the list as you read. Examples: "The sirens were screaming like babies" (p. 2); "I saw spaces where stores should be. Like broken teeth" (p. 10).

## Chapters 6–10

Uri gives Stopthief a new name, Misha, and creates a believable backstory for him about his Gypsy family. The boys' skilled thievery allows them to eat fairly well. Misha becomes friends with a Jewish girl named Janina and leaves a loaf of bread on the back step of her house every day. The great risk of making these deliveries becomes clear to Misha as he loses a tooth in an encounter with an older, aggressive thief and has one of his earlobes shot off by Jackboots. Incidents of degrading and violent acts against Jews escalate, culminating in *Kristallnacht*.

### Vocabulary

caviar  
brine  
pastry  
surviving  
foil  
flurries  
curfew  
coffin

### Discussion Questions

1. Examine the scene in which Misha speaks to the Jackboots. How does he endanger himself and Uri? How is Uri able to keep the two of them out of trouble? (*Misha tells the soldiers where he and Uri are living. The last thing that Uri wants is for the Jackboots to know where he and Misha live, particularly since they may suspect that the boys are Jews. Uri is able to communicate something to the soldiers in German which makes them laugh and diffuses the situation.*)
2. What does Misha remember about his family? Why do you think he remembers these things and not people? (*He remembers hearing a booming laugh, smelling a horse, tasting something sweet, riding on someone's shoulder, and seeing bright colors and hair glittering in firelight. Answers will vary. Senses are very strong in memory, but faces fade because they become too familiar. Hence, one may see only first impressions of people instead of eyes, ears, noses, etc.*)
3. Besides the fact that Uri is a kind and caring person, why else might he want to help Misha? (*Uri reveals that he once had a little brother named Jozef. In many ways Misha is like a little brother to Uri, and Uri may feel compelled to save him partially because he was not able to save Jozef.*)
4. How do Uri's and Misha's methods of thievery differ? What differences in personality might their methods of thievery indicate? (*Uri steals from shops and takes only what he needs. Misha prefers to steal randomly from people, except in the case of candy, which he must steal from stores. Uri is more methodical and practical, but Misha is more impulsive.*)
5. Reread Uri's story about Misha Pilsudski in Chapter 7. Why does Uri craft such a detailed backstory for Misha? Why is Misha enthralled with the story he has been given? (*Answers will vary. Uri wants to give Misha a history that seems authentic to him. Uri knows that a child needs to have a sense of identity, and if that identity [however fabricated] will keep Misha safe, then so much the better. If Misha is ever asked about his family history, a detailed story may go a*

*long way toward keeping Misha out of trouble. Misha would be thrilled to have almost any identity [having never known his own], but the one that Uri crafts for him is rich, compelling, and gives him hope [since it assures him he is not a Jew]. His adopted identity gives him confidence, and for the first time in his life he can share who he is with others.)*

6. Having witnessed Jews being beaten and humiliated, Misha remarks that he is glad he is not a Jew. Uri replies, “Don’t be too glad” (p. 38). What does Uri mean by this comment? *(Uri may know that Misha is a Jew. He may worry that one day Misha will be exposed as a Jew and forced to face his true identity in some very cruel and unfortunate ways.)*
7. Why is Misha so determined to deliver loaves of bread to Janina’s family? *(Misha knows that Janina and her family are Jewish and that Jews in Warsaw are in peril. Misha cares a great deal about her; he collects the things she leaves him in a special bag.)*
8. Why does Misha want to believe in angels? Why might this be difficult for him? *(Answers will vary, but it seems that Misha wants to believe that there is someone other than Uri who will help him when he is in trouble. Misha has lived a hard life thus far, and evil and unfairness probably seem much more real to him than goodness and righteousness.)*
9. **Prediction:** Will the Jackboots come for Janina’s family?

### Supplementary Activities

1. Research: Locate articles on the 1939 invasion of Poland, and present your findings to the class in an oral report.
2. Writing: Create a different name and backstory for Misha. Be sure to make it believable for the time period and location.
3. Art: Draw a picture of a Jewish-owned store in Warsaw after *Kristallnacht*. Look up pictures on the Internet of Jewish stores from this time period and location. Compare your drawing with the photos.