



Wringer

By Jerry Spinelli
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About the Author

Jerry Spinelli is the author of the 1991 Newbery Medal-winning book *Maniac Magee*. His novels are regularly praised for their humor, poignancy, and realistic characters -- many of whom are drawn from his real-life experience as a father of six children. Jerry lives with his wife, Eileen, who is also a writer, in West Chester, Pennsylvania. He is a graduate of Gettysburg College.

About the Book

Not all birthdays are welcome. In Palmer's home town of Waymer, a boy's tenth birthday is more than just another birthday -- it is considered to be the biggest and most honorable day of his life. When a boy turns ten he has finally earned his place as a wringer at the town's annual Pigeon Day. On this day 5,000 pigeons are released into the sky only to be shot down by the town's men. It is the job of wringers to retrieve dead birds from the field and to wring the wounded birds' necks.

Although all proceeds from Pigeon Day go to pay for the town's park maintenance and he is assured that wringers "humanely" put the dying pigeons to death, Palmer cannot shake the dreadful feeling that he does not want to be a wringer. Unfortunately, "this not wanting to be a wringer" conflicts directly with the expectations of his clique of friends -- for them, being a wringer is the highest honor, an honor only a wimp would refuse. Not to be a wringer would mean going against his friends, his family, and the town and risking ostracism.

Palmer's life becomes further complicated when he befriends Nipper, a pigeon who likes to roost in his closet and sit atop his head. Now Palmer has a very important reason to strike out against his friends and the town's traditional Pigeon Day. In this gripping and thought-provoking novel, Spinelli tells of one boy's courage to overcome peer pressure and unquestioned tradition -- to stand up for what he believes.

Questions for Discussion

1. "This thing, this not wanting to be a wringer, did it ever knock him from his bike? Untie his sneaker lace? Call him a name? Stand up and fight?" (page 4). Although there is no physical reason why Palmer should refuse to become a wringer, and even though most ten-year-olds in his town consider it an honor, he abhors this tradition. Identify and discuss the reasons why Palmer does not want to be a wringer.
2. Jerry Spinelli uses powerful descriptive images to evoke the scenes of Pigeon Day, everything from the bright red barbecue sauce on a spectator's lips to the smell of gunsmoke. What does this recurring image of gunsmoke tell us about Palmer's anxiety? What are some other memorable images in the novel and what do they signify?
3. Do you believe Palmer's father when he tells Palmer "you can thank a pigeon for the swings at the playground" (page 57). Is Pigeon Day and the shooting of 5,000 birds a justified event simply because the proceeds go to pay for the park's maintenance? Can you name any other events where animals are injured or killed for sport and entertainment? Do you feel these events are justified?
4. Consider Palmer's relationship with Beans, Mutto, and Henry. How does his relationship with them change over the course of the novel? In what ways is Henry different from the rest of the gang? Why does Palmer fear becoming more like Henry?
5. Dorothy claims that Palmer is a hero in his attempt to save Nipper from the guys and Panther the cat. Discuss the term heroism. What qualities make a hero? Do you feel Palmer is a hero? Palmer's father? Dorothy?
6. Why does Palmer feel compelled to ignore Dorothy or tease her in public when privately he holds much respect for her? Can you find any similarities between Palmer's friendship with Dorothy and his friendship with Nipper?
7. Describe how Palmer must feel when he discovers that his father was a champion pigeon sharpshooter. Does this discovery present a new pressure on him to become a wringer?
8. Palmer eventually defies the gang by shouting: "No nothing! No Treatment! No wringer! No Shots! My name is Palmer!" (p. 179). By refusing to take the abusive Treatment, refusing to be a wringer, and finally, by reclaiming his own name -- the name the guys used to pick on -- what has Palmer proved? How has he broken away from the group?
9. Compare the different ways in which Palmer and Beans treat animals. Do you think that Beans respects animals? How about Palmer?
10. Why does Palmer risk his reputation to befriend and care for Nipper? Discuss this question in the context of the following passage: "He thought of the pigeon flying over the snow-covered land, and he felt bad ... He thought about somebody else feeding the pigeon, and he felt jealous. Then he felt nervous, realizing he was thinking of it as his pigeon, and what a dangerous thought that could be around here" (page 79).
11. How does violence play a role in this story? Can you explain why anyone who receives Farquar's abusive and infamous "Treatment" garners so much respect from the community and why the shooting of pigeons marks a time for celebration? What do you feel Spinelli is trying to show his readers about the nature of violence in society?