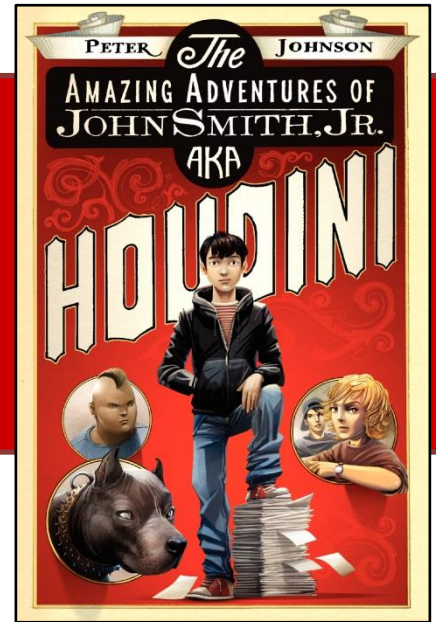


THE AMAZING ADVENTURES OF JOHN SMITH, JR. AKA HOUDINI

BY PETER JOHNSON

DISCUSSION GUIDE



ABOUT THE BOOK

After a famous author visits his middle school, John Smith Jr., nicknamed Houdini, writes a book about his adventures with his two friends, Lucky and Jorge. They battle with a local bully, ironically called Angel, while also dealing with Old Man Jackson, a one-armed Vietnam veteran, and his ornery, one-eyed pit bull, Da Nang. Meanwhile, Houdini's father might lose his job, and his brother, Franklin, returns home after being wounded in Iraq. To try to make sense of all these events, Houdini creates a number of lists—one on how to write a novel. In the end, he realizes no list can prepare him for his ultimate realization: That writing makes him look at himself and others differently, and that after writing his book, he will never be the same person again.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

(Note: From this point on, the narrator, John Smith, Jr., will be called Houdini. The phrase “the real Houdini” refers to the escape artist Harry Houdini.)

1. Why does Houdini hate his real name? What does he compare it to, and what do all of these comparisons have in common? Names are important in this book. What is ironic about the names Angel and Lucky? CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL. 4.3; 4-8.4; 5.6; 6.6; 8.3.
2. The real Houdini said, “Genius is repetition” (page 3). How does the narrator interpret this statement? How does his interpretation help him to be successful in life? The narrator is fascinated with the real Houdini, and they share certain qualities (page 57). What famous person has influenced you? Explain why you respect that person. CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL. 5.2; 6.2; 8.3; 4-8.4.
3. Mr. Peterson, the visiting writer, says, “Your characters change you. They get into your blood” (page 10). How can fictional characters, who aren't even real people, change the way you think? Or are they “real” in a different way? CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL. 4-8.4; 4.3; 4-8.2.

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DISCUSSION QUESTIONS (CONTINUED)

4. Early in the novel we learn that Jorge swears a lot. From your experience, why do you think kids swear when it's really not necessary? Adults don't want kids to swear, so why does Houdini's father give Jorge a pass toward the end of the novel (page 145)?
CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL. 5-8.3; 7.6; 8.3.
5. What makes Houdini's lists comical? Look at pages 11–12, 62–63, 89–90, 120, and 133. What is your favorite comic list or comic scene? Describe how the comedy works in it. Is it verbal comedy (dialogue), physical comedy (actions), or some other kind of comedy?
CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL. 4-8.9; 8.5.
6. Why is Da Nang important to this story? In what way is his situation similar to that of other characters in the book? CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL. 4-8.3; 6.5.
7. Do you think Houdini's revenge on Angel is justified (pages 121–133)? What did he do that makes Houdini and his friends think he deserves his punishment? Do you think girls would have taken a similar course of action? CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL. 4-8.2; 8.6.
8. Houdini's father recounts the visit he and Houdini's grandfather made to the Vietnam Memorial in Washington (page 111–112). What themes about family and war are developed by this scene? CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL. 4-8.2; 4-7.3.
9. Without his friends, Houdini would be lost. What problems do Jorge and Lucky have at home? In spite of these problems, how do they help Houdini to grow? Refer to specific scenes. CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL. 4-5.3; 4.8.2; 6.3;
10. Houdini goes to the basketball court when he is upset. The setting a character is placed in can say a lot about him. Why does Houdini choose the basketball court as a safe haven? What special place do you visit when you're confused or angry? Why do you go there?
CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL. 4.3; 5-6.3; 7-8.2.
11. Houdini says, "With Franklin being wounded, death suddenly became more real. It was like a whole new enemy had popped up . . ." (page 114). This is an important moment in the novel. How does the closeness of death change the way Houdini sees his relationship with Franklin and his mother and father? CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL. 4-8.2.
12. Can reading or writing a novel change people or help them to deal with daily life? Explain how Houdini grew emotionally from the beginning to the end of the novel. What are a few of your favorite books? Tell your classmates how one of those books changed you in some important way. CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL. 4-8.9; 4-8.3.

EXTENSION ACTIVITIES

- 1. The Real Houdini.** The escape artist Harry Houdini has been an inspiration for a number of novels (see pages 167–68 of this novel). Have students do some research on the real Houdini. Break them into small groups and ask them to make a list of things they learned about Harry Houdini. Then ask them to explain why kids and adults have a fascination for this historical figure. CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL. 4-8.9.
- 2. Rules for Writing a Novel.** Are there rules for writing a novel? Have each student write five rules for writing a children’s novel. They can borrow two from Houdini but they must create at least three new ones. Then divide them into groups of three or four. Have them merge their lists and arrive at ten rules, which they can then read out loud. Read what Houdini says about writing a novel by following a list (page 166). CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL. 4-8.5; 5.7,
- 3. Rewriting the Novel.** One way to understand why a writer makes certain choices is to write alternative scenes and compare yours to the author’s. Try some of these exercises:
 - a.** Houdini comes up with “Ten Other Guesses of What Happened to Angel at Old Man’s Jackson’s” (pages 155–56). Ask students what they think happened. Then suggest they write the scene from Angel’s point of view.
 - b.** Often a book cover has one or more images that capture a theme of the book. Have students devise their own covers, either by drawing it themselves or cutting and pasting. Then tape their covers to a wall and go through each one asking students to explain their choices.
 - c.** Read the last paragraph of the novel and suppose there is a sequel. Ask students to write the first paragraph of the sequel, making the reader want to continue reading. CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL. 4-8.7; 4-8.2.
- 4. Iraq War and the Vietnam War.** Ask students to research these two important wars to learn how veterans were treated when they returned from these wars. Use your findings to discuss the similarities and differences between Franklin’s and Old Man Jackson’s experiences. CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL. 4-8.3; 4-8.7; 7.6.
- 5. Bullying.** On pages 128–129, Lucky and Jorge get in an argument about Angel and Lucky kind of defends him. This scene raises the question of whether we are supposed to feel sorry for bullies who may be bullied at home because they could just be doing what they’ve learned. Most people, hopefully, would agree that there is never an excuse for bullying. Have students discuss what makes Angel a bully and if they think he has changed at the end. For more information on bullying, visit www.bullying.org. CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL. 4-8.2; 4.3.