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THE BULLET CATCH: MURDER BY MISADVENTURE

by Amy Axelrod and David Axelrod

Common
Core State
Standards

GRADES
5–9

About the Book

This spellbinding novel chronicles the coming of age of a resourceful young man who must refashion his destiny amid murder and misadventure in the golden age of magic.

When the orphanage he called home burns to the ground, fourteen-year-old Leo and his three friends turn to larceny to survive. Leo proves to be a most gifted pickpocket, but when he is cruelly betrayed by his gang, he abandons the life of crime to become the apprentice of a has-been magician named Barzini, who is staging a comeback using the bullet catch trick made famous by his archenemy. Barzini wants more than to just outshine his old rival; he is out for revenge. As Leo struggles to escape his dangerous past, he must confront the possibility that his new mentor may be even more dangerous.

SUGGESTED CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES

Literature/Language Arts

Vocabulary—Students may be unfamiliar with certain words in the story: *alchemy, calliope, clairvoyant, concierge, conundrum, crypt, entrepreneurial, fedoras, foyer, gramophone, jerky, muttonchops, newsreel, séance, skill, straitjacket, suffragist, winch*. For maximum understanding of the story, discuss these terms and their meanings with the students prior to reading. [CCSS 6.RL.4, 6.L.4](#)

Similes—The author uses similes throughout the story: “like a strip of jerky,” or “body like a rhinoceros.” Review the meaning of *simile* and then have the students choose a chapter from the story and list all the similes they find. These can then be shared with the class. [CCSS 6.RL.4, 6.L.5](#)

Questions for Discussion / Writing

Students may discuss the following questions as a whole group, in small groups or partners, or choose one or more about which to write. [CCSS 6.W.2, 3, 6; 6.SL.1, 6.L.1, 2, 3](#)

Dishonesty/Wrongful Acts—In the story Leo and his friends, and later Barzini and others, lie or commit various acts that are either illegal or just wrong, but they always feel that they were justified. What is your opinion on lying or committing crimes, even if at the

moment it seems necessary or a good idea? What about doing things that you know are wrong because of what someone else “made you do”?

Bullying—There are many examples of bullying in the story—by the Mayor, by Barzini, and by others. What do you think a person being bullied can do to prevent it? If you have ever been bullied, how have you reacted? Discuss what worked and what didn’t.

Suspense—The author creates many moments of suspense in the story, where the reader cannot wait to see what happens next. Have students list the moments when they felt the greatest suspense. What was the same as or different from their own expectations of how the story would continue? What do you think was the biggest moment of suspense in the whole story? Why?

Friendship/Betrayal—At various points in the story Leo feels betrayed—first by the Mayor, then by his “best friend,” Murph, and finally by Barzini himself. Describe situations where you felt betrayed by a friend, and what you did to solve the situation. Provide reasons why it is sometimes better just to end the friendship, while at other times it is worth the effort to make things good again and maintain the friendship. Barzini implies that friends are “wasteful” (p. 108). Explain why you agree or disagree with this statement. Use examples from your own life.

Trust/Respect—Leo frequently has to decide whether to trust various characters in the story. How do you decide whether or not to trust another person? What do you do to make sure that people trust you? What are some things that make you respect other people? What do you do to gain respect from others?

Kids vs. Adults—Often Leo feels that Barzini or other adults never ask his advice or value his opinion. Describe situations from your own life where you felt that your opinion should have mattered more or that adults should have listened to you.

Life Goals—Toward the end of the story Leo says that working as a magician is something “bigger than him or Barzini” (p. 211). What do you think he means by that? Describe things in your own life that are “bigger” or more important than anything else.

Who Killed Chung Ling Soo?—After finishing the story, ask students to surmise who they think killed this famous magician. Was it really an accident? Ask students to use examples from the story to prove their theories.

Research

Students can write short reports or find other creative ways to present the information they find to the class.
CCSS6.W.7, 8; 6.SL.2, 4, 5

New York Locations—There are many settings mentioned in the story with which students may be unfamiliar. They may wish to consult Google Images to see pictures of 1917 New York City, the Bowery, Coney Island, Chinatown, the Tombs, the Hippodrome, Algonquin Hotel, Delmonico’s, Long Island, Central Park, the Williamsburg Bridge and Ellis Island. Encourage them to search for any other images or information on New York settings that might pique their interest. In each case they should be sure to enter “1917” into their search.

Famous Historical People—Students might want to find photos or more information on the following real people who are mentioned: Harry Houdini, Chung Ling Soo, Harry Blackstone, (Alexander) Herrmann the Great, Jack Dempsey, Guglielmo Marconi, Arthur Conan Doyle and Peter Stuyvesant.

Online Resources

Bullet Catch—<http://bulletcatch.com/> presents a website entirely devoted to this dangerous trick and includes information about Chung Ling Soo’s death, Harry Houdini, and other magicians who have tried the trick (or decided not to!).

Harry Houdini—http://thekidswindow.co.uk/News/Harry_Houdini.htm presents a short biography of Houdini and descriptions of some of his most famous tricks.

Houdini in Times Square—<http://graphics8.nytimes.com/packages/pdf/arts/houdini-timessquare.pdf> presents a replica of the actual article describing this event from the November 5, 1917 *New York Times*.

Dollar Values—<http://tinyurl.com/npr5vcb> Students can enter an amount of money mentioned in the story to find out how much it would be worth today. For example, the \$347 that the Mayor hides from Leo and the other boys would be worth \$8,006.73 today!

Magician’s Code of Ethics—<https://magician.org/pdf/JointIBMAAndSamEthics.pdf> presents the complete list of rules magicians are supposed to follow, as mentioned many times in the story.



Classroom Activities prepared by Sandy Schuckett, school library consultant.

About the Authors

Amy Axelrod is the author of *Your Friend in Fashion*, *Abby Shapiro* and the *Pigs Will Be Pigs* math series. She lives in the Hudson Valley, New York, area.

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