

The Pigman by Paul Zindel Alicia Rice English 393 Final Paper

Paul Zindel's *The Pigman* is a fairly short novel, aimed at a middle-school audience. It is written at about a 6th grade reading level, about situations in which teenagers could imagine themselves. Published in 1968, the overall setting of *The Pigman* is a large, dirty city, like New York or Chicago.

The Pigman is one of many young adult novels about teenagers by Paul Zindel which include such unusual titles as *Pardon Me, You're Stepping on My Eyeball!*, *Harry and Hortense at Hormone High* and *My Darling, My Hamburger*. Through *The Pigman*, Zindel wants his readers to enjoy reading a story about people their own age, who share many of the same flaws, but also to explore deeper subjects such as family relationships, death, and responsibility. The story of *The Pigman* is that of two teenagers, John and Lorraine, who, because they are not getting the support and love that they need from their families, seek it in each other and the company of Mr. Angelo Pignati. The lonely threesome finds love, reassurance, and meaning in each other, and the old man John and Lorraine call "the Pigman" becomes a father figure for the two teenagers. Mr. Pignati is everything their parents aren't: caring, understanding, and fun. At the same time, John and Lorraine give the Pigman some much-needed company and a reason to interact with society.

John and Lorraine first meet the Pigman as part of a game, randomly calling a number from the phone book to see who can keep the person on the line the longest. When they go to his house to collect the contribution to the "charity" they talked about on the phone, the lonely Mr. Pignati welcomes them in for their company. They go on various outings together, including roller skating through a department store and visiting Mr. Pignati's friend Bobo (a baboon) at the zoo. The group becomes close during their meetings, although Lorraine often feels that they are taking advantage of the old man's generosity.

During one episode, when the teenagers are visiting Mr. Pignati, he tries to chase John up the stairs on roller skates, and has a heart attack. While he is in the hospital, John and Lorraine have a party in his house, which gets out of hand when the bully Norton starts a fight. During the fight, Mr. Pignati comes home from the hospital, to discover his house trashed, his wife's dresses torn, and the pigs smashed. John and Lorraine take responsibility and suffer the consequences of their actions, the worst of which is losing the Pigman's friendship. When they finally gain his forgiveness, they convince him to go on an outing to the zoo to see Bobo. When they arrive at the Primate Building, they learn that Bobo has passed away while Mr. Pignati was in the hospital. The shock and grief of this news causes Mr. Pignati to have a second, fatal heart attack, and the teenagers feel responsible for his death.

In many ways, Lorraine Jensen is a typical teenage girl. She worries about how she looks and thinks she's not pretty, a sentiment which seems constantly reinforced by her mother. She is very intelligent and caring, but has very little self-esteem. Lorraine has a weakness for good food, and loves to eat. She also dreams of becoming a writer, and has a tendency to use big words; for example, she says that John "prevaricates" instead of "lies." Additionally, Lorraine is fascinated by psychological disorders, and she has read a number of magazine articles on psychology. She is constantly psychoanalyzing the people around her, and has theories, which seem fairly reasonable, about why the people around her act the way they do. For example, she sees John's drinking as a result of his father showing when John was at an impressionable age that drinking was a sign of maturity. Lorraine admires John's guts and charisma, and it is obvious to the reader that she has a crush on John, although she does not admit to it until the end of the book.

Like all of the adults in the novel, Lorraine's mother has deep -rooted problems. She is excessively overprotective and overbearing, and very distrustful of men. This distrust comes both from Lorraine's father's adultery when she was pregnant with Lorraine, and from her experience with "dirty old men" in her profession as an in-home nurse. Also, she works with terminally ill patients, and has become almost immune to the death around her, blowing it off as just another day's work. Lorraine's home life is manipulative and abusive. Her mother hits her for disobedience and for talking back, although toward the end of the book Lorraine physically defends herself by blocking the slaps. Lorraine's mother also emotionally abuses her, constantly telling Lorraine that "she's not a pretty girl" and picking on her looks. Her mother tries to control her every minute of the day, constantly reminding her to come straight home and to lock the door and windows. She tells her that her skirts are too short and not to walk home from school, among other things, because she is afraid Lorraine will look like or become a slut. Ms. Jensen also has a double standard, because while she steals small things like canned goods and cleanser from her employers, she would be furious if Lorraine ever stole anything. Furthermore, she constantly questions and tries to undermine Lorraine's education, practically ordering her to stay home one day and clean the house. Lorraine's mother is clearly not a model for how a parent should behave, and definitely is not a positive parental figure for Lorraine.

John Conlan is handsome, smart, and creative, but despises authority and shirks responsibility. He wants to be an actor, rather than following in his father's footsteps and working on Wall Street. As Lorraine says, ". . . the reason John gets away with all these things is because he's extremely handsome. I hate to admit it, but he is. An ugly boy would have been sent to reform school by now." His wish is to be An individual, rather than one of the crowd. He drinks and smokes terribly, mostly to assert his independence . He always has a smart-aleck comment for everything, and seems to enjoy creating chaos. For example, his freshman year he organized "fruit rolls," where when there was a substitute teacher every student in the class would buy an apple at lunch and then, in class at his signal, roll them down the classroom aisles to disturb the teacher. This cavalier, devil-may-care attitude is something that teenage readers can identify with, since they too are trying to be individuals and stand out in the crowd. John is not heartless, however; he feels genuinely sorry for lonely Mr. Pignati even as he abuses the old man's generosity, and he is deeply affected by his death.

Like Lorraine, John has an unhappy family life. Today , we would call his family "dysfunctional," but in 1968, when *The Pigman* was written, the idea of dysfunctional families was not so widely used. John refers to his father and mother as "Bore" and "Old Lady" respectively; both are around sixty years old and very traditional. One gets the impression that they are tired of being parents and don't want him to be a bother to them anymore. John also has a much-older brother named Kenneth, who , by following in his father's footsteps and being a successful futures broker, is often held up as an ideal son. This standard is unattainable for John, who would rather be an individual and detests the hectic Exchange.

His father does not understand his need to find out who he is and be his own man. One particular evening they get in a heated discussion over John's seeming lack of ambition. He tries to be supportive, but yet really wants John to be exactly like his brother: "Be yourself! Be individualistic!" he called after me. "But for God's sake get your hair cut. You look like an oddball."

John's mother has her own neuroses: she is obsessive about cleanliness, and avoids conflict as much as possible. When John and his father argue, she disappears from the room as quickly as possible, and seems to leave all of the parenting she can to her husband. Neither John's mother

nor his father provides a positive adult role model. While his family is not abusive, his parents are unsupportive, which causes John to seek emotional support and understanding elsewhere.

Mr. Angelo Pignati, the "Pigman," is a lonely old man who lives by himself in a large, old house. Since the death of his wife Conchetta, Mr. Pignati has largely removed himself from society; his only friend is Bobo, the baboon he visits regularly at the zoo. When he first speaks to Lorraine on the telephone, he is so grateful for conversation that he rambles on and on with jokes. Upon meeting John and Lorraine, he welcomes them into his home, grateful for company and attention. Mr. Pignati has suffered a great loss with the death of his wife, and is searching for the friendship and companionship that is now missing from his life. He takes great pleasure in doing things that make John and Lorraine happy, such as buying them chocolate-covered ants and roller skates. Although he becomes a parental figure for John and Lorraine, the support is not simply one-way; they often are more mature than the childlike Pigman. From them he gains company and stability, and a sense of enjoyment from life.

One aspect of *The Pigman* that goes against the norm is that it does not have any positive characters. All of the characters are seriously flawed, and for the most part, do not change their ways through the course of the book. The protagonists, Lorraine and John, are sophomores at Franklin High School, which seems like an average urban high school with the associated cliques, overcrowding, and teacher-student friction. Most of the action of the story happens outside of school, however, if for no other reason than because Lorraine and John skip school so often. In many ways, Lorraine and John are juvenile delinquents, disrespecting authority and taking advantage of Mr. Pignati. No parent would want their child to use these teenagers as role models.

The book also uses an unusual technique: it is written as a memoir of Mr. Pignati by Lorraine and John, with alternating chapters written by Lorraine and John. By using dual narrators writing alternating chapters, the reader can see both main characters' points of view, and contrast the two viewpoints. This creative technique allows the reader to watch both characters develop, by seeing what they are thinking and feeling as described directly by them. Often, John and Lorraine give differing descriptions of the same event, as seen from their individual viewpoints. Thus, we can understand what happened more clearly because John and Lorraine interpret things in different ways.

Another result of having John and Lorraine narrate alternating chapters is that the book is interesting to both teenage boys and girls. Both groups' interests are included in the descriptions; girls might gravitate more toward Lorraine's emotional responses to the events, and recognize that when she goes along with one of John's crazy ideas, it is because she has a crush on him. Teenage boys, on the other hand, will appreciate John's smart-aleck attitude and the sheer gall in his actions.

One of the serious themes the novel deals with is death. Many people in the characters' lives are dead: Lorraine's father, Mr. Pignati's wife, and John's aunt Ahra. Also, death plays a major role in the plot: Bobo, Mr. Pignati's friend the baboon, dies, the grief of which causes his fatal heart attack. There are other references to death in the novel: the teenagers hang out in a cemetery at night, where John contemplates one evening while drinking near the mausoleum, "I knew I wasn't really wondering about the guy underneath me, whoever he was. I was just interested in what was going to happen to me. I think that's probably the real reason I go to the graveyard. . . . I'm looking for anything to prove that when I drop dead there's a chance I'll be doing something a little more exciting than decaying." The "pig room" in Mr. Pignati's house is very similar to the mausoleum in the cemetery. The ceramic pig figurines serve as reminders of his deceased wife, and the room stands in memorial to her. One of the most traumatic events in the story for Mr.

Pignati is discovering that the pigs have been smashed by Norton. To him, this is the same as defacing a mausoleum, and he is emotionally crushed by the loss.

From one point of view, many of the characters in the novel who are physically alive are emotionally or mentally dead. They have ceased to fully function in the world because of their particular neuroses (as Lorraine refers to them), and maintain their existence within an emotional cage or coffin that holds them back. For example, it is clear that part of Mr. Pignati died when his wife passed away. He no longer has a normal life, and did not move on after the loss. Instead, he chooses to deny it and continues to live in a fantasy world, pretending that Conchetta has simply gone to California. Just as Bobo, the baboon, is trapped in a cage in which he eventually dies, Mr. Pignati is trapped in a coffin of grief and denial that he stays in until he dies. John's parents serve as another example of emotionally "dead" characters. As John observes, "...all of a sudden Bore and the Old Lady got old. They didn't fight anymore. They didn't do much of anything anymore.... They just see me tired." It is also constantly mentioned during fights that they won't be around forever, and the wear and tear of the hectic coffee exchange on Mr. Conlan is clear. John's mother lives trapped by her fears of dirt and conflict. In one sense, John's parents have stopped living.

In addition to dealing with the serious issue of death, both physical and emotional, *The Pigman* looks at responsibility. At the end, after the Pigman dies, Lorraine feels that they are responsible for causing his death. Outwardly, John denies this, but the reader can tell that he feels some sense of responsibility, that their recklessness may have hastened his death. Furthermore, the two teenagers must accept responsibility for the horrible result of their party at the Pigman's house. Not only do they have to answer to their parents, but the Pigman is emotionally shattered and torn, much like Conchetta's pigs and dresses, and the teenagers lose the only positive emotional influence they have. In the last paragraphs of the book, John reflects: "We had trespassed too. . . and we were being punished for it." ". . .when he died something in us had died as well. There was no one else to blame anymore."

Another serious undercurrent that runs through the book is the intricacies of relationships, both positive and negative, with families and others. John and Lorraine's family relationships are less than ideal. Lorraine's mother is too overworked and stressed from her job and too bitter about men to be an effective parent. When Lorraine has to face her mother after the party incident, in many ways she behaves more maturely than her mother, who cries in a way Lorraine recognizes as phony: "She was sitting at the kitchen table, crying _ a slightly exaggerated crying which seemed to make our relationship even more artificial." John's parents see him as a "disturbing influence" in their lives, something to be kept out of the way. To some degree he is not welcome in his family, because of the disruption he causes them. By contrast, the Pigman's first thought is always to make John and Lorraine feel welcome and at home. Their presence is important to him, and he is constantly concerned with their happiness. Thus, the relationship between the teenagers and the Pigman, while complex, is generally positive.

Another complex relationship that evolves during the book is that between Lorraine and John. John seems to be Lorraine's one real friend, possibly because he was her first friend in a new, unfriendly city. However, it is clear that she is also attracted to him. Throughout the story, we see John take more interest in Lorraine as more than friends. The pivotal point in this development occurs when they dress up and cook dinner at the Pigman's house while he is in the hospital. When they first kiss, it is in play, but suddenly the situation changes and they are no longer "acting;" they recognize that their relationship has shifted. A teenager reading the novel could easily identify with the uneasiness that occurs when two opposite-sex friends begin to be more than just friends.

One of the most outstanding aspects of *The Pigman* is that it does what many young adult stories don't: it explores dysfunctional, crazy relationships from the point of view of two unsure, emotionally needy teenagers. The people in this book are "real," not fluffed-up with their flaws glossed over. The author recognizes that no relationship is perfect, and some are less perfect than others. For the same reasons that John and Lorraine are not role models for teenagers, teenage readers can identify with their character flaws and recognize some of the same feelings and characteristics in themselves. The book really speaks to teenagers, who have the same fears, needs, and turbulent relationships that are addressed in *The Pigman* but that are often left out of young adult literature.

Another place where the novel stands out is in its realistic, teenage language. The teenagers speak just as any average teenager would, using slang words and swearing when appropriate. It is easy to believe that John and Lorraine are the ones actually writing the book, because it reads in very much the same way as teenagers talk. Furthermore, the book is not written with condescendingly simple words, but the language is not so complex as to be confusing. This makes the book readable both for more advanced teenage readers, who, like Lorraine, enjoy the "big words," and for less skilled readers, who would be frustrated by constantly needing to look up unfamiliar words.

One criticism of *The Pigman* is that the dual-authors method of writing can be difficult to follow. Occasionally, it is necessary to double-check who the current "author" is, in order to correctly interpret what is happening in the chapter. This can be confusing, and interrupt the flow of the story. However, this creative style allows the reader to see both protagonists' points of view. So, as long as the reader can keep track of which character is currently "writing" the chapter, the multiple authors should not pose a major problem.

Another potential criticism is that it portrays adults and families in an overly negative light. There are no positive role models anywhere in the story, and none of the flawed individuals seem to overcome their flaws through the course of the book. This could have a negative impact by creating such a bleak view of people and relationships; the idea that everyone is seriously flawed and cannot overcome those flaws is depressing. However, the novel's strong points far outweigh its weaknesses. *The Pigman* is a very enjoyable novel to read. It has a good pace, is both introspective and exciting at times, and gets the reader interested and involved in the lives of its teenage protagonists. At the same time, it goes beyond telling a simple story of two teenagers, and deals with the difficult issues of death, responsibility, and relationships. With *The Pigman*, Paul Zindel has succeeded in his goal of not only creating an interesting and entertaining story, but also making his readers think about complex issues and how those issues relate to their own lives.

< <http://www.public.iastate.edu/~ricea/writing/pigman.pdf> > 30 Dec 1999. 24 June 2004.