



JUST JOSHUA

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JAN MICHAEL

Teaching Guide

By Gillian Perdue

RATIONALE AND THEMES

This is a compelling and thought-provoking novel set in a distant, tropical land. It raises interesting questions on the notion of 'belonging' in society and sensitively explores other important themes such as:

- Family relationships and love
- Death and loss
- Friendship
- Adult and parental fallibility
- Poverty
- Adoption

SUMMARY

The story begins with a death: that of the pig that Joshua's father slaughters. Father is the only butcher in a small community of fishermen and, as such, does not fit in. Joshua is aware of this but, as the story progresses, becomes increasingly aware of other, more subtle ways in which his father is different. Their way of life is simple, and Joshua must work hard and assume his responsibilities. One day when working in the market, Joshua and his friend Robert see a mountain man, one of the people who are feared and mistrusted by the villagers. Joshua feels drawn to this mysterious man and begins to collect the stone carvings that he discards. Could it be that the mountain man is trying to communicate with him? Over time, the whispers of the villagers and his father's strange ways begin to add up. Joshua is forced to confront prejudice and ignorance and, when tragedy strikes, he must make some difficult decisions.

APPROACH

For the purposes of this exploration, the novel has been divided into five units, covering four or five chapters at a time. It may suit to read one chapter per day, or larger blocks. Discussion points and activities are listed at the end of each unit.

UNIT 1 THE BUTCHER

We meet the hero of the story, Joshua, swimming in the warm sea while his father butchers a pig. Joshua has chores associated with the killing which most would balk at, but he performs these dutifully. It is only the actual killing he cannot bear to see. He helps his father and we observe the close, loving bond between the pair. We learn that Joshua's mother is not around and that Joshua and his father care for each other in her absence. Later, Joshua and his friend Robert help out at Mama Calla's stall in the market where they see the strange mountain man for the first time. The man is selling berries and the boys decide to try them. Later still, at the hospital, Joshua sees the mountain man again. He seems to be very ill and he stares at Joshua, but the nun won't let Joshua in to visit. The next day, Joshua goes back to the hospital and speaks to the nun, but he is still not allowed in. Joshua waits outside the window. There, hidden in the grass, Joshua finds a tiny stone carving – a snake. The mountain man must have carved it. Could he be trying to communicate?

Read pp.7– 49

DISCUSSION POINTS

- Joshua once watched his father killing a pig, but there were two expressions

of almost human emotion which made him decide never to watch again. What were these? (p.7). Do you think this is something that Joshua will grow out of?

- On p.11, we read that Joshua wonders why his father is a butcher when all the other men earn their living by fishing. Is Father a butcher because the other men would be 'no good' or is it because he couldn't fish?
- Read pp.22–23 for the description of the mountain people's lifestyle. See p.41 where Robert says 'You can't help mountain men.' Why might the villagers be suspicious of the mountain men? Is Joshua breaking any rule when he buys a bag of berries from the man? Discuss the mountain man's reaction to Joshua.
- When Joshua asks Father for the name of the berries, Father begins to answer but stops mid-sentence. Do you think Father knows their name? Discuss any similarities you have observed between the mountain man and Father.

ACTIVITIES

1. A SENSE OF PLACE

Though the actual location of the story is not specified, the author gives us a strong sense of place in her descriptions of this tropical land. In the Author Information section at the end of this Guide, we learn that Jan Michael grew up in the Seychelles. Check out websites for information on the Seychelles. Do you think the author has set the story in the land of her childhood?

www.lonelyplanet.com/destinations/africa/seychelles/get.htm

www.cia.gov/cia/publications/fact-book/geos/se.html

2. TOURISM

Though Joshua's life is one of comparative poverty and hardship, he lives in a land where tourism forms a vital part of the economy. From descriptions in the book, write a holiday advertisement for a travel magazine, encouraging people to visit. Use persuasive language and be creative!

3. RITUAL SLAUGHTER

While animal slaughter is unpleasant, it can be performed with minimal distress to the animal. Regulations are in place that recommend stunning animals so that they are insensitive to pain prior to being killed. In Judaism, the role of ritual slaughterer (called a 'shochet' in Hebrew) is regarded as a position of great honour and the slaughter itself is viewed as an intensely spiritual act. What steps does Father take to alleviate unnecessary suffering of the animal (pp.8–12)? Do you think this would be effective? Organise a class debate on the question: 'It is morally wrong to eat meat; vegetarianism is the only option!'

4. EARNING MONEY

Read the scene where Joshua and Robert earn money working for Mama Calla (pp.18–21). If you apply for a job, you may be asked to provide a Curriculum Vitae, giving personal, educational and professional details of your experience to date. Imagine you spot a dream job in the paper. Write your C.V. and a covering letter of application outlining why you would be the perfect candidate for the job.

5. CHILD IN DANGER

On p.33, Joshua's father catches him dissecting a dead rat with a sharp knife, thus combining two of the worst fears for every parent or guardian: risk of serious injury and risk of disease. What risks do your parents/carers warn you about? Discuss these fears with them, then write a piece (poem/list/prose) based on what you learn. Discuss their fears in class.

UNIT 2 THE SHOP

Father finishes building the shop and opens for business. We learn that, though the villagers buy meat, they regard the butcher with suspicion and use the term 'meatseller' as an insult. A number of references are made to Joshua's mother, Anna. Mama Siska

remembers her fondly and says that Joshua's mouth is like hers. Anna was obviously a villager. Joshua shows Robert the snake carving and they agree that the mountain man might be trying to communicate with them. They go to the hospital again and stand outside, trying to send their thoughts to the man inside. Once again, a carving appears, this time thrown out the window. Like the snake, it too is flawed. Joshua keeps it. Robert asks some questions about Father which reveal that he, too, looks down on the 'meatseller'. Joshua is hurt and angry. Their fight is temporarily forgotten when Robert reveals that the mountain man is dead.

Read pp.50–79

DISCUSSION POINTS

- Read pp.50–54 where Mama Siska inspects the butcher's shop. Do you think she approves of the business? What gift does she give to Father and how would this be useful in the shop? What might have happened if Mama Siska had refused to enter the shop?
- Robert tells Joshua that Father has no friends and that people only came to the shop opening because 'nobody wants to miss a party, even at the meatseller's'. Discuss the reasons which may have motivated Robert to speak so harshly. What do you think of Joshua's reaction? Do you think that Robert later regretted his words?
- When Father is carving, he seems to be in a world of his own. Are there any activities that put you into a world of your own, where you may not hear someone calling you or talking to you? Why do you think this might happen?
- Mama Siska says that Joshua has his mother's mouth. What family characteristics, either physical or in terms of temperament, have you inherited from your parents or from other close members of your family? Are you happy about these similarities?

ACTIVITIES

1. FIRST VISITOR

Mama Siska is the first person to visit the shop and, in so doing, clears the way for other villagers to enter. Write the dialogue between Mama Siska and a villager who is fearful of entering the premises.

2. LATIN TERMS

On p.56, we read that the priest had an 'aspergill' of holy water hanging from a chain. The word is derived from the Latin word, 'spargere' meaning 'to sprinkle'. Hundreds of words we use every day have come from Latin. Using a dictionary, make a list of twenty of those words.

3. PARTY ORGANISER

The new shop is launched with a party. Imagine you are a party planner. Your task is to organise an event to publicise/celebrate one of the following happy occasions: House warming/Book launch/Shop opening/Christening or Naming/Wedding/Birthday party/Other. Plan the celebration, including Menu, Invitations, Guest list etc. Make it a great day!

4. TELEPATHY

Joshua, Robert and Millie stood outside the hospital window trying to make the mountain man hear their thoughts. Get into pairs and sit near your partner. Write down a number, colour or object which you are going to try to 'send' to your partner. In silence, over a minute, try to 'send' the information. How did you get on? Keep a record of your progress, then swap over!

UNIT 3 THE WOODEN PIG

Father finishes carving the pig and Joshua helps him to hang it in pride of place outside the shop. Joshua learns that his mother's family had not approved of her marriage to Father. Returning from a swim, Joshua finds the village men in an angry mob outside his house, demanding that Father take down the pig. They believe it's bringing bad luck and causing poor fishing. Joshua and Robert have another fight about Father's being a mountain man and Joshua realises that Robert is right, that both he and Father are different. At home, Father becomes depressed and starts drinking. Millie, Robert and Joshua entertain the tourists to earn some money. Father decides to abandon butchery and sell Leon's leftover fish, but perhaps the change is not good for him. After breaking up a dog fight in the market, he is feverish and heads towards the hospital.

Read pp.80–127

DISCUSSION POINTS

- Read p.83 where Joshua talks to Robert's mother. What new information does he find out about his own mother?
- Why do the fishermen want Father to take the pig down? Do you think it could in any way affect their fishing?
- Read pp.90–91 where Robert and Joshua fight once more. Do you think this is a good description of an argument between friends? Did both boys want the fight to end? Later in the story, we hear that Joshua felt the fight had brought them closer. Discuss ways in which an argument can clear the air and reveal a person's true feelings.
- On p.97, Marguerite talks about Joshua as if he weren't there. '...he is lovely, isn't he. Just look at those eyes. What do you think he's called?' Could this quotation be applied equally to a puppy or kitten? Would you be happy if spoken about in this way?
- Though it is Robert who cuts Joshua's arm, Joshua is asked how he could be so careless (p.109). Why is the nun so quick to blame Joshua? What does this tell you about the extent of the prejudice?

ACTIVITIES

1. MOTTO

The dog fight in the market revealed an ugly, cruel side to many of the villagers and was only broken up by Father's timely arrival (pp.121–123). Afterwards, there is another ugly scene where Simon tries to provoke a fight with Father, even spitting on the ground in front of him (pp.123–125). Discuss Father's reaction to Simon. What would have happened if he had not avoided the fight? Father says to Joshua: 'Don't let them get to you, Josh. Not ever.' What do you think of this advice? Make a list of situations in which this advice could prove useful. Have you ever needed it yourself?

2. WISH YOU WERE HERE

Read the opening paragraph on p.93 where the author describes the gleaming cruise ship in the bay. Imagine you are one of the wealthy tourists and have spent the morning sightseeing in Joshua's village. Write a letter or postcard home, describing what you've seen.

3. WRITE THE QUESTION

In school, Joshua is given a test (p.108). Read the answers to the first two questions. Can you write the questions which would elicit those answers? Get into pairs as before and work together. One person writes a list of ten answers then asks the other person to provide the question.

4. TEACHER WISH LIST

Sister Mary's eyebrows shot up comically at Robert's unusual enthusiasm for his Maths lesson (p.113). Imagine you are a weary class teacher writing your journal after a hard day's teaching. What do you wish for? Make a wish list for your class.

5. MOUNTAIN MAN

In this unit, it is becoming increasingly evident that Father is, or used to be, a mountain man. What evidence have you noticed to support this fact? However, on p.118, he denies that he is: 'Well, I'm not,' before adding, 'Not so as to count.' What do you think this means? Discuss.

UNIT 4 DEATH AND CHANGE

Father is suddenly taken ill and has to be helped to bed by Joshua. Later that night, despite Joshua's protests, Father is taken to the hospital where he dies on the operating table. Joshua moves to live at the convent in the orphanage, bringing only the wooden pig and a few belongings with him. He is tormented by feelings of guilt about not having thrown away the carvings. Perhaps that is why Father died. He visits his old home, removes the carvings and throws them into the sea. Later on, however, he returns and takes his father's carving knife. He sharpens it and experiments with some carving. It feels good. He and Millie get to ride in the car with the tourist couple from the cruise ship. They are brought to the hotel for a drink where the couple show Joshua photographs of their home far away. The woman asks Joshua if he would like to come and live with them. The couple visit the convent and, after a short meeting, Joshua agrees to be adopted by Mr and Mrs Nettar.

Read pp.128–167

DISCUSSION POINTS

- Joshua is in a whirlwind of emotions caused by his father's sudden death. Aside from the shock and disbelief he is feeling, what other emotions are going through his mind? Why do you think he feels so guilty in the light of this tragedy?
- On p.137, Joshua packs up his few belongings. Read the paragraphs and discuss the objects he chose to bring to the orphanage. Why do you think he decided to bring Pig? Would Pig not be a sad reminder of his Father's doomed business?
- Throughout the story, Robert has played a large part in Joshua's life. Read the scene pp.144–145 where Joshua throws the carvings back into the sea. What do you think of Robert's role? Read also pp.157–158 where Robert discovers Joshua carving. Is Robert the kind of person who you would like to have as a friend? Discuss.
- Though he is obviously different from the other children, Joshua consistently denies this both to himself and to Robert. Why do you think he does this? Do you think he is right to keep the carving secret? In a small village where he has seen mountain men mistreated and abused, what does Joshua stand to gain by pretending to be like everyone else? What would you do if you were in his situation?
- Discuss Joshua's reasons for accepting the Nettars' offer of adoption. What, in your opinion, are the merits and demerits of such a decision? Another book that deals with the question of adoption is Marita Conlon-McKenna's *A Girl Called Blue* (0-86278-887-0). Are Blue's reasons for wanting to be adopted so very different from Joshua's?

ACTIVITIES

1. SIMILES

A simile compares one thing with another, using the words 'like' or 'as'. On p.135, Robert's mother approaches and her younger children are described as 'bobbing in her wake like ducklings'. What picture does this simile conjure up? On p.149, the car's engine is described as 'purring like a well-fed cat'. See if you can find other similes in this unit. Does this type of language enrich the story?

2. EXCLUSION

On p.145, Catherine deliberately excludes Joshua from her little 'huddle'. Are scenes such as this a familiar sight in school playgrounds? Write a dialogue between Joshua and Catherine for this scene in which he confronts her about her behaviour, rather than running to the dormitory.

3. AGONY AUNT

Joshua's decision to be adopted seems to have been based almost entirely on the thought of his own bedroom, books and a clock. However, he also muses that 'people probably wouldn't know about mountain men' there (p.164). Imagine you are Joshua, write a letter to a problem page, explaining your dilemma and asking for advice. And/Or, write the reply you would give to Joshua.

4. LIFE'S LIKE THAT

Just as Joshua makes the decision to leave the orphanage, things begin to look up. Millie's father takes him out in the boat, Joshua casts off perfectly and he suddenly begins to think of Marius and Vincent as brothers. Perhaps life is not so bad after all? Write Joshua's diary entry, describing the day you spent on the boat.

UNIT 5 ENDINGS AND BEGINNINGS

(Including A Note from the Author)

It is Joshua's last day in the orphanage. He wears shoes for the first time and, also for the first time, begins to have doubts. Joshua is collected and brought off in the car – without Pig. Just as they pass by the hospital, Joshua leaps out of the car and runs away. Too scared to return to the convent, he heads towards the mountains. Eventually, he meets a mountain man, finally admits that his father was one of them, and asks if he can come and live with them. But the man doesn't understand him and points towards the coast. Joshua spends the night alone and wanders, lost and bewildered, up the mountain, before collapsing beneath a tree. The mountain man finds him and, in the dead of night, returns him to Mama Siska in the village.

Read pp.177–192

DISCUSSION POINTS

- When Joshua declares that his father was a mountain man, why does he feel as if 'a weight lifted from him' (p.178)? The mountain man considers him a 'boy from the coast'. Which is Joshua? Is it possible for him to be both?
- As Joshua is helped into bed, his head bumps into Pig, which Marius and Vincent had put there. What does this action tell us about their feelings for Joshua? What other signs have you noticed in this unit which show the affection people have for Joshua?
- When Robert calls Joshua 'mountain man,' he says it gently and with a grin (p.191). Sister Martha then calls him 'our mountain man'. Discuss the meaning behind these words. What does Joshua choose to call himself in the final words of the book? Is this something that he would have been able to do at the start of the story?
- Jan Michael asks 'Wouldn't the world be dull if we were all the same?' (p.192). Discuss with reference to Joshua, and in relation to people of different race, religion or ability we are likely to meet.

ACTIVITIES

1. JOSHUA, THE MOVIE

The author describes Joshua's land so clearly and vividly that you can easily picture the places and almost smell the smells.

Imagine you are a film director, about to shoot a scene from the story. Which scene would you choose? Give your reasons and write a list of instructions to the camera crew, telling them what to film, whether to do a close-up, how long to film etc. Do you think this story would make a good film?

2. IDIOMS

Idioms are exaggerated expressions used in everyday language, eg 'The heavens opened' (p.180). Read the following and explain their meaning: they pulled the wool over my eyes/I smelled a rat/knight in shining armour/we buried the hatchet/he led me up the garden path/facing the music. Can you think of any more?

3. MISSING YOUR WORLD

Jan Michael describes her life in Europe as like 'being dumped into an icy bath in a grey room', until she became used to it. What might Joshua have missed if he had gone to live with the Nettars? Imagine you are sent to live in a faraway place with a different climate and a different language. List the things you would miss – people, food, shops, activities and traditions etc.

4. HEROIC QUALITIES

In many stories, the hero is strong, brave, fearless and not prone to doubt and questions. Explore the notion of heroism and debate the motion: Joshua is too weak and fearful a character to make a good hero.

About the author, Jan Michael



Jan Michael is an English writer who was born on the Yorkshire moors, grew up in the Seychelles and went to school in Wales. She now lives in Amsterdam and works as a literary agent. She has written several books for children.

Just Joshua won the Vlag en Wimpel award in the Netherlands.

Also by Jan Michael: *The Rock Boy*, a book about friendship, loneliness and illegal immigration set on the Mediterranean island of Malta.

'This is a sensitive story built around a pacy plot in a historic location that drips with almost tangible atmosphere.'

Sunday Tribune

'Evocative and haunting.'

Books Ireland

