

Literature Circle Guide to LOSER by Jerry Spinelli

Book Summary

Just like other kids, Zinkoff rides his bike, hopes for snow days, and wants to be like his dad when he grows up. But Zinkoff also raises his hand with all the wrong answers, trips over his own feet, and falls down with laughter over a word like "Jabip."

Other kids have their own word to describe him, but Zinkoff is too busy to hear it. He doesn't know he's not like everyone else. And one winter night, Zinkoff's differences show that any name can someday become "hero."

Author Information

Jerry Spinelli was born in Norristown, Pennsylvania. He went to Gettysburg College and Johns Hopkins University. His books are funny and true to life. He wrote *Who Put That Hair in My Toothbrush?* Hey, it's a problem! In 1991, he won the Newbery Award for *Maniac Magee*, and in 1998, *Wringer* was named a Newbery Honor book. Whenever students ask him where he gets his ideas, he replies, "From you. You're the funny ones." Cheers for Jerry Spinelli and you!

Suggested Answers to Literature Circle Questions

Use these questions and the activities that follow to get more out of the experience of reading *Loser* by Jerry Spinelli.

1. What does Zinkoff wear his first day of school despite his mother telling him not to?

He wears the giraffe hat his dad bought for him at the zoo (pg. 9).

2. What does Miss Meeks calculate during her opening day speech?

She calculates how many days are in the first twelve years of a child's schooling ($108 \times 20 = 2,160$) (pg. 16).

3. What does his mother give Zinkoff to reward him? What does Miss Meeks make Zinkoff wear when he misbehaves?

As a reward, Zinkoff receives a silver star sticker from his mother that he puts on his shirt. As a punishment from Miss Meeks, Zinkoff must wear a large, round, yellow button that says "I Know I Can Behave" (pg. 31).

4. When Zinkoff wins the soccer trophy, he offers to give it to Andrew. Why do you think he does this and what does it reveal about him? What does Andrew's reaction tell you about him?

Zinkoff offers Andrew his trophy because it hurts him to see his friend so sad about losing. This action reveals that Zinkoff purely enjoys playing the game and winning is not the most important part of being on the soccer team. Andrew is very disappointed about losing and wants to take Zinkoff's trophy, which shows that Andrew will do anything for glory and the trophies that accompany it, even if he does not really deserve them (pg. 49).

5. How is Miss Meeks different from Mrs. Biswell? Compare how each views Zinkoff's writing?

Miss Meeks loves children and delights in their uniqueness and their strengths. Mrs. Biswell does not like children and responds only to neatness, quiet, and brilliance. Miss Meeks acknowledged that Zinkoff's writing was messy and encouraged him to make it neater, but also enforced what a delightful and enthusiastic student he was (pg. 33), while Mrs. Biswell was only negative and called Zinkoff's writing atrocious (pg. 54).

6. Why can't Zinkoff go with his father on Take Your Kid to Work Day? Why is it important to Zinkoff? How does his father make it up to him?

Zinkoff can't go with his father to work because the post office won't allow it. They believe that the job is too dangerous, and that mail jeeps can only accommodate one person (there is only one seat) (pg. 60). It is important to Zinkoff to go because he loves his father and reveres the work that he does. He especially likes the fact that mail must be delivered despite any bad weather. His father makes it up to him by taking him to deliver mail on a Sunday (pg. 63).

7. When he is stuck at home after his operation, why does Zinkoff think about the Waiting Man? Why do you think Zinkoff gives himself a test? Does he learn anything about himself by doing his test?

Zinkoff thinks about the Waiting Man because he comes to understand what it means to really wait for something that you want; in Zinkoff's case, his return to school (pg. 82). He realizes how lonely waiting can be. Zinkoff gives himself a test because he figures that if he can't go to school, then school can come to him and he can continue learning. From his test of approaching the Furnace Monster, Zinkoff learns that he can conquer some of his fears and work toward conquering them all completely (pg. 93).

8. Chapter 15 is titled, "Discovered." In what way is Zinkoff discovered? Why does it happen at this time and not before?

In fourth grade, Zinkoff is discovered by his teacher Mr. Yalowitz, and his classmates. Mr. Yalowitz spotlights Zinkoff's effort and clever comments, but now his classmates are looking at him with their "big kid eyes" (pg. 98). They have lost the innocence of their youth in which they would accept giggles and falls and silliness; now they stare upon things with a more critical eye. Zinkoff is discovered by these critical eyes that don't understand his humor or perspective.

9. Who in the book do you think believes that Zinkoff is a loser? Who doesn't? Show examples to support your choices.

Most of Zinkoff's classmates believe he is a loser. They think he is a loser for not being good at field day, for his clumsiness, for his average grades, and for his silliness (pg. 111). They often call him this name behind his back, but still loud enough for him to hear. Zinkoff's family supports him, and think he is wonderful. In the same way that his father sees run-down cars as "honeybugs" not "clunkers", his family sees him as a winner, not a loser.

10. Why does Zinkoff spend Field Day with the old lady on Willow Street? How does this show Zinkoff's character?

Zinkoff spends Field Day with the old lady because he wants to avoid the persecution from his classmates on Field Day for not being a superb athlete (pg. 143). It shows how open Zinkoff is to people and how willing he is to listen to them and spend time with them. It also demonstrates how desperate Zinkoff is to have friends to confide in and talk to about his life.

11. Why do you think Bounce eventually calls Zinkoff's name at the end of the book? If Zinkoff was in your class, would you be friends with him? What qualities does he have that would make him a good or bad friend?

Bounce calls Zinkoff's name because Zinkoff refuses to accept the position other kids have tried to push on him as a "loser." He does not view himself that way, so he doesn't slink off when he is not immediately called to be on Bounce's team. Bounce is thrown off balance by his persistence and refusal to be pigeon-holed and reacts by inviting him to play on the team. Some students will recognize that Zinkoff would make a wonderful friend because he is willing to believe in people, willing to support people, and willing to share his interests and ideas.

12. Has anyone ever misjudged you or called you a name that hurt your feelings? What did you do? What do you think Zinkoff would do in your shoes? Would you still react the same way?

Most students will have experienced some sort of persecution or hurt feelings in their lives be it from friends or siblings or relatives, but everyone should be able to make a connection to this question. Encourage students to share their stories and their reactions. Discuss Zinkoff's willingness to laugh at himself rather than be embarrassed if he made a mistake. Zinkoff sees trips and falls and mishaps as a part of life, a part not to hide from and be embarrassed about, but a part to shrug off and laugh about. Discuss whether or not Zinkoff's attitude is a good one, and if not, then why not?

13. After Zinkoff writes Hector Binns's name as his best friend, how does Zinkoff try to make it true? Why doesn't it work? Compare their friendship to Zinkoff's relationship with Andrew Orwell and Claudia.

Zinkoff tries to make Hector Binns his best friend by displaying the behavior that he has seen in best friends. When Zinkoff goes to Binns's house, he acts as

if he is very comfortable and has been going there for years. He starts eating black licorice like Hector does. Zinkoff defends Hector when someone uses a nickname he does not like. They also share secrets and have sleepovers. Zinkoff finally tries to give Hector some of his own ear wax to add to Hector's ear wax candle. This behavior doesn't work because Hector is ultimately a loner. He likes having his own ideas and doing his own activities. He is not that interested in Zinkoff's passions. Zinkoff's relationship with Andrew Orwell is hard to call a friendship because Andrew never really liked Zinkoff and was not very kind to him. This doesn't change in middle school when Andrew snubs him. The difference between Andrew and Binns is that Binns gave Zinkoff a chance and was nice to him for awhile. Claudia is too young to be a real friend and confidant to Zinkoff, but she enjoys his company and looks to him for entertainment.

14. Why do you think Jerry Spinelli wrote a story about a "loser"? How do you think the author feels about losing? Do you think that the "winners" in the book are always the best? Explain.

It could be that Jerry Spinelli wrote this story to explore the idea of labels and the reasons why kids will cruelly give them to others that they don't understand. Zinkoff's classmates call him a loser, but he does not feel that he is one. So Spinelli is exploring what perspective really matters and what defines who you are as a person; is it how you see yourself or how others see you? Perhaps Jerry Spinelli does not like that from a very young age, life is turned into a series of contests in which there is always only one winner and many losers. He may be trying to show that Zinkoff is very much a winner in his own way. He does not have the best grades, the fastest run, the most graceful gait, but he is a wonderful person at the same time. The winners in the story like Gary Hobin and Andrew Orwell are not good people. They are cruel and selfish.

Note: These literature circle questions are keyed to Bloom's Taxonomy: Knowledge: 1-3; Comprehension: 4-6; Application: 7-8; Analysis: 9-10; Synthesis: 11-12; Evaluation: 13-14.

Activities

1. Imagine who you would cast in the movie version of *Loser*. Create a poster for your movie that illustrates a scene that would show what the movie is about. **Teachers could place students in small groups to work on this project to promote discussion of the story and what message the group is trying to send through their poster. Emphasize that the students need to consider their audience when designing their poster, an audience that knows nothing about the story. Students might connect with the final scene as an illustration of what the book is about. In that scene you have the two opposing views of Zinkoff. Bounce, Andrew Orwell, and Gary Hobin who see Zinkoff as a "loser" and a bad athlete, whereas Zinkoff doesn't see himself in that light. So that represents the struggle to define yourself or to let yourself be defined by others.**

2. Make a list of things you remember about different teachers you've had and what was different about each grade. Does any year or teacher stand out? Why? How do you think Zinkoff would have felt if he was in your class?

All students have strong memories of their elementary school teachers. After students have created their initial lists, they can use that to help them create a longer piece of writing.

3. Make a timeline of events in Zinkoff's life in the book. Extend the timeline out to the future and guess what you think will happen to him in high school and beyond.

First Grade: Miss Meeks, loves school, loves life, wins soccer tournament.

Second Grade: Mrs. Biswell, still loves school, friends with Andrew Orwell, delivers mail, discovers the Waiting Man, has an operation.

Fourth Grade: Mr. Yalowitz, has a terrible Field Day, is starting to be called a loser.

Fifth Grade: Mrs. Shankfelder, has Hector Binns as a best friend, skips Field Day, graduates.

Sixth Grade: Middle School, tries to find Claudia in the snowstorm, refuses to be a loser.

Seventh Grade: Begins to find a group of friends who appreciate him, still loves band, and starts getting more interested in music and art.

In addition, teachers could have students make timelines of their own lives to compare and contrast with Zinkoff's.