

Individual Learning Packet

Teaching Unit

The Five People You Meet in Heaven

by Mitch Albom

written by Sally Wein

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Background

All references are from the Hyperion First Paperback Edition of *The Five People You Meet in Heaven*, copyright 2003.

While readers recognize Mitch Albom as the writer of the *New York Times* bestselling memoir, *Tuesdays with Morrie*, many are unfamiliar with Albom's background as a sports columnist and musician.

Albom was born on May 23, 1958, in Passaic, New Jersey, and he lived his childhood and teenage years there, where he took a particular interest in music. He went on to study sociology at Brandeis University, and after graduating, toured Europe and the United States, singing and playing jazz piano in various nightclubs. He went back to school, getting a master's degree in both journalism and business from Columbia University, while simultaneously writing for *SPORT* magazine and the *Queens Tribune*.

Albom became a free-lance writer for *Sports Illustrated* and *The Philadelphia Inquirer* before accepting a full-time job as the lead sports columnist for the *Detroit Free Press*. Then, when the newspaper merged with the *Detroit News*, Albom was asked to write a weekly column on a subject other than sports, which appeared on Sunday's Comments Page. For his great work in sports writing, Albom won the *Associated Press Sports Editor* Best Sports Columnist award 13 times, in addition to seven awards for Best Feature Writer.

In 1995, Albom reconnected with one of his sociology professors, Morrie Schwartz, with whom he was very close as an undergraduate at Brandeis. Schwartz suffered from Lou Gehrig's disease, a terminal illness that gradually destroys the nervous system. Every Tuesday, Albom would visit his old friend, and he turned his interaction with Morrie and the life lessons the old man taught him into his best-selling memoir, *Tuesdays with Morrie*. The book gave Albom great acclaim as a writer, spent 205 weeks on the *New York Times Bestseller* list, and sold over 14 million copies. The book was later adapted for a television movie and an off-Broadway play.

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Plot Summary

The main character of *The Five People You Meet in Heaven*, Eddie, is based on Alбом's uncle, Eddie Beitchman, a World War II veteran and cab driver, who passed away when he was 83 years old. The plot of the novel was inspired by a story Eddie told at one Thanksgiving Dinner: When Eddie was younger, he was sent to the hospital with a life-threatening fever. On the verge of death, he woke up one night to find his dead relatives collected around the bed, staring at him. Eddie told them to "get lost," and that he wasn't "ready for them yet." He recovered, but always retained the memory of that night. Alбом, intrigued by his uncle's near-death experience, developed it into a story, exploring the concept of heaven and who would be waiting for the deceased in the afterlife.

The book was widely successful, becoming a *New York Times Bestseller* like its predecessor. Also, like *Tuesdays with Morrie*, *The Five People You Meet in Heaven* became a television movie.

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Objectives

By the end of this Unit, the student will be able to:

1. define the significance of figurative language in setting and theme of the story.
2. recognize literary devices used in the text, including allusion, personification, metaphor, and simile.
3. focus on the main points of a story and how they tie into the author's purpose or message.
4. explore how a character's action and dialogue reveals his or her inner thoughts and feelings
5. study character relationship and how one character may directly or indirectly affect another.
6. analyze how diction and imagery helps to establish mood.
7. trace the motif of coincidence in the story, specifically the Blue Man's message about the inter-connectivity of all people and events.
8. determine the practicality of having the plot revealed through a third-person omniscient narrator.
9. identify the theme of the novel, and evaluate how it is developed throughout the course of the text.
10. analyze the ways in which irony and foreshadowing help build suspense.
11. explain how flashback is used to develop Eddie's character.
12. determine how key actions and phrases act as symbols in the novel.

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Questions for Essay and Discussion

1. Compare the stories of the five people Eddie meets in heaven. Who do you feel contributes the most to the message Albus is attempting to present? On which person does he place the most emphasis? Are there any characters you feel he does not emphasize enough? Explain your answers using examples from the text.
2. In heaven, Ruby tells Eddie he will have peace when he makes it with himself. What do you think that entails? Explain your answer.
3. How does Eddie's acceptance of his position in life help him or hinder him when he arrives in heaven? How would he react differently if he had followed his dream of becoming an engineer?
4. Discuss Ruby's role in the novel. Why is she the only one who can persuade Eddie to forgive his father? Could any of the other characters convince him to do that? Why?
5. According to the text, one person can indirectly benefit another without intentionally doing a good deed. What are some of the ways one person's *bad* deed can have a positive effect on another person?
6. Determine what Eddie gains from his encounter with each of the five people, and place the importance of each discourse in order from the most important to the least important. Use specific examples from the text to support your answer.
7. Elaborate on the motif of coincidence. Do you believe that every event in life happens according to plan, or do you think that there is no such thing as fate? Discuss how each theory dictates how a person chooses to live his or her life.
8. Neither of Eddie's parents is waiting to meet him in heaven. Discuss the reasons why you think that is the case and whether their presence would help or hinder his progress in learning.
9. Review the characters in the story. Who do you think might have been included or excluded in Eddie's meetings, and what purpose would those changes serve?
10. Do you believe Eddie is a universal character, meant to represent all men and women, or do you believe he is a unique character with distinct qualities, values, and traits?

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The End – Today is Eddie’s Birthday

Vocabulary

arterial – affecting the blood vessels
bolted – moved suddenly or explosively
cacophony – a loud, noisy mixture of sounds
craggy – rough
husking – removing leaves from ears of corn
hydraulic – moved by pressure
shingles – an illness that causes nerve pain and a rash
solvent sink – a special basin used only for rinsing chemicals
thrumming – tapping; beating

1. What is Eddie’s almost super-human ability as “ride man” at Ruby Pier?

2. What literary device is illustrated by the phrase “Eddie lowered the lap bar and *clack-clack-clack*, up they went.” and what purpose does the device serve?

3. What is significant about the particular day that Eddie dies?

4. What is one possible reason why Albom mentions that the people at the park jokingly called Eddie, “Eddie Maintenance”?

18. How does Eddie manage to keep some of his comic book collection, even though he is 17 years old?

19. How does Eddie's love for comic books characterize him? Does he lose this trait as he grows older? How do you know?

20. In the scene of Eddie's 17th birthday, how does Albom suggest that Eddie was embarrassed when his family found out about the girl he danced with?

21. How does Eddie's mother try to get the brothers to reconcile? Is it successful?

The Fourth Person Eddie Meets in Heaven – The Fourth Lesson

Vocabulary

ambushed – made a surprise attack
confounded – confused
contraption – a gadget with working parts
cutlets – thin slices of meat
exuberant – excited
lacerating – tearing
oblivion – a state of nothingness
parchment – a type of paper
protocol – a standard procedure
sallow – yellowish; faded
sparse – thin; small in amount
spurred – formed by jutting pieces of bone
travertine – limestone deposits near water
troughs – long, narrow boxes, usually used to hold water or food

1. When Ruby leaves and Eddie is transported to another part of heaven, where does he go?

2. Why does Eddie tend to feel uncomfortable at weddings? How do his feelings toward them change over time?

3. Who is the young bridesmaid in the lavender dress?

4. On his 38th birthday, why is Eddie jealous of his brother, and how do you know?
