

# A Teacher's Guide for Sid Fleischman

Featuring *The Whipping Boy*, *Jim Ugly*, and *Disappearing Act*  
Grades 3 up

## ABOUT THE BOOKS

### **The Whipping Boy**

Tr 0-688-06216-4 • Pb 0-06-052122-8

A Greenwillow Book

In the Middle Ages, it was considered treasonous for anyone to spank a prince, so the orphan Jemmy is plucked off the street and forced to be the whipping boy for the disobedient and obnoxious Prince Brat. Whenever the Prince does anything that deserves a whipping, Jemmy is brought to the king and whipped severely by the guards. Jemmy plans an escape, but the Prince beats him to it, and together they leave the palace grounds to find adventure. Along the way, they meet two dangerous crooks who hold them for ransom, a young girl with a dancing bear who saves them from a beating, a man selling hot potatoes who helps them escape, and Jemmy's old friends who live in the sewers of London catching rats.

**Newbery Medal**

**ALA Notable Children's Book**

**School Library Journal Best Book**

### **Jim Ugly**

Tr 0-688-10886-5 • Pb 0-06-052121-X

A Greenwillow Book

Part wolf and part dog, Jim Ugly has the ability to sniff out anything and anybody. So when Jake's father, Sam Bannock, is buried without anyone seeing the body, Jake and his dog Jim Ugly set out to prove he is still alive. Their Old West adventure leads them on a chase for missing diamonds, and they tangle with some strange stage actors who knew things about Jake's father that Jake didn't know, and a bounty hunter who wants Sam Bannock dead for real.

**ALA Notable Children's Book**

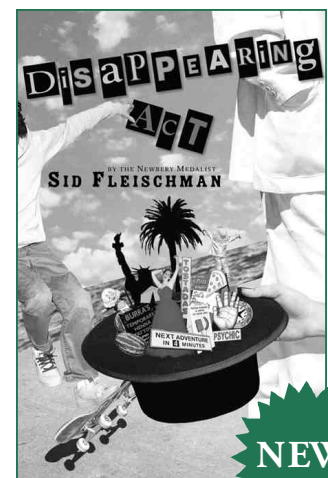
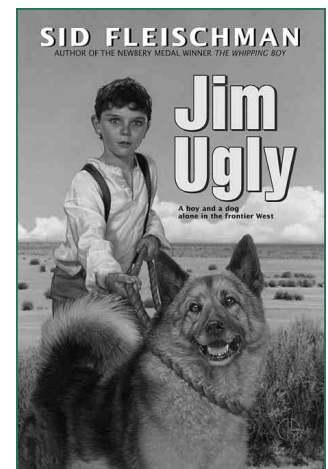
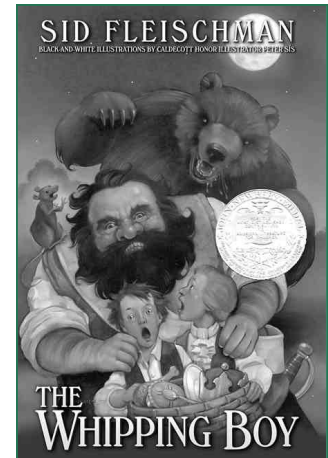
**New York Public Library's "One Hundred Titles for Reading and Sharing"**

### **Disappearing Act**

Tr 0-06-051962-2 • Lb 0-06-051963-0

A Greenwillow Book

After their mother's death, Kevin and his older sister Holly are stalked by a strange man in a white suit. Afraid for their lives, they run from Albuquerque, New Mexico, to Venice Beach, California. They find a place to live close to the Boardwalk, where they make new friends and find jobs, but all too soon the stalker finds them and threatens not only their lives, but also the new life they have made for themselves.



## IN THE CLASSROOM

Sid Fleischman weaves wonderful stories in distinctive settings filled with characters that are funny, clever, and full of life. His bad guys are despicable, and his good guys are easy to fall in love with despite their faults. Students will get lost in the stories and be mesmerized by the imagery and word pictures used. Fleischman writes to entertain, yet instructs eloquently.

Teaching these novels will be a pleasure for teachers and students because of the richness of the language, the adventure in the stories, and the relationships of the characters. The themes of friendship, adventure, loyalty, and greed make these books ideal for classroom study. Cross-curricular activities in language arts, geography, science, social studies, health, and art will give additional insight into the novels.

## PRE-READING ACTIVITY

In *Disappearing Act*, Kevin and Holly move into a place called Casa de Suenos, which means House of Dreams. Kevin says, "Exactly what we need, I think. Dreams. We'd had it with nightmares" (pg.3). Explain to students that even though Kevin refers to dreams and nightmares, he is speaking about hopes and wishes, not actual sleep-related dreams. Dreams are a common theme found in all three of Sid Fleischman's books. Hold a class discussion about the importance of dreams and ask students about the dreams they have for their lives. As they read each novel, ask students to find examples of each character's dreams and how those dreams help them to find a better place in life.



Illustration © 1986 by Peter Sís

## INTERDISCIPLINARY CONNECTIONS

### Language Arts

Sid Fleischman uses figurative language and dialect in his books to describe the characters, the settings, and the events that take place. Discussing simile, metaphor, and dialect with the students, divide the class into groups of two or three and assign each group a chapter to scan and from which to list examples of figurative language. Combine the lists from each group and ask students to use dialect to write a poem in two different characters' voices. You might want to use the book *Joyful Noise: Poems for Two Voices* by Paul Fleischman for models. Examples of dialect in *Jim Ugly* are the words "clatterwacking," pg. 25; "reckoned," pg. 28; "obliged," pg. 31; "tarnation," pg. 49; "howling rumpus," pg. 66; and "sashay," pg. 112.

Foreshadowing is a tool writers use to build suspense and prepare the reader for action to come. Mr. Fleischman uses foreshadowing in *Disappearing Act* on page 1 when he introduces the stalker, and in *Jim Ugly* on page 3 with the statement, "Who'd think to look for dad on a chicken farm? He'd be safe." Ask students to find other examples of foreshadowing as they read.

### Geography

In *Jim Ugly*, Jake travels through the towns of Sunflower Creek, Red Sky, Smoketree Junction, Truckee, Roseville, and Sacramento. Draw a map of Nevada and California showing where these towns are or might be. Trace Jake and Jim Ugly's route through this area. Have students refer to the book for clues from the story that would help readers place these towns on the map. For example, Jake travels by train from town to town and Sunflower Creek is referred to as a "big city" (pg. 39). When Jake leaves Truckee for Roseville, the train carries them west down the long mountainside (pg. 96). "We reached the foothills and charged across the flatlands" (pg. 97).

Using a road map of the United States, highlight the route that Holly and Kevin take when they move from Albuquerque, New Mexico, to Venice Beach, California. Then, highlight the route they would take to New York City. Investigate the climate, scenic attractions, tourist sites, and culture in the three cities. Divide the class into three groups, each representing one of the three cities. Ask students within each group to make a travel brochure about the city and post them around the room. Students could vote on the place they would like to visit based on the information in the brochures. Graph the results.

### Science

*Jim Ugly* is set in the desert of Nevada and Sid Fleischman talks about chicken hawks and sage grass. Divide students in groups of two or three and assign each group one of the following topics: plants, animals, climate, and terrain. Ask students to make an illustrated informational booklet noting what they have discovered about the Nevada desert.

### Reading

*Where the Wild Things Are* by Maurice Sendak holds special significance for Kevin. It is one of the only things he brings with him when he and Holly run away from home. Ask students to bring a book to class, either from home or the school library, that is special to them, and on a 3 x 5 card write down the reason it is significant. Display the books with the cards around the room. If time permits, read the books to the class.

## Social Studies

In the twenty-first century, using an orphan as a whipping boy would be against the law. Ask students to investigate homes for orphans in their state and write a letter to the director of one of the orphanages, asking permission to be a pen pal with one of the children who lives there. Children could post the letters they receive on a bulletin board.

Each story is set in a different location and time period, each with its unique set of social rules and customs. What are the possible dangers each set of characters faces when they run away? How and why are the risks different in each time period? Ask students to investigate the settings to determine the differences in clothing, food, education, economics, and medicine. How would the differences in these areas affect the risks of running away? Students should report their findings to the class.

A lot of people on the Venice Beach Boardwalk make their money telling the future, juggling, opera singing, miming, performing magic tricks, and dancing. Ask students if they have ever been to a circus, a carnival, or a boardwalk and witnessed any of these activities. Ask students to choose one of the activities and research the history and current use of the performing art and report their findings to the class. As an option, some students may want to learn to mime or juggle or perform magic tricks for the class.

## Health

In the historical settings of the books *The Whipping Boy*, set in the Middle Ages, and in *Jim Ugly*, set in the Old West, diseases killed thousands of people because medical care was nearly nonexistent and little was known about germs and how they spread. Divide your students into two groups and assign each group one of the time periods. Ask them to investigate the diseases that were prevalent in that time, how the diseases were contracted, and what, if anything, was done to try to control the outbreak. What has now been done to combat these diseases? Why are the diseases that were common then rarely infecting people now? Each group can report their findings to the class.

## Art

Create a missing person poster or a milk carton ad for Prince Brat and Jemmy, Holly and Kevin, or Jake Bannock. When the posters and milk cartons are displayed around the room, they can serve as a review of the plot. Be sure to include the characters' ages, a physical description, and where they were last seen.

## Music

In *Disappearing Act*, Holly has a beautiful soprano voice and practices constantly, singing opera songs in several different languages. Tell your students the story of *La Boheme*, then let them experience the opera by listening to several songs. Ask students to write a paragraph about their reaction to what they hear.

# THEMATIC CONNECTIONS

## Friendship

Regardless of the time period, characters in all three novels exhibit true friendship. Brainstorm with the class the characteristics of friendship and make a list on the board. Compare the list generated by the students to the characteristics Jake, Jemmy, and Kevin possess. How do the characters' situations make friendship a necessity? Discuss with students how circumstances might have helped make a new friend or strengthen the bond with a friend they already had. Have students select one character from any of the three novels and write a letter from that character to one from a different Fleischman book. Circulate the letters around the room and have other students respond while in character as well.

## Adventure

Although Prince Brat and Jemmy are at opposite ends of the social ladder, they were both unhappy and wanted to run away from the life they led at the palace. Even though Jake has a place to live and food to eat, he is desperate to find his father, so he sets off with Jim Ugly on a quest to find him. Holly and Kevin, too, flee their home to escape the dangerous stalker who they think is out to kill them. Ask students to analyze the possible risks and benefits involved in each character's adventure. What lessons do you think these characters learn through their self-imposed adventures? Have students make an illustrated "Survivor Booklet," showing the lessons they learned through the plot events.

## Loyalty

Loyalty is defined as a feeling or attitude of devoted attachment and affection. Based on this definition, what specific ways do the characters in Mr. Fleischman's books show loyalty to one another? For example, how do Miss Fiesta, Daisy, Gomez, and Bumpy show loyalty to Holly and Kevin?

## Searching for Identity

The characters in each novel are searching for a better, safer way of life and a place they can call home. Draw a large Venn diagram on butcher paper and attach it to the wall, then ask students to identify and write the similarities and differences of each book and characters in the appropriate places. When the diagram is complete, discuss the results. Then ask students to choose two or more of the events they wrote on the diagram, and in groups of two or three, have them write their own story in an original setting with characters who search for their identity. Ask the students to read their stories to the class.

## Careers

There are a variety of careers held by the characters in each story—a rat catcher and a hot potato man in *The Whipping Boy*, a chicken farmer and storekeeper in *Jim Ugly*, and a singing instructor and policeman in *Disappearing Act*. How do these careers reflect on the time period? Would there be a need for a rat catcher in the twenty-first century? Would a singing instructor be able to make a living in the Middle Ages? Ask students to choose a career from one of the time periods in Mr. Fleischman's novels and make a recruiting poster. Display the posters around the room and host a classroom job fair.

Photo by Margaret Walker



## AN INTERVIEW WITH SID FLEISCHMAN

Kevin encounters several different kinds of performance in *Disappearing Act*—fortune-telling, street performing, opera singing, juggling, and tap dancing, to name a few. Have you tried any of these yourself? How did you get “behind the scenes” to write about these performances?

As a teenager, I learned to read palms, which made me very popular in high school. (What’s to learn? You make things up.) My experiences as a magician (described in *The Abracadabra Kid*) gave me the insights I needed to write the street performance scenes in the novel. While I listen to a lot of opera, the best I can do is hum.

You say that you like to be surprised as you write. Are there ever any bad surprises? How can you tell what’s a good surprise and what’s a bad one?

While improvising my scenes and plot as I go along, I expect the unexpected. I shake it by the hand. I depend upon it. The appearance of the real Gomez in this novel caught me by surprise—he was a sudden inspiration of the moment. I don’t give the time of day to weak or clumsy ideas. I junk them.

Since you don’t know what’s going to happen to the characters once they are entangled in the story, do you worry about them after you’ve finished writing for the day? Were you anxious about whether Kevin and Holly would escape their stalker, the Toad?

Yes, after finishing the day’s writing, I continue to wonder about my characters, or search for ways to get them out of the jams I put them in, or otherwise tamper with them. For example, I changed both their names several times while I was writing before I settled on Kevin and Holly. No, I was not anxious about my lead players escaping the Toad—I knew they would. I just didn’t know how they were going to do it until I got into the final chapters.

One of the most enjoyable elements of your novels is your humor. How do you keep that comic touch when you are dealing with serious topics, such as orphaned children and stalkers?

Dunno. All of my novels have serious underpinnings, but somehow the surfaces turn comic. The two are not so far apart. I learned long ago that humor is tragedy in slap shoes and wearing a putty nose.

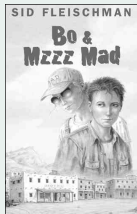
Does *Where the Wild Things Are* have any special significance for you, as it does for Kevin?

Beyond admiring the book as one of the great, great ones, I have known its author and illustrator, Maurice Sendak, for decades. It amused me to trap the book within my plot, as I hope it will amuse Maurice.

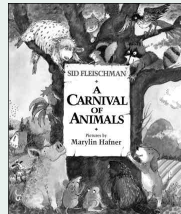
What kind of street performer is your favorite?

I am most amused by the mannequins, such as Daisy’s mother doing her Statue of Liberty act. How can these performers stand as motionless as marble statues without so much as blinking their eyes?

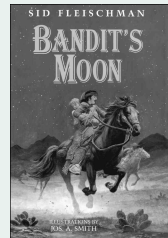
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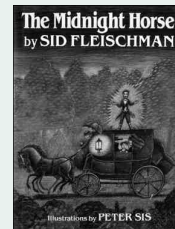
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Teaching ideas prepared by Susan Geye, Library Media Specialist, the Crowley Ninth Grade Campus, Ft. Worth, Texas.

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