

Junkyard Dog

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Book Summary

Justin is fascinated with the aged guard dog at the corner store. He names him Smokey and sneaks the dog treats. Smokey belongs to a company that supplies working dogs to local businesses. Justin is thrilled to get a job working for Smokey's company, until he learns about their mistreatment of the animals. When Justin can't shake his suspicion that someone in the company is involved in a rash of thefts, he tries to quit. But Justin knows too much, and his boss won't let him go.

Author Biography

Monique Polak lives in Montreal, Quebec, with her husband, a newspaperman, and daughter Alicia (who was named after *Alice in Wonderland*—the subject of Monique's master's thesis). She spends her days doing her two favorite things: writing and teaching. In addition to being a frequent contributor to *The Gazette*, Montreal's English-language daily newspaper, Monique is the author of several novels for young people, including *Finding Elmo* and *121 Express* from the Orca Currents series. She has taught English and humanities at Marianopolis College in Montreal since 1985. Monique says she gets ideas for her novels from her work as a reporter and teacher.

Connecting to the Text

Character and Novel Study

Use the following ideas as individual or small group novel study exercises:

1. Choose two or three sentences from chapters one, two or three that provide hints about Justin's personality and family life. When reading these early sentences, what can we learn about Justin? Examples could include:

(ch. 1) *There's no way I'd spend two bucks on a carton of milk.*

(ch. 1) *I may not be dressed fancy, in a blue blazer like the prep-school boys, but I don't have cooties.*

(ch. 1) *I reach into the front pocket of my jeans. I wrapped a piece of hamburger in plastic...I knew...the meat was still good. I thought about Smokey straightaway...I wish I had more hamburger.*

(ch. 1) *I want to say bye to Smokey, but I know I can't. So I say so in my head—the way I say most things.*

(ch. 2) *...the bald spots...[have] gotten worse lately.*

(ch. 3) *Loud noises spook me. They remind me of what happens when Dad loses it.*

2. Vince said Justin has “a way with dogs” (ch. 4) and Floyd said, “Think you're the dog whisperer...?” (ch. 10). Find three examples in the novel of Justin interpreting dogs' behavior through their body language or vocalizations. For example, in the convenience store, Justin knows that “if Smokey's baring his fangs, it's because he's on the alert”; Justin seems to understand Smokey. With each example, describe what the dog is doing, and how Justin interprets it. If you have a dog, describe an example of how you interpret your dog's body language and vocalizations.

3. Consider the advice Justin is given by the adults in his life. Choose one of the examples below and describe what was happening for Justin at that time the advice was given. Did he take the advice or go his own way? Use examples from the novel to describe how Justin grew as a person. For example, consider Justin's key realization in chapter 15 when he says, “...for once in my life, I stood up for myself. And for what's right.”

(ch. 4) Floyd told Justin, *“In this business, you don't wanna ask too many questions. It's better to just do as you're told.”*

(ch. 5) Justin's dad's said, *“Let me tell you something, Justin, you can't trust anybody.”*

(ch. 9) Vince told Justin, *“...you get to my age, Justin, and you learn to live with things. Specially if you need your paycheck the way me and my old lady do.”*

(ch. 11) Vince also told Justin, *“You gotta be tough to make it in this world.”*

(ch. 11) When Justin asked Mrs. MacAlear, *“Don't you have to learn to live with things?” she replied, “Not when it comes to the things you can't live with.”*

Compare and Contrast

Encourage students to keep a list of details from *Junkyard Dog* that illustrate the similarities between Justin and Smokey. Some examples to get students started in their lists:

- Justin and Smokey are both neglected by those who should be caring for them.
- Neither Justin nor Smokey has a healthy diet or home life. While he's in the convenience store, Smokey only eats kibble. Justin can only afford macaroni and cheese for himself and his dad.
- Both Justin and Smokey are “spooked” by loud noises. They also both know when people are “being mean and...mocking” (ch. 3).
- Neither Justin nor Smokey knows how to play games. Smokey “never learned how” (ch. 13), and Justin was “not used to playing board games” (ch. 16).
- Then lead a group discussion where students share their findings. Topics could include:
 - ◆ Why does the author present these similarities in the story?
 - ◆ What do these similarities tell us about the characters and their journeys?
 - ◆ How do they help us understand the characters and the themes of this novel?

Building Vocabulary

The following words and terms are used in *Junkyard Dog* in the context of Justin's experiences with the dogs. Ask students to reflect on Justin's experiences with the dogs by writing a descriptive paragraph or journal entry. To get students started, read the questions below aloud or write them on the board. Encourage students to use five or more of the words and terms below in their responses.

- Why was Justin kind to dogs when so many people around him weren't? What made Justin different?
- Describe the “business” Vince, Floyd and Terence are in. How do they make their profit? How are the dogs involved?
- Imagine you are Justin and you are touring the SPCA with Glenda, or listening to Vince describe Floyd's treatment of the dogs. How did Justin react to these experiences?

- At one point, Justin said, “I’m trying to decide whether I like working—or whether I just like making money” (ch. 7). What did he decide? What happened that influenced his decision?

abandoned dogs	exercise	muzzle	strange growl
adoption	gesturing	nervous	teeth
attack	groceries	pant	trick
bares his teeth	guard dog	patrol	tug toy
collar	haunches	puppy mills	understand
confused	ID tag	rabies shot	unspayed
convenience	inspect	robbers	vet
crates	junkyard dogs	scrawny-looking	vicious
dangerous	kibble	senior dogs	warning growl
debarked	leash	shuffling	well fed
dog whisperer	lips curl	silence	well groomed
domesticated	matted	spayed	whimpering
euthanize	monster	SPCA	wire fence

Connecting to the Curriculum

Report Writing Topics

1. Justin has a lot to deal with. His mom left, and his dad is an alcoholic who does not work and “loses it” a lot. Justin is responsible for earning money to buy food for himself and his dad. He also prepares their meals and cleans the apartment. He doesn’t appear to have any time to just “be a kid.” Justin says, “Dad has never laid a hand on me. But he’s done stuff that’s almost as bad” (ch. 5). If you were a friend of Justin’s, what could you do to help him out? What advice would you give him?
2. A number of dog breeds are mentioned in *Junkyard Dog*. Students may work independently or in pairs to research a breed of dog and prepare a report which answers the following questions. Encourage students to include pictures or illustrations.
 - What is the color, size and weight of the dog?
 - Are any special skills particular to this breed? (Retrieving or protecting; strong swimmer, etc.)
 - Does this breed have any special needs?
 - What kind of owner lifestyle would best suit this breed?
 - Write one interesting fact about this breed (its history, special needs, parentage, etc.).

3. There are a number of examples of animal abuse or neglect in the novel, including people abandoning dogs and the practice of “debarking.” Research and describe an example of cruelty or neglect of domestic animals. Include pictures or illustrations, and bring examples from the novel into your reports.
- Describe the example you’ve chosen. Who is exploiting or abusing the animal, and why?
 - What can be done to save and/or protect the animals and prevent further abuse or exploitation?
 - Has your research changed (or deepened) how you feel about pet ownership? If so, how?

Option: Ask (or have students ask) a volunteer or worker at your local Humane Society or Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (SPCA) to visit your class and give a presentation on pet care and responsible pet ownership, or arrange a class field trip to visit their facility. You may wish to let the representative who will be speaking know that the class has been reading about animal exploitation, so they can be prepared to answer related questions or distribute literature.

4. Justin collects bottles to earn money to buy food for himself and his father. He says, “...you’d be surprised how many people put refundable bottles in their blue boxes” (ch. 1). Ask students to research and prepare a report on recycling in your community (or school), answering the questions below.
- Write a definition and provide examples for the terms *reduce*, *reuse* and *recycle*. Why are they important? Why are these terms always in this order? Describe the levels of the “waste hierarchy.”
 - Give an example of how you can reuse the following items before recycling them: aluminum can, plastic shopping bag, plastic margarine tub, glass soda bottle, cardboard shoe box and lid, and another item of your choice.
 - Choose three items in your home or school that can’t be recycled through a blue box recycling program. For each, think of ways they can be reused. For example, an old blanket could be given to an animal shelter, and vegetable scraps can be made into compost.

Option: Organize a class swap meet so that students can exchange items they no longer want. Be sure to stress that the intention is to encourage reusing items (rather than throwing them away). As a class, collect a dollar for each item that is exchanged, then use the whole amount to make a donation to a local animal shelter.

5. The book that Mrs. MacAlear gave Justin describes dogs as “a subspecies of the gray wolf...dogs are believed to be the first species domesticated by humans...dogs have been around for 15,000 years” (ch. 7). Research the history of the domestication of dogs and the “garbage theory” described on page 48, and comment on Justin’s conclusion that “there is something smart about getting along with people.”
6. A key theme in the novel is the treatment of dogs. Justin struggles with the idea of working dogs. Is it wrong to make dogs work, or is it okay as long as they’re treated right? What does history—those “first gray wolves” of 15,000 years ago—teach us about dogs’ and humans’ “mutually beneficial arrangement”? How do you feel about working dogs?

Art

Ask students to choose a scene or description from *Junkyard Dog* that they’d like to explore artistically using collage, drawing, painting, print or another medium of their choice. They may wish to include a quotation from the novel as a caption in their project. Ask students to write a paragraph connecting their project to the novel. Ideas for exploration and consideration include:

- (ch. 4) *When I peer through the gates, I see two liver-colored Dobermans, a square-jawed pit bull and a big shaggy black mutt. The mutt charges against the bars of his crate and bares his teeth at me.*
- (ch. 4) *Since Smokey bit me, I’ve been trying to imagine what it would feel like to be a dog who couldn’t bark.*
- (ch. 4) *Floyd turns to face me. He has a surprisingly thin face for a guy with such a big belly. A thin pale scar runs down from his forehead to the top of his nose...I feel his eyes on me...*
- (ch. 5) *...Dad hurls the beer bottle against the wall. My whole body tenses. The bottle doesn’t shatter, but the cap flies off. Beer gushes everywhere, down the wall and onto the floor, making a sticky brown trail. The bottle has left an ugly gash in the plaster.*
- (ch. 8) *...I push open the door, I see both sides of the room are lined with cages. (ch. 10) Most people want puppies—not aging German shepherds who walk funny.*
- (ch. 10) *I’ll never forget the look in Smokey’s eyes. They say I trust you.*

Science, Biology

Justin has a disease called *alopecia areata*, which results in the loss of hair in patches on his scalp. He wears a cap to cover it. He says, “The nurse thinks it’s stress-related” (ch. 12). Ask students to research this disease, answering three or more of the following questions:

- There are three types of human alopecia areata. What are they? Briefly describe each, including their symptoms.
- Is there a known cause for alopecia areata?
- Who can be affected by alopecia areata? Are there any groups that are more susceptible than others?
- Is alopecia areata contagious? Can you ‘catch’ it from someone else?
- What are some of the challenges someone with this disease could face?
- Justin’s dad blames Justin’s mom for Justin’s disease: “That hair business is all her fault. Imagine a woman abandoning her kid like that...It’s no wonder you’re going bald” (ch. 2). Based on what you have learned about this disease, do you think Justin’s mom could be to blame?
- Do you think Justin copes well? How do others (the kids in his class, his teachers, his dad, Amanda) respond to his disease? Provide examples from *Junkyard Dog* to support your answers. If Justin were in your class, how would you respond?

Connecting to Other Books in the Currents Series

If students are interested in stories about animals, they may wish to explore three other novels in the Currents series:

Dog Walker by Karen Spafford-Fitz

Turk needs cash but he doesn't like working, so getting a job is out of the question. Then he makes a discovery: girls love dogs. Turk starts a dog-walking business. In an attempt to impress dog-loving Carly, Turk brags about his business in front of the school tough guy, Chuck. When Chuck learns the true nature of Turk's business and wants in on the action, Turk worries that he will lose his business and Carly's respect.

Finding Elmo by Monique Polak

Fifteen-year-old Tim loves his job at his dad's pet store, partly because he gets to spend time with his best friend, a black cockatoo named Elmo. To make extra money, his father rents out the store's exotic birds for parties. When Elmo is stolen at one of the parties, the police are unconcerned about the theft, so Tim and his new friend, Sapna, set out to find Elmo. They discover that Elmo is more valuable than they'd ever imagined.

Horse Power by Ann Walsh

Callie and her mom head into ranch country to camp—bloodthirsty mosquitoes, stinky outhouses and all—and participate in a protest to save a rural school. Callie hates camping and wants nothing to do with the protest. To make matters worse, Callie's only possible ally, her cousin Del, is mad at her. The last time Callie visited, she was thrown from Del's horse, Radish, and now Del's parents want to sell Radish. Callie wants to help her cousin, but she's terrified of the horse. Callie is not going to be allowed to go home until both the horse and the school are saved.

Web Resources**www.naaf.org**

The National Alopecia Areata Foundation is dedicated to research to finding a cure or acceptable treatment for alopecia areata, supporting those with the disease and educating the public. See *School Pack* under *Popular NAAF Materials* for educational resources, for lesson plans, school-wide awareness projects and a list of recommended reading (books to promote self-esteem and understanding). There is also a free children's video available for ordering by parents, teachers, school nurses, etc.

www.teachkind.org

According to their website, TeachKind is a humane education resource for teachers, administrators, and librarians who want to help students become kinder, more compassionate individuals. The site has free lesson plans or one can order free books, posters, leaflets, stickers, videos and other resources.

www.epa.gov

According to their website, the US Environmental Protection Agency's mission is to protect human health and the environment. Since 1970, the EPA has been working for a cleaner, healthier environment for the American people. See **www.epa.gov/epa-home/students.htm** for educator resources. The Teaching Center has lesson plans, ideas to get students involved and information on healthy schools.

www.pawsacrossamerica.com/interpret.html

Paws Across America. site has a list, including illustrations, of dog attitudes (aggressive, playful, submissive, etc.) and the body language and vocalizations to expect with each.