



Hate Mail

Monique Polak

Reading level: 3.5

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Book Summary

Jordie's cousin Todd has moved back to Montreal and is attending Jordie's high school. Todd has autism and requires an aide. Todd has not been welcomed in the school. He's known as a freak, and even other parents seem to resent Todd's special needs. Jordie does everything he can to distance himself from his cousin, fearful of what his friends might think. When he learns that Todd's whole family is buckling under the pressure of a hateful letter, Jordie starts to question his own behavior. Todd's resources are unique, and he soon finds a way to prove his worth to his peers and to the community at large. Inspired by real-life events, *Hate Mail* examines the transformative power of speaking out against prejudice.

Author Biography

Monique Polak has written many novels for young adults, including her historical novel, *What World Is Left*, which won the 2009 Quebec Writers' Federation Prize for Children's and Young Adult Literature. In addition to writing award-winning books for youth, Monique teaches English and Humanities at Marianopolis College in Montreal, Quebec, and also works as a freelance journalist. Monique lives in Montreal with her husband, a newspaper man.

Connecting to the Text

Theme and Character Study

To engage students with the characters and themes in *Hate Mail*, use the following as group discussion topics, individual novel study or paragraph-writing exercises:

- In chapter 3, Mr. Delisle tells the assembly he doesn't want students to just tolerate each other. He asks students to "aim for something better. Acceptance."
 - Jordie avoids Todd at school and pretends Todd isn't his cousin. He also doesn't defend Todd, even when other people call Todd a freak. Why do you think Jordie does this? Is Jordie tolerating Todd, accepting Todd, or something else?
 - Jordie doesn't always do the right thing but he sometimes wants to, especially when Samantha is around (ch. 9). Do you think Samantha's behavior demonstrates tolerance or acceptance of Todd? Give examples.
 - When does Jordie begin to truly accept Todd, and how can you tell? Is it gradual or all at once? What behaviors does he demonstrate when he is not accepting Todd, and when he is? Be specific.

Prompt: Students can compare Jordie's behaviors in these scenes: he reads the letter on his mom's computer (ch. 5); he discovers Todd is trapped in the bathroom stall (ch. 6); he has to watch over Todd during Saturday detention (ch. 9); he has to care for Todd when Todd's father goes to the hospital (ch. 11); and, he volunteers to watch Todd on the field trip (ch. 12).
- Mr. Delisle also talks about bullying at the assembly. He says, "Each one of us is different... We all have different abilities, and we face different challenges."
 - Can you relate Mr. Delisle's words to Todd's experiences at Riverview High School? Was Todd bullied, and how? Name one obvious example and one that is more subtle.
 - The kids initially think of Todd as different, but they come to recognize his unique abilities and challenges. Imagine if Todd hadn't saved the kids on the field trip. How might they have seen his abilities and challenges?
 - If you were Todd's cousin, what would it be like for you if Todd started attending your school? Would you behave differently than Jordie did?

The Writer's Craft

- Writers choose words carefully and intentionally to evoke feelings and responses in readers. Ask students to consider the following examples from *Hate Mail*. What power and meaning do the words bring to each scene? Consider the speaker and audience in each example.
 - In early chapters, before we learn that Todd has autism, Jordie uses these words to describe Todd: *shouting, arms flapping, labored breathing, obsessed, jabbering, going ballistic, bouncing*. What do these words suggest to you?
 - In chapter 5, Jordie reads the letter on his mom's computer: *lunatic, freak, locked up, zoo*. What do these words say about the speaker's intentions?
 - In chapter 6, Jordie uses these words to describe the scene where Todd is in the

bathroom stall being teased by Tyrone: *trapped, banging like crazy, bangs harder, freaking out, crawl out, high-pitched nervous howl, Let him out!*

- Everyone is in costume at the Halloween dance. Ask students to discuss how a character's costume might reflect their personality and outlook on life. For example, Darlene is a unicorn: "It's her way of saying it's good to be different" (ch. 6). Encourage students to suggest a costume that reflects their own personality and outlook on life. You may wish to use this opportunity to discuss symbolism.

Connecting to the Curriculum

Social Studies

- Ask students to imagine that they will be participating in a rally to raise awareness about autism. One of the placards at the rally says, *Autism is not a Disease; Ignorance is*. Invite students to research autism and create an eye catching brochure, flyer or poster to educate others. Distribute these in the school by placing them in the library, lunch room or a place that has high visibility.

Option: Provide students with the opportunity to interview (individually or as a group) a special education teacher or assistant who works with students with autism.

- Monique Polak said that *Hate Mail* is based on real events. Ask students to watch the following video: <http://globalnews.ca/news/789411/oshawa-family-receives-hate-filled-letter-directed-at-autistic-son>. (Use your discretion—this content may be not suitable for all classrooms.) Ask students to reflect on this. At the end of the video, Max's mother has words to say to the person who wrote the letter. What would you have said if you were Max's mother or brother?

Drama

- Jordie's parents think he cares too much about what other people think. Jordie's Dad says, "When you're a teenager, you put a lot of stock in what other kids think of you. Too much stock" (ch. 7). Ask students to discuss this comment in pairs or triads. Is what Jordie's Dad said true? Invite students to explore this theme and the characters' unique points of view. Ideas could be a mock trial, a talk show or a news reporter interview. If students choose an interview format, encourage them to interview Jordie and his Dad. How might their points of view be different? What could each learn about the other's perspectives?
- Jordie's thoughts come from his experiences and his own unique perceptions. As he walks into Saturday detention, he says to himself, "What would it be like, I wonder, to have a normal cousin? Someone to hang out with, play video games, listen to music, talk about girls. Sometimes, it suck is to be me" (ch. 8). Ask students to act out the following through monologue or other dramatic expressions. Consider: For this character, what do they most want and need to be comfortable, content, happy?
 - Imagine what Todd might be thinking as he walks into detention—coming from his unique experiences and perspective. How might he describe what he doesn't like about his life? *What would it be like, I wonder, to have...*

- ◆ Aunt Anna has many challenges to face. Her son is being bullied by students and parents at his new school, and her husband is suffering from a mental illness. If she were to describe what she wishes were different about her life, what would she say?

Art

1. Ask students: "For you, what is the difference between tolerance and acceptance?" Invite students to creatively illustrate these two concepts. Students may wish to utilize scenes from the novel or examples from their own experiences or from history or popular culture. Questions to consider:
 - ◆ *Of the two behaviors, which is truly kinder?*
 - ◆ *Are there times when one is easier than the other?*
 - ◆ *If one is tolerating another, how might that feel for the person being tolerated? If one is accepting another, how might that feel for the person being accepted?*
2. Invite students to create posters that illustrate themes from the novel, such as bullying, tolerance, acceptance, prejudice or family bonds. Students may wish to include a passage from the novel that resonates with them or illustrates the theme. For example,
 - ◆ *I know I should go over and help.* (Jordie in chapter 1)
 - ◆ *We're not just going to tolerate each other. We're going to aim for something better.* *Acceptance.* (Mr. Deslisle in chapter 3)
 - ◆ *I could say something.* (Jordie in chapter 4)
 - ◆ *Sometimes it's better to stand up. Even if it's hard!* (Aunt Anna in chapter 10)
 - ◆ *People are afraid of what they don't know.* (Todd's Mom in chapter 15)
 - ◆ *If you really want to help people like me, here's what you can do. You can treat us like we're human beings.* (Todd, through Jordie, in chapter 17)

Connecting to the World

1. Todd has autism, a wide spectrum neurodevelopmental disorder. As a research project, ask students to learn about some of the characteristics of autism while making connections to the novel. Some examples are below.
 - ◆ People with autism can have difficulty communicating with others. Todd is unable to read other people's feelings. He doesn't say hi or make eye contact, and he hates when people touch him. Jordie "can't have a normal conversation" with Todd.
 - ◆ Repetitive behaviors and movements, called stimming, are also characteristic of autism. Sometimes Todd paces or bounces and he also "scratches his arms over and over" (ch. 3). As Jordie noted, "Doing things in a certain order makes him feel better" (ch. 9).
 - ◆ What would you suggest to a person who doesn't understand autism, if they were meeting a person with autism for the first time? What advice would you give them?

Prompt: What does Jordie do in chapter 17 to make sure Todd is comfortable during the rally, and what does he tell others?

2. In chapters 8 and 9, Mr. Delisle takes the kids serving Saturday detention outside to clean up the school yard. Tyrone asks if this is illegal child labor. In many countries, kids from kindergarten through high school are responsible for cleaning the school, not janitors. Kids can spend up to an hour a day cleaning the halls, classrooms, lunchrooms and the washrooms. Ask students to reflect on this. What would change for them if they did this in their school?
 - ◆ If you and your classmates had to clean the classroom, halls and washrooms every day, would there be less graffiti or littering in your school?
 - ◆ If you had to do this from kindergarten through high school, would you think of your school differently than you do now?
 - ◆ Mr. Delisle said cleaning up the schoolyard would “contribute to youngsters’ education, health, physical and moral development” (ch. 8). How might each be true, or not?
3. Jordie’s Uncle Fred is making a documentary film about people arriving at airports. He’s interested in filming “families meeting up after long absences” (ch. 2). Some people have made similar short videos which can be found on YouTube. What feelings do these sounds and images inspire in us?

Connecting to the Students—Ideas for Discussion

A powerful theme in the novel is caring too much about what others think. Jordie does this when he avoids Todd and pretends they’re not related.

1. In your experience, is this true for many teenagers? Do they care “too much” about what others think of them? What does “too much” mean, and what behaviors demonstrate this? Is it okay to care what others think sometimes but not okay other times?
2. Does our capacity to care too much change from context to context? Is it different depending on the size of the group, who we are with, and if we’re physically together or not? For example, compare a physical classroom to a virtual or on-line classroom; a school gym with classmates to a mountain hike with close friends; Saturday at the mall with your friends and Saturday at the mall with a parent.