



A Teaching Guide to Rodman Philbrick's "Freak the Mighty"

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*Note, see also: "Max the Mighty" Teaching Guide and
"Exploring Philbrick Books" Teaching Guide by Dr. Alexa Sandman*

*"I wrote Freak the Mighty because Max, the mighty half of Freak the Mighty,
insisted and he's bigger than I am." - Rodman Philbrick*

TO THE TEACHER:

"Freak the Mighty" is an unusual, well-written young adult novel. Although likely to be classified as realistic fiction, it has many elements of fantasy and fairy tale: the handicapped hero who is bigger than life, exciting quests, events that have numerous levels of meaning, and magical moments. Philbrick's novel of two handicapped and troubled young men, one smaller than a yardstick and the other outgrowing size thirteen shoes, is about the strength of friendship, family, intelligence, and life. The poignant story is told from the perspective of Max, who through the life and death of his friend Kevin, learns to respect his own intelligence and endure his own frightening heritage.

Philbrick's novel, most appropriate for middle school readers, has won significant critical acclaim and is an ALA Best Book for Young Adults. It is an excellent book to teach and to discuss. Not only will adolescent readers devour it and rejoice in the victories of Max and Kevin, but teachers will love all its teachable themes.

SUMMARY

The novel's plot is circular. In the first two sentences Max states, "I never had a brain until Freak came along and let me borrow his for a while, and that's the truth, the whole truth. The Unvanquished Truth." But it is not until the novel's final page that we learn why and how Max wrote a book about the adventures of Freak the Mighty.

In the first chapter, we meet the cast of characters: learning disabled and very large Max, severely handicapped and incredibly intelligent Kevin, Gram, and appropriately named Grim, Max's grandfather. We learn that there is a Him in Max's life, someone his grandparents fear and someone Max resembles.

Max and Kevin had known each other in day care, but do not meet again until the summer before eighth grade, when Max, who is so big he is exploding out of his clothes, places Kevin, whose body is

too small for his growing organs, on his shoulders and walks into a pond to out wit Tony D. and his punkster pals. From that moment, with Kevin providing the directions and Max the mobility and strength, they are known as Freak the Mighty. All summer they rescue fair maidens and slay dragons. Loretta, one of the maidens, turns out to be a friend of Kenny Kane, Max's father who is imprisoned for murdering Max's mother.

That Christmas, Kenny Kane, newly released from prison, kidnaps Max, and drags him bound and gagged to the basement of a burned-out building. Suddenly, Freak rolls down through a basement window holding a big blaster squirt gun he claims is filled with sulfuric acid. He squirts it in Kenny's eyes. Max puts Freak on his shoulders, and they run for their lives.

After the recapture of Killer Kane, life becomes quieter for both boys. On his birthday, Kevin suffers a seizure and is rushed to the hospital. He gives Max a blank book asking him to fill it up with their adventures. When Max learns the next day that Kevin has died, he lashes out at Kevin's doctor, but she explains that no surgery was ever possible and that Kevin knew it. At first Max hides from his friend's death in his room down under. Finally, after many months he begins to write the story of Freak the Mighty on the pages of the book Kevin had given him.

THINKING ABOUT THE BOOK

1. Why is Max convinced he does not have a brain? Is his assessment of himself as a "butthead" correct? Do our opinions of ourselves affect what others think of us? Do others' opinions of us affect how we feel about ourselves?
2. How does Kevin prove to Max he is not a "butthead"? How does Kevin help Max learn how to read and write?
3. Why is Freak's Christmas gift of the pyramid shaped box and handwritten dictionary so important to Max?
4. Why does Max call the first chapter of his book, "The Unvanquished Truth"?
5. Why do we care about what happens to Max and Kevin? How does the author make us care about them?
6. How does the location of Max's room "down under" relate to how he feels about himself?
7. How does Freak get Max out of his room? What is "magic" about their quests?
8. Does Freak really believe that he will be "the first bionically improved human" by having a body transplant? What does Freak mean when he says "you can remember anything, whether it happened or not"?
9. Why does Max agree with his father, who says, "I, Kenneth David Kane, do swear by all that's Holy that I did not murder this boy's mother"? What does the story Kenny tells about the "injustice" that was done him, tell us about him?
10. How are Kevin and Kenny similar in how they deal with the world? How are they different?
11. What is the irony in calling the tenements the New Testaments? What is ironic about Killer Kane posing as the Reverend Kenneth David Kane? Why is Kenny's remark that you should never trust a cripple ironic?

12. Why does Loretta try to save Max? What does this tell us about her? Why is Max not surprised when he sees her drunk at the end of the novel? How does she finally save Max?

13. Why is the scene with Kevin and the squirt gun funny? Does Kevin recognize the humor? Does Max?

14. With whom is Max angry when he realizes that Kevin is dead? Why? What helps him get over his anger?

STUDENT ACTIVITIES

1. Help students search for aspects of the novel that make it fantasy-like: the bigger-than-life hero, the quests, the magical moments, and meanings beyond actual words on the page.

2. Discuss with students the meaning of the word "sobriquet." Identify the sobriquets used in the book. Suggest that students write a sobriquet for a partner reflecting a positive quality in that person.

3. Each day, write one of the many interesting quotes from the book on the chalkboard. Have students write about what they think the quote means, write a poem that includes the quote or helps explain the quote, or tell a story that incorporates the quote or uses the quote as a moral.

4. Explore some of the novel's themes: the importance of friendship and family, the difference between myth and reality, recognizing the worth in all humans, the importance of positive self concept, and dealing with death.

ABOUT RODMAN PHILBRICK

William Rodman Philbrick has used the name W. R. Philbrick for eight detective novels and mysteries and the name William Dantz for four medical and technical thrillers, all for adult readers. *Freak the Mighty* is his first young adult novel. According to Rod, the name to which he answers, he wrote the novel "because Max, the mighty half of *Freak the Mighty*, insisted and he's bigger than I am."

Rod had no intention or inclination to write a young adult novel until an editor asked him if he had any stories for young readers. At first he said "no," but on the ride back from Manhattan to Maine, the voice, story, and plot for *Freak the Mighty* unrolled in his head.

The inspiration for Kevin was his son's close friend who had died tragically the previous year. According to Rod, "It was my way of dealing with the loss." The real Kevin had the same medical condition as *Freak* in the novel, but a very different personality. His mother was the inspiration for Gwen. Once he had the story in his head, Rod wrote the entire novel in one draft in about six weeks.

Rod's second young adult novel, *The Fire Pony*, will be published by Scholastic in 1996. He and his wife, Lynn Harnett, have collaborated on a mass-market paperback, haunted house series in three volumes called *The House on Cherry Street*. It is clear that Rodman Philbrick has many young adult voices inside his head and they will appear in numerous future novels.

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