



## Loser

By Jerry Spinelli  
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### Introduction:

*Loser* is a tender story about Donald Zinkoff, a young character who demonstrates great self-acceptance and who is not afraid to fail. With the encouragement of his family, he learns to approach life with a positive spirit and to enjoy all that it has to offer. Donald faces the familiar challenges of elementary-aged children—disagreeable teachers, peer pressure, social conformity, and competition. By maintaining a strong sense of self through his experiences, Donald Zinkoff teaches us all about important and unforgettable lessons of self esteem and happiness.

### Questions For Discussion:

1. Donald Zinkoff's mother gives him a silver star after his first day of elementary school and says "One thousand congratulations to you." Why? What are some other examples of how Donald's family demonstrates their love to him? Give examples of how their support helps Donald to develop his self-esteem.
2. Donald admires his teacher Miss Meeks because she calls her students "young citizens" and gives a famous opening day speech to her first grade class. Reread her speech on pages 13–17. What are Miss Meeks's attitudes about school and learning? How does Donald make his own learning adventurous, both at school and at home?
3. Why do you think "Take Your Kid To Work Day" was such a meaningful day for Donald? How does Mr. Zinkoff prepare to make the day special for Donald? What are the most important things that Donald learns about his father's work when they spend the day together?
4. Donald experiences being a winner when every player on his Titans soccer team receives a trophy. While he is very pleased with the trophy, he decides to give it to his friend Andrew. How do you think Donald feels after giving his trophy away? What is special about Donald's behavior as a winner, and how does it challenge the idea that winning is best?
5. In school, Donald's classmates notice and comment upon his unique behavior and brand him a "loser." How does Donald respond when he is teased? Our experiences are affected by the meaning we give to them. Think about an example in your own life when you refused to accept a negative comment from another. (If you cannot think of an example, try it out sometime!)
6. In the fifth grade, Donald's classmates discourage him from participating in Field Day. How does spending the day with the old woman on Willow Street help him to feel better about this rejection? Name other examples from LOSER where Donald distracts himself from a negative situation. Do you think this behavior makes him more or less happy? Why?
7. In the final scene Donald wants to play ball with a group of his classmates, and is the last kid to be chosen for a team. On page 217, his classmate Bonce thinks "... [this kid] doesn't know that...he's only going to be ignored. Or embarrassed. Or hurt. He doesn't know that he's a klutz. Doesn't know he's out of his league. Doesn't know a leftover, doesn't stare down a chooser. Doesn't know he's supposed to look down at his shoes or up at the sky and wish he could disappear, because that's what he is, a leftover, the last kid left." Why do you think Bonce eventually invites Zinkoff to play on his team?

### About The Author:

Jerry Spinelli is the author of *Maniac Magee*, winner of the 1991 Newbery Medal, and *Wringer*, named a Newbery Honor Book in 1998. He went to Gettysburg College and Johns Hopkins University. He and his wife, Eileen, also a writer of children's books, have seven children. Jerry Spinelli's books are funny and true to life. Whenever students ask him where he gets his ideas, he replies, "From you. You're the funny ones." Spinelli enjoys writing about the adventure in the typical experiences of children and young people.