

milkweed

Jerry Spinelli

An ALA-YALSA Best
Book for Young Adults

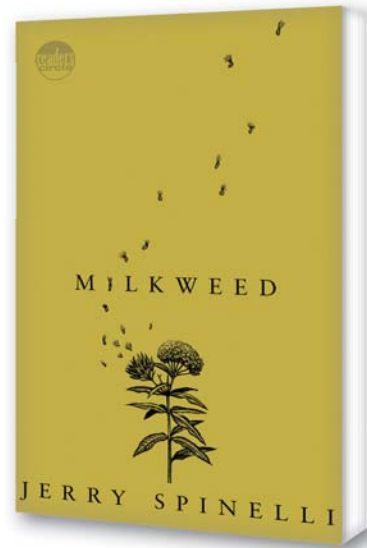
Grades 7 up

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ABOUT THE BOOK

Young Misha Pilsudski lives on the streets of Warsaw, Poland, and struggles with his identity. When he enters the Jewish ghetto and sees firsthand the evil acts of Hitler's Nazi soldiers, he realizes it's safest of all to be nobody.

Milkweed opens in 1939 and tells the story of a homeless, nameless boy—a “nobody” until he takes up with other street kids and embraces the identity of a gypsy: Misha Pilsudski. Misha is fascinated by the Jackboots, and spends his days stealing food for himself and the orphans. When he meets Janina Milgrom, a Jewish girl, and follows her family to the Jewish ghetto, he loses his fascination with the Nazi soldiers. He slips in and out of the cracks of the walled ghetto, getting food for the Milgroms. For the first time in his life, he has a family until resettlement and deportation snatch them away. This good-hearted boy is once again a “nobody” and eventually makes his way to America, carrying only the memories of his adopted family with him.

★ “Add [this] stirring title to the Holocaust curriculum; the youth of the protagonist allows [students] to ask questions and get answers that will help readers learn the history.” —*Booklist*, Starred

QUESTIONS FOR GROUP DISCUSSION

1. Uri advises Misha and the other homeless boys that an important survival skill is to remain invisible. How does Misha have a difficult time remaining invisible? What other survival skills do the boys employ? What does Misha teach the Milgroms about survival? What is the greatest threat to the survival of the Jews in the ghetto?
2. Discuss what Misha Pilsudski means when he says, “Thanks to Uri, in a cellar beneath a barbershop somewhere in Warsaw, Poland, in autumn of the year 1939, I was born, you might say.” (p. 31) How does the made-up story of his life become so important to him? How does Misha's identity change throughout the novel? What gives him a true identity at the end of the novel? Discuss Uncle Shepsel's efforts to give up his identity as a Jew. How is this related to survival?
3. Uri is described as “fearless on the streets.” (p. 80) What does Uri teach Misha about fear? Janina has led a privileged life and doesn't deal with fear until her family is moved to the ghetto. Discuss how Misha helps her cope with her new life. How does fear eventually kill Mrs. Milgrom? At what point in the novel does Misha display the most fear? How does he deal with it?
4. Ask students to discuss how Misha's relationship with the Milgrom family changes throughout the novel. At what point does Mr. Milgrom invite him to become a part of the family? Why are Uncle Shepsel and Mrs. Milgrom so reluctant to accept Misha as family? Ask students to discuss how Misha's desire for family comes full circle by the end of the novel.
5. Brainstorm the qualities of true friendship. Discuss the friendship that develops between Misha and Janina. Engage the class in a discussion about why Misha is such a good friend to the orphans. Why does Dr. Korczak, the head of the orphanage, call Misha a “foolish good-hearted boy”? (p. 65)
6. When Misha comes to the United States, he shares his memories of his life in Poland on the street corner. He says that “running” is his first memory. (p. 1) What might he say is his last memory? Misha won't share Janina with his family, but he pays tribute to her memory by naming his granddaughter for her. Discuss why he wants to keep that memory to himself. Discuss the symbolism of the milkweed. How does planting milkweed at the end of his yard preserve his memories of Poland?

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