

Music, Message, and Merriment: The World of Teacher and Author Jordan Sonnenblick

Dr. Alexa Sandmann, Kent State University, asandman@kent.edu
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In Advisory, decide to read aloud: *Drums, Girls and Dangerous Pie* by Jordan Sonnenblick, Scholastic, 2006.

Before beginning, ask students to respond to this journal prompt:
“The most annoying thing in the world is ...” (p. 1). Afterwards, in pairs, small groups, or with the whole class, ask for volunteers to share their responses.

Then, have a discussion with students, asking them to make predictions about this novel. Particularly, ask them for the recipe for “dangerous pie.” Just before beginning to read aloud, explain that the opening chapter is the main character’s response to the journal prompt to which they just responded ☺

Finish reading aloud the novel, as time permits. As students listen, ask them to keep paper and pen handy to jot down questions and comments.

Other ideas that might be completed in Advisory—or as options in various content areas:

Journal prompts (to which the character Steve is asked to respond):

- a) “Should foreign languages be taught in middle school?” (p. 27)
- b) “Discuss your favorite character in *Huckleberry Finn*.” (p. 39)
- c) “Should our school have uniforms?” (p. 57)
- d) “Pick any character in Mark Twain’s works and explain how he or she is changed by his or her experiences.” (p. 136)
- e) “If you could pick one word in the English language to describe the universe, what would it be? Why?” (p. 196)

Journal prompts (inspired by the novel):

- a) If you were to “throw off the weight of this particular day,” what day would that be? Describe a day from your past (or one you imagine in your future) which you would like to erase. (p. 13)
- b) “I remember when I was eight” (p. 37)
- c) “It made a statement.” What clothing of yours makes a statement about you? (p. 51) Describe what it actually looks like, as well as the statement it makes.
- d) “If I could say anything I wanted to, to anyone in the world right now, I would be all over _____ (name of person).” (p. 57) Decide who you would talk with, and write what you would say.

- e) Reread and then analyze Steven’s journal entry on pages 57-60. What is Steve *really* saying? Was this an effective way for him to “say” it? Why or why not?
- f) Steve notices similarities between *dodgeball* and *dances* and calls them the “two Ds of my middle school nightmares.” (p. 95) Write your own comparison of some kind, “the two ___s of my _____ nightmares.”
- g) Steve decides that the “old rules no longer apply.” Can you think of a time in your life when you would say that the “old rules” needed to be replaced? Describe what happened and what the “new rules” were. (p. 171)
- h) Mrs. Galley encourages Steve to “try working on the things you CAN change.” (p. 184) Is this solid advice? Why or why not?
- i) Matt Medic keeps Jeffrey brave. (p. 221) What keeps you brave?
- j) *Before* reading past page 251—predict: Will Steve’s Dad attend the concert? Why or why not?

Music Connections:

Choose one of the following musical topics, either an artist, a specific piece of music, a kind of music, or a kind of instrument, and do some research on it. Then, figure out a way to share what you learned with your classmates, connecting it with *Drums, Girls and Dangerous Pie*. Why did Sonnenblich include these references?

- a) Dave Matthews Band, especially Carter Beauford (p. 6)
- b) Beethoven (p. 8)
- c) Thelonious Monk (p. 8)
- d) Brian Setzer and “Jump, Jive and Wail” (p. 9)
- e) “In the Mood” (p. 12)
- f) Kinds of drum rolls (p. 13/14)
- g) Latin rhythm (p. 29)
- h) Dizzy Gillespie (p. 31)
- i) “Cubana Be, Cubana Bop” (p. 32)
- j) Conga drums (p. 32)
- k) “Barney Miller” theme song (p. 60)
- l) “Manteca” by Dizzy Gillespie (p. 60)
- m) Chopin (p. 84)
- n) “Take Five” by Dave Brubeck (p. 85)
- o) Led Zeppelin (p. 109)
- p) “Hey, Jude” and “Revolution” by the Beatles (p. 148)
- q) “Satin Doll” (p. 192)

Math Connections:

- a) Consider the “Tic Tac” problem that Steve creates for himself on page 25. What is the answer? Ask a friend to figure out the answer, too. Are your answers the same? If not, ask another friend and then come to consensus as to the correct answer. Then, each of you create a similar problem for your classmates to complete, including the solution.

- b) Design a benefit event for someone in your school. Like Annette and Renee do, create lists of both income, as well as expense items. Figure out how much income the event would actually generate for the beneficiary. (p. 209-210)
- c) Create word problems that provide both the problems and the answers to Steve's rantings about 1) light bulbs and 2) the snack line (p. 239).
- d) The financial consequences of serious illnesses can devastate a family's fiscal well-being. What can you find out about the average cost of cancer treatment, with and without insurance? Relate this to typical salaries. Conclusions?

Health Connections:

Research one of the following topics, either individually, with a partner, or a small group. Then, share your findings with your classmates.

- a) Leukemia
 - 1) What is ALL? (p. 75)
 - a. Describe it. Who normally gets it?
 - b. What is the prognosis?
 - 2) What are the possible ways of treating it?
 - a. Chemotherapy (69)
 - b. bone marrow aspiration (74)
 - c. How else?
- b) Coping with significant illness
 - 1) As the patient, what are some ways to cope with serious illnesses, like leukemia, heart disease, or diabetes?
 - 2) As a family member of someone with a serious illness, what are some ways to cope with his or her health challenges?
 - 3) As a friend of someone with a serious illness, what are some things that can be done to support him/her/the family during this difficult time?
- c) Stages of illness/grief/loss—what are the stages? Do you see evidence of these stages within the text? denial (64) bargaining (79) anger (132) depression (150) acceptance (p. 161) What follows the stages? Why is it the most important “phase”?
- d) Humor and illness—what is the role of humor in medicine? What do research studies say it is? What examples can you find in the text?
- e) Steve mentions scurvy (p. 139), goiter (p. 139), and leprosy (p. 148). What are these diseases? Who normally gets them? Are they curable? How?

Reading/Language Arts Connections:

Possible mini-lessons—

- a) Conventions
 - 1) Purpose of capital letters?—p. 18
 - 2) Purpose of italic print?—(for dialogue)
- b) Irony—when Steve is “relieved” his brother has leukemia (p. 36)

- when Steve realizes that Renee knows he is alive—and wishes he were dead (p. 130)
- highlight of Steve's year is ruined by an ear infection (p. 263)
- c) Voice—Steve takes on the voice of a “sports commentator” to make Jeffrey laugh when people bring food and good wishes during Jeffrey's recovery. What words/phrases does Steve use to sound like a commentator? (p. 88-89)
- d) Style—“Take me” is both the chapter title ... and the final two words of the chapter (p. 80 & 97) Why is this a successful technique?
- e) Language—
 - 1) Plentiful examples of “showing versus telling” writing, such as what Jeffrey's life in the hospital is like (p. 66-69) Details!
 - 2) Similes—How do these comparisons help the reader understand the situations? “our ride to the hospital was like the Indy 500” (p. 99) or “The doctor in charge was barking orders like an army drill sergeant” (p. 99)
 - 3) Metaphors—“Annette was the locomotive” (p. 114).
 - 4) Medical lexicon—Steve says it sounds like his mother and brother are “clued in to this secret language,” the terminology of cancer and the hospital. Ask students to find examples of medical terminology and to figure out why Sonnenblich would use these largely unfamiliar terms with readers.

Discussion:

- a) For Steve, what is the hardest time of Jeffrey's illness?
- b) Which parent had a more difficult time coping with Jeffrey's illness? Why do you think that?
- c) Why does Steve shave his head? Is it a good idea or not?
- d) When does Steve seem to put into action the idea of “changing the things he can change”?
- e) Write a journal entry as if you were Steve, reflecting on graduation and the previous year.
- f) What is the message of this novel?
- g) Did you like the novel? Why or why not?

Concluding activities:

- a) Have “moatmeal” in Jeffrey's honor, while listening to Dizzy Gillespie or another jazz legend.
- b) As a class, design a service project and complete it—even if it doesn't generate revenue.
- c) To continue to be inspired as to the personal and global reasons to *choose* to complete a service project (not be *required* to), read the fabulous *Notes from a Midnight Driver* by Jordan Sonnenblich (Scholastic, 2006).
- d) For another great middle school novel, read Sonnenblich's newest, *Zen and the Art of Faking It!*