Theme and characters

**Maniac Magee**

Jeffery “Maniac” Magee is the main character of the novel. At a young age, Maniac’s parents die in a tragic accident. Alone and orphaned, the boy spends the majority of the novel searching for an address and a family of his own.

Although damaged and bruised by the death of his parents and his own personal roller coaster of ups and downs, Maniac finds self worth in his abilities to connect with others and unite people. A kind hearted soul and a talented athlete, Maniac’s personal journey comes to a close when he finds the address that he’s dreamed of.

Jeffrey “Maniac” Magee is a legendary figure in the history of Two Mills, Pennsylvania. Throughout most of the story, Maniac is a homeless orphan who longs for a family and a home. He is from the neighboring town of Bridgeport, and after his parents were killed in a trolley crash when Jeffrey was three, he moved in with his [**Aunt Dot and Uncle Dan**](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/maniac-magee/characters/aunt-dot-and-uncle-dan) but he ran away around the age of 10 or 11, winding up in Two Mills. There, Jeffrey’s friendliness, feats of athleticism, and fearlessness of bullies earn him the nickname “Maniac.” Maniac first befriends [**Amanda Beale**](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/maniac-magee/characters/amanda-beale) and her family and he feels at home in Two Mills’ East End, which is predominantly black. He leaves the East End after the Beales are targeted by those who dislike Maniac. He also creates a home with an elderly zoo worker, Earl Grayson, whom Maniac teaches to read. After Grayson dies, Maniac takes young Piper and Russell McNab under his wing, making them attend school and trying to offset the racist ideas they’re learning at home. Maniac runs almost everywhere he goes, is gifted at untying [**knots**](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/maniac-magee/symbols/knots) (including the famed Cobble’s Knot), and is allergic to pizza. He doesn’t go to school, finding it reminds him of his lack of a home, but he loves learning and devours books. He always seeks out the best in people—even in bullies like the East End’s [**Mars Bar Thompson**](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/maniac-magee/characters/mars-bar-thompson) and the West End’s [**Giant John McNab**](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/maniac-magee/characters/giant-john-mcnab)—and he tries to encourage people to fulfill their potential. These traits ultimately distinguish Maniac more than his ability to run fast or hit endless home runs.

**Amanda Beale**

Amanda, an African American girl living in the East End, is Maniac’s first friend and consequently his best friend. She can best be described as a smart and sassy young lady with a big heart and a passion for books. To Maniac, Amanda is like a sister and he views her family as his own.

Amanda is the first person who talks to [**Maniac**](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/maniac-magee/characters/jeffrey-lionel-maniac-magee) in Two Mills. She is a kind, studious, spirited girl. Amanda carries her entire book collection around town in a suitcase so that her younger siblings, [**Hester and Lester**](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/maniac-magee/characters), won’t color on them. Her suitcase piques Maniac’s curiosity when he arrives in town, and when he convinces Amanda to lend him a book, they soon become friends. Amanda is a loyal sister and friend who fiercely defends Maniac, even when others in the East End question whether Maniac belongs in a black neighborhood and give the Beale family a hard time as a result. She even hatches a plan for Maniac to undo Cobble’s [**Knot**](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/maniac-magee/symbols/knots) in hopes of winning everyone’s approval. When Maniac resorts to living in a buffalo pen at the end of the book, Amanda climbs in and scolds Maniac in a sisterly way until he agrees to move in with the Beales once more.

**Mrs. Beale**

Mrs. Beale serves as a mother figure in Maniac’s life. This kind hearted cook takes Maniac in and treats him as if he is her child. When she slaps Maniac for using crude language, he sobs and begs for her forgiveness. Mrs. Beale’s love and approval is extremely important to Maniac.

Mrs. Beale is the mother of [**Amanda**](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/maniac-magee/characters/amanda-beale) and Hester and Lester Beale and the wife of [**Mr. Beale**](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/maniac-magee/characters). She spends much of her time cleaning up the youngest children’s messes. Mrs. Beale is warm-hearted and hospitable, welcoming [**Maniac**](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/maniac-magee/characters/jeffrey-lionel-maniac-magee) into the household as soon as she learns he’s homeless. She becomes a beloved maternal figure in Maniac’s life.

**Earl Grayson**

Grayson, as he is known to Maniac, is an older gentleman who works for the parks and zoo department. Grayson takes Maniac under his wing and serves as a father figure to him. The bond between the two loners transcends both of their tendencies to be guarded. As a former minor league baseball player, Grayson’s love of sports further solidifies his bond with Maniac. Grayson’s passing at the end of part two marks one of the lowest moments of Maniac’s life.

Grayson is an elderly parkhand who works at the Elmwood Park Zoo. He is an outwardly gruff man though he is actually kind at heart. Grayson discovers the homeless [**Maniac**](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/maniac-magee/characters/jeffrey-lionel-maniac-magee) living in the buffalo pen at the zoo and makes sure that Maniac is fed, clothed, and sheltered. Gradually, he and Maniac form a family unit of their own. Grayson grew up neglected and poorly educated and he ran away at 15 to join the minor leagues, but he fell short of his major league baseball dreams and he has always worked menial jobs since then. When Maniac teaches Grayson how to read for the first time—and shows Grayson love and affection—Grayson feels valued for the first time in many years. He dies of old age soon after he and Maniac celebrate Christmas together.

**Mars Bar Thompson**

Mars Bar, one of the stories antagonists, is an African American boy living in the East End. Known as the toughest and meanest boy of the East End, Mars regularly bullies Maniac and antagonizes him for being a white kid in a black neighborhood. Maniac persistently stands up to Mars and, in the end, Mars respects Maniac’s bravery and serves as a catalyst for uniting the East End and West End.

Mars Bar is so nicknamed because he’s often seen eating his favorite candy bar. He is revered as the toughest kid in Two Mills’ East End and he bullies [**Maniac**](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/maniac-magee/characters/jeffrey-lionel-maniac-magee) relentlessly when Maniac first arrives there. He jeers Maniac as “fishbelly.” He prides himself on being “bad,” i.e., tough. He’s also extremely fast and he challenges Maniac to a footrace, which Maniac wins, prompting Mars Bar’s hatred. Still, Maniac sees potential in Mars Bar and admires his sense of pride. Seemingly by accident at first, he and Maniac begin silently running through town together in the early mornings. Mars Bar later rescues Russell McNab when Russel gets stranded on the trolley trestle. Then, at the end of the story, Mars Bar invites Maniac to stay with him at his home, showing that he now considers Maniac a friend. Amanda renames Mars Bars “Snickers,” a less threatening nickname.

**John McNab**

John, another antagonist, is a burly Caucasian boy who is spiteful and hateful to those who attempt to cross him. With quick wit and peaceful resistance, Maniac is able to thwart John’s constant bullying. John’s wild and unruly younger brothers, Piper and Russell, unknowingly unite the East and West Ends when Mars saves one of them from a train trestle accident.

Giant John McNab is a huge 12-year-old, the pitcher for Two Mills’ Little League baseball team. He’s also a bully, part of a gang called the Cobras. [**Maniac Magee**](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/maniac-magee/characters/jeffrey-lionel-maniac-magee) breaks Giant John’s strikeout record the day he arrives in Two Mills, and from that moment on, Giant John has it in for Maniac. Giant John lives with his drunken father, George, in a filthy house along with his little brothers, [**Piper and Russell**](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/maniac-magee/characters/piper-and-russell-mcnab), and he has absorbed his dad’s racist ideas. Giant John spends much of his time drinking and smoking with the Cobras and letting his little brothers do the same. Giant John tolerates Maniac after Maniac rescues the runaway Piper and Russell and brings them home.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Piper and Russell McNab Character Analysis** | **[Next](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/maniac-magee/characters/mars-bar-thompson)**  [Mars Bar Thompson](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/maniac-magee/characters/mars-bar-thompson) |

Piper and Russell are [**Giant John**](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/maniac-magee/characters/giant-john-mcnab)’s little brothers and [**George McNab**](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/maniac-magee/characters/george-mcnab)’s sons. They are around eight years old. They frequently try to run away; [**Maniac**](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/maniac-magee/characters/jeffrey-lionel-maniac-magee) crosses paths with them when all three find shelter in the Valley Forge historic park. Maniac soon assumes a brotherly responsibility for the boys, especially when he sees their dirty, neglected situation at home—they drink and smoke along with Giant John’s Cobra friends and they rarely go to school. Maniac bribes them into attending school by fulfilling various dares and drawing positive attention from their classmates, making the boys feel important for the first time. After Russell gets stranded on the trolley trestle and is rescued by [**Mars Bar**](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/maniac-magee/characters/mars-bar-thompson), there’s hope that the boys will not grow up embracing George and Giant John’s racist attitudes.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Finsterwald Character Analysis** | **[Next](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/maniac-magee/characters/mrs-beale)**  [Mrs. Beale](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/maniac-magee/characters/mrs-beale) |

Finsterwald lives at 803 Oriole Street. Finsterwald never actually appears in the story—he’s just the subject of ominous rumors spread by generations of West End kids. It’s believed that if a kid—like [**Arnold Jones**](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/maniac-magee/characters)—is dropped into his backyard, the kid will go crazy with fear—a condition called the “finsterwallies.” Nobody understands exactly what Finsterwald does to cause such terror. [**Maniac Magee**](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/maniac-magee/characters/jeffrey-lionel-maniac-magee) is the only kid who isn’t afraid of Finsterwald. In fact, he even knocks on Finsterwald’s front door and walks away smiling, though nobody knows what transpires between Maniac and Finsterwald.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Mrs. Valerie Pickwell Character Analysis** | **[Next](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/maniac-magee/characters/george-mcnab)**  [George McNab](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/maniac-magee/characters/george-mcnab) |

Mrs. Pickwell has 11 children who are called home for dinner by her whistling each night. Besides Mr. Pickwell, her household also includes Grandmother and Grandfather Pickwell, Great-grandfather Pickwell, and whatever down-and-out person the family is helping at the moment. She calls these individuals her “small nation.” Like her husband and kids, Mrs. Pickwell is an unfailingly kind, generous, and hospitable person who symbolizes the best that Two Mills’ West End has to offer.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **George McNabCharacter Analysis** | **[Next](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/maniac-magee/characters/aunt-dot-and-uncle-dan)**  [Aunt Dot and Uncle Dan](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/maniac-magee/characters/aunt-dot-and-uncle-dan) |

George is the father of [**Giant John**](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/maniac-magee/characters/giant-john-mcnab) and Piper and Russell McNab. He is rarely home, is covered with tattoos, and appears to be an alcoholic. George has very hostile and paranoid racist beliefs, building a “pillbox” in his house so he’ll be ready to fight the East End “rebels” when, according to his expectation, they try to overrun the West End.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Aunt Dot and Uncle Dan Character Analysis** | **[Next](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/maniac-magee/symbols)**  [Symbols](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/maniac-magee/symbols) |

Dot and Dan are [**Maniac**](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/maniac-magee/characters/jeffrey-lionel-maniac-magee)’s aunt and uncle. Maniac lives with them for eight years after his parents are killed. Dot and Dan hate each other, but as staunch Catholics, they refuse to get a divorce. As such, they spend Maniac’s childhood refusing to speak to each other, eat meals together, or even share kitchen appliances. Maniac runs away from Dot and Dan when he can no longer stand their silence and hostility.

**Objects/Places**

**Address**

Throughout the novel, Maniac openly discusses his longing for an address.

Maniac notes the address of the Beale’s home when they invite him to stay with them. When Grayson asks Maniac why he doesn’t go to school, he states it’s because he doesn’t have an address. Once Grayson and Maniac settle into their home in the baseball closet, Maniac proudly paints the address on the outside building.

For Maniac, an address symbolizes a sense of belonging and a permanent home.

**Butterscotch Krimpets**

Krimpets are Maniac’s favorite snack and they are the only food he consistently eats throughout the novel. He receives them as a Christmas gift and eats them while tackling the Cobble’s Knot.

**Two Mills, Pennsylvania**

Two Mills is the town where the story predominately takes place. The town is racially divided into the predominately black East End and the predominately white West End.

**Finsterwald’s House**

This home is a type of haunted house for the children of Two Mills. No one dares to go into the backyard or front porch and the house is shrouded with mystery. Maniac performs a series of stunts at the house and proves that the unknown doesn’t have to be scary.

**Books**

Throughout the novel, books are brought up regularly. Amanda Beale has an immense passion for reading and for books. As a result, Maniac also develops a love of reading. Grayson learns how to read during the story using the children’s books from the library’s used book sale.

**101 Bandshell Boulevard**

This is the address of the home Grayson and Maniac shared in the baseball closet. This address is full of love and the time spent here marks the happiest moments in Maniac’s life.

**Sports**

Maniac, a talented athlete, regularly plays sports in the neighborhood. His talent catches the attention of the town and hoists his legacy in the minds of the townspeople. Sports mentioned throughout the novel include baseball, football, and stickball. Consequently, sports unite Maniac with Grayson and other characters in the story.

***Symbols:***

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Knots Symbol Analysis** | **[Next](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/maniac-magee/chart-board-visualization)**  [Theme Wheel](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/maniac-magee/chart-board-visualization) |

Knots symbolize problems that appear unsolvable on the surface, but that—in careful, deft hands—can be gradually unraveled. [**Maniac Magee**](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/maniac-magee/characters/jeffrey-lionel-maniac-magee) is gifted at untying knots. He’s the first member of the Beale household who can successfully untangle little [**Hester and Lester**](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/maniac-magee/characters)’s shoelace knots, and soon Hester and Lester send their friends to Maniac to get their sneakers’ knots untied, too. Most memorably, Maniac unravels the legendary Cobble’s Knot, a four-blocks-long ball of string that has thwarted a whole generation of kids. Maniac takes his time with the task and has a surgical delicacy: “He had to find the right routes to untangle the mess, or it would just close up again like a rock and probably stay that way forever.” These words might as well apply to the much knottier problem of race relations in Two Mills, Pennsylvania, as Maniac learns throughout the story that forging friendships between kids of different backgrounds isn’t a quick, miraculous fix, but a process that requires time, wisdom, and patience.

**Themes**

**Racism**

Racism is a major theme in the novel "Maniac Magee". The East End and West End neighborhoods of Two Mills are deeply divided. The two ends are so divided many people never cross into the opposite end out of fear and ignorance. Although there are people in both ends of the town who are not prejudiced, those that are sway the opinions and drive the fear of the masses. Maniac is different because he is color blind in regard to race. He serves as a catalyst for change in a community desperately needing to be enlightened.

The town of Two Mills is neatly divided into two segregated halves: white people live in the West End and black people live in the East End. When [**Maniac Magee**](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/maniac-magee/characters/jeffrey-lionel-maniac-magee) (a white kid from elsewhere) arrives in town, running from a life as an orphan, he doesn’t know this. In fact, he doesn’t seem to be aware of racial difference at all. Racial prejudice is incomprehensible to him because he is just an orphan looking for a sense of belonging, and he sees everyone he meets as potential friends and family, regardless of race. By telling the story of Two Mills through Maniac’s innocent perspective, Spinelli suggests that racism, which is founded on ignorance and lack of empathy, ultimately doesn’t make sense and can only be defeated by people who are willing to cross invisible boundaries in order to make friends.

Maniac lacks awareness of the hostility between racial groups in Two Mills, which leads him to think and behave in innocent ways that kids who’ve lived in the town all their lives probably wouldn’t. In one instance, [**Mars Bar**](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/maniac-magee/characters/mars-bar-thompson), a black boy who is the East End’s most notorious bully, sarcastically offers Maniac a bite of his candy bar (trying to provoke him into a fight). Maniac actually accepts, to the astonishment of everyone watching: “The kid had done the unthinkable, he had chomped on one of Mars's own bars. Not only that, but white kids just didn't put their mouths where black kids had had theirs, be it soda bottles, spoons, or candy bars. And the kid hadn't even gone for the unused end; he had chomped right over Mars Bar's own bite marks.” Spinelli uses this lighthearted scene to highlight the ugliness of racism in a deeper way. A local white kid would consider a black kid’s candy bar to be untouchable, whereas Maniac just sees it as the sincere offering of a possible friend.

After being befriended by [**Amanda Beale**](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/maniac-magee/characters/amanda-beale), a black girl, and then invited to live with the Beale family for a while, Maniac still feels baffled by the concept of racial difference, thinking, “he still couldn't see it, this color business. He didn't figure he was white any more than the East Enders were black. He looked himself over pretty hard and came up with at least seven different shades and colors right on his own skin, not one of them being what he would call white.” In other words, Maniac—having gotten a taste of genuine family life for the first time—still thinks about race in a superficial, literal way and finally decides, in light of his experience, that it doesn’t make much sense to him—a reaction Spinelli uses to signal that, in fact, racism is an arbitrary and foolish prejudice.

However, Maniac’s innocence doesn’t last forever: he is initially rejected because of his naïveté of the town’s racial hostility, leading him to recognize the reality of racism and its roots in ignorance. During a community party in the East End, Maniac gradually picks one jeering voice out of the happy crowd: “The voice was behind him, saying the same word over and over […] But when he saw the brown finger pointed at him (not a speck of icing on it), and the brown arm that aimed it and the brown face behind it, he knew the name [he heard] was ‘Whitey.’ And it surprised him that he knew.” The parenthetical remark about icing refers to [**Mrs. Beale**](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/maniac-magee/characters/mrs-beale), who would always offer him a taste of frosting while she baked his favorite cake. That maternal image contrasts harshly with the accusing finger of the elderly man, who then tells Maniac to leave the East End and join “his kind” on the opposite side of town. Suddenly, the reality of hostility based on race—an idea that has been present only vaguely in Maniac’s mind—becomes unavoidably manifest, because this time it is directed at him.

Not long after this incident, Maniac does walk out of Two Mills, feeling responsible for bringing hostility on the Beales, who’ve sheltered him. “So he turned and started walking north on Hector, right down the middle of the street, right down the invisible chalk line that divided East End from West End. Cars beeped at him, drivers hollered, but he never flinched. […] [People on] [b]oth sides were calling for him to come over. And then they were calling at each other, then yelling, then cursing. But nobody stepped off a curb, everybody kept moving north, an ugly, snarling black-and-white escort for the kid in the middle.” Maniac is portrayed as being “in the middle” of a divided town whose two sides refuse to face each other directly. The reactions of others suggest that an innocent outlook like Maniac’s can’t survive in a community that is divided by hatred.

When Maniac eventually wanders back to Two Mills, having been rejected by everyone, he has a clearer perspective on the racism he’s encountered in various residents: “Remembering how little [**Grayson**](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/maniac-magee/characters/earl-grayson) had known about black people and black homes. Thinking of the McNabs' wrong-headed notions. […] *What else would you expect? Whites never go inside blacks' homes. Much less inside their thoughts and feelings. And blacks are just as ignorant of whites* […] and the less they knew about each other, the more they invented.” Now that Maniac has been exposed to the ugliness of racism and experienced some degree of ostracism himself, he has a better understanding of what fuels it: in his opinion, simple ignorance and a refusal to understand other perspectives or get too close to other people’s lives. Such ignorance allows harmful fabrications to take root and flourish, further dividing the community.

When Maniac hides in the town zoo, figuring he’s not wanted elsewhere, he is eventually found and coaxed to leave by Mars Bar (who has softened toward him) and Amanda, whose household he finally rejoins. The simplicity of the ending reflects the simplicity of Maniac’s perspective on racism throughout the story. Maniac doesn’t spontaneously heal the town’s deep-seated divisions; rather, his willingness to simply befriend individuals who are outwardly different from him, and even to live with them, is meant to signal a hopeful approach for the future. In this way, Spinelli vindicates Maniac’s perspective—the key to countering hostility and division, the book suggests, is friendship.

**Friendship**

Throughout the novel, a number of great friendships transcend age and race differences to promote change. The best example is the relationship between Maniac and Amanda. Their bond exemplifies the strength of friendship and the idea that two people can overlook differences to focus on the similarities that unite them. Maniac and Grayson’s friendship is special for different reasons. Although the two had a drastic age difference, their love for baseball and sports unite them. These strong friendships serve as a model for unity and mirror Maniac’s wish for the community of Two Mills.

**Unity**

Throughout the text, Maniac attempts to unite the racially divided town of Two Mills. Three major events mark this quest for unity. First is the gathering of both neighborhoods at the Cobble’s Knot. Second is Mars’ attendance at Russell and Piper McNab’s birthday party. Third is Piper and Russell’s visit to Mars’ home after he saves the two boys. Maniac’s quest for unity proves successful and, as a result, he is able to live with the Beale family without fearing major repercussions.

**Perseverance**

Perseverance an important theme in the novel "Maniac Magee". Perseverance is especially important to the character of Maniac, who has two main goals or purposes throughout the text: to help others and to help himself. Consequently, Maniac learns these purposes are quite reciprocal and during his quest he is faced with many challenges such as racism, homelessness, and death. Despite all of this, Maniac’s perseverance guides him and keeps him pushing toward his purpose. The reader is left feeling empowered and feels nothing is impossible with perseverance.

**Sports**

Sports proves to be an important and unique kind of theme in the novel "Maniac Magee". Sports unite characters in the novel and break down the walls that separate race and age. Maniac’s athleticism allows him to bring attention to his strengths rather than his skin color. Initially, the theme is presented as Maniac amazes Two Mills with a spectacular football catch and baseball strike out. As the novel continues, his athleticism helps him fit into the East End community during the time he lives with the Beales. As a culmination of the theme, Grayson and Maniac’s mutual love for baseball allows them to open up and negate their tendencies to be guarded.

***Myth Reality and Heroism:***

*Maniac Magee* is the story of an orphaned kid to whom ordinary rules don’t seem to apply: Jeffrey “Maniac” Magee doesn’t have parents, runs away from his gloomy adoptive home, and doesn’t go to school. What’s more, he distinguishes himself in the town of Two Mills by pulling off a series of unlikely deeds, which is how he becomes known as “Maniac.” The story is even told from the perspective of later years, giving the characterization of Maniac a legendary feel: “Maniac Magee was not born in a dump. He was born in a house, a pretty ordinary house, right across the river from here […] And he had regular parents, a mother and a father. […] Of course, to be accurate, he wasn't really Maniac then. He was Jeffrey.” The storytelling teeters on the edge of myth and reality, making Maniac seem mysteriously untouchable, yet also ordinary. Through this narrative approach, Spinelli suggests that despite his “maniac” reputation, Jeffrey Magee is ultimately an ordinary kid in the ways that matter most—especially when it comes to the genuine heroism of confronting fears and overcoming prejudices.

Maniac Magee is portrayed as a larger-than-life hero, who pulls off zany and improbable exploits that get retold over the years. When Maniac comes up against the town’s bullying Little League pitcher, [**Giant John McNab**](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/maniac-magee/characters/giant-john-mcnab), and keeps hitting homeruns, McNab tries to outsmart the new kid with an unconventional pitch: “It wasn't a ball at all, it was a frog, and McNab was on the mound cackling away, and the kid at the plate was bug-eyed. He'd never—*nobody'd* ever—tried to hit a fast*frog* before. So what did the kid do? He *bunted* it. […] The kid was trying for an inside-the-park home-run bunt—the rarest feat in baseball […] McNab could already feel his strikeout record fading to a mere grain in the sandlot of history.” Clearly, Maniac isn’t afraid to attempt things that seem improbable or even inexplicable to those around him. The excited tone—as if someone is breathlessly recounting the story years later—reinforces the legendary air surrounding Maniac at this point of the story.

Continuing with the legendary feel, the narrator sums up Maniac’s early weeks in Two Mills like this: “And how he came to be called Maniac. The town was buzzing. The schools were buzzing. […] The stranger kid. Scraggly. Carrying a book. Flap-soled sneakers. The kid who intercepted [high school quarterback] [**Brian Denehy**](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/maniac-magee/characters)'s pass to [the receiver] and punted it back longer than Denehy himself ever threw it. The kid who rescued [**Arnold Jones**](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/maniac-magee/characters) from **[Finsterwald](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/maniac-magee/characters/finsterwald)**'s backyard. The kid who tattooed Giant John McNab's fastball for half a dozen home runs, then circled the sacks on a bunted frog. Nobody knows who said it first, but somebody must have: ‘Kid's gotta be a maniac.’” Jeffrey Magee’s “maniac” status revolves around the fact that, though he looks unremarkable and even “scraggly,” he does things nobody in the town thinks is possible—he makes improbable sports plays, rescues kids who’ve been abandoned as a lost cause, and matter-of-factly confronts bullies. The legendary tone suggests that Maniac is a semi-mythical figure whose feats will go unmatched.

Yet, at the same time, Maniac is a deceptively ordinary kid. For instance, Maniac isn’t the infallible person others seemingly perceive him to be. When little Russell McNab is trapped on the trolley trestle—the same one on which Maniac’s parents were killed—Maniac is too traumatized to act, leaving another kid to act as the hero: “[**Mars Bar**](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/maniac-magee/characters/mars-bar-thompson) stared with growing astonishment at Maniac, whose wide, unblinking eyes were fixed on the trestle, yet somehow did not seem to register what was there. […] With the drenched, mud-footed kid clawing at him, he turned without a word, without a gesture, and left the platform and went downstairs. Shortly he appeared on the sidewalk below. He crossed Main and continued walking slowly [.]” This scene shows that Maniac is human—haunted by fears like anyone else, he sometimes can’t rise to the occasion. What’s more, other people are capable of doing the kinds of heroic acts that get attributed to Maniac, as Mars Bar does here.

When Maniac, dared by some younger kids, knocks on the door of Finsterwald (a terrifying neighbor who is rumored to make children disappear), he returns from the encounter unharmed. “The door closed. Maniac bounded down the steps and came jogging toward them, grinning. Three kids bolted, sure he was a ghost. The others stayed. They invented excuses to touch him, to see if he was still himself, still warm. But they weren't positively certain until later, when they watched him devour a pack of butterscotch Krimpets.” Maniac’s encounter with Finsterwald, though making the younger kids think he’s superhuman, actually demonstrates that heroism doesn’t mean being invincible; it simply means having the courage to be kind and reach out to people, especially when others won’t.

Thus, Spinelli’s bigger point about Maniac is that real heroism isn’t about flashy achievements, but about quite ordinary kindness (like knocking on an ostracized neighbor’s door). But by embedding Maniac’s less conspicuous struggles and acts of kindness within a story of seemingly larger-than-life actions, Spinelli taps into the magical, adventurous feel of childhood and encourages young readers to believe that lasting heroism is within their reach, too.

***Love, Loss and Home:***

[**Maniac**](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/maniac-magee/characters/jeffrey-lionel-maniac-magee)’s story is largely that of an orphan finding home—but it isn’t a tidy, decisive event. For Maniac, it’s a gradual, painful process in which he’s constantly aware of the losses he’s experienced in the past, and he fears facing them all over again. Maniac lost his parents in an accident when he was a little boy, then ran away from his aunt and uncle’s loveless household. When he winds up in the town of Two Mills around age 11, he experiences several different kinds of homes, being taken in by the Beale family, later taking shelter with a lonely old man named [**Grayson**](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/maniac-magee/characters/earl-grayson), and briefly living with the troubled McNabs. Through Maniac’s journey through various homes and his struggles with grief and homelessness, Spinelli argues that, while loss and pain cannot be avoided, they are worth facing in order to find genuine love and a sense of home.

Early in the story, Maniac perceives home in terms of his fear of lack, and his understanding of home is fragile as a result. When Maniac starts living with the Beale family, he doesn’t want them to use his nickname—bestowed by the strangers of Two Mills—in their house: “He told [[**Mrs. Beale**](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/maniac-magee/characters/mrs-beale)] what he told everyone. ‘I'm Jeffrey. You know me.’ Because he was afraid of losing his name, and with it the only thing he had left from his mother and father. Mrs. Beale smiled. ‘Yeah, I know you all right. You'll be nothing but Jeffrey in here. But—’ she nodded to the door—‘out there, I don’t know.’ She was right, of course. Inside his house, a kid gets one name, but on the other side of the door, it's whatever the rest of the world wants to call him.” In one way, Maniac’s real name, Jeffrey, is a connection to his dead parents. In another way, the use of his name establishes him as part of the Beale household—known here in a way that he isn’t known by people outside. It’s this sense of being known that he most fears losing, perceiving that the outside world could take it away from him.

While on his own, Maniac never attends school because it reminds him of his homeless status. When asked why he’s not in school, “Maniac felt why more than he knew why. It had to do with homes and families and schools, and how a school seems sort of like a big home, but only a day home, because then it empties out; and you can't stay there at night because it's not really a home, […] [a place where] where you walk right in the front door without knocking, where everybody talks to each other and uses the same toaster.” It’s not that Maniac objects to school on principle, but that he doesn’t want to face the reality of leaving school and having nowhere else to go. Other kids can take things for granted like not knocking and using the same toaster, but Maniac doesn’t have these things, and he intuits that going to school will only make that lack feel starker to him. In other words, he still defines home in terms of what he *doesn’t* have.

In the middle part of the story, Maniac begins to find security in a makeshift home founded on mutual love. After running away from the Beales (fearing he’s brought the town’s hostility on their home), Maniac finds himself making a home with Grayson, an elderly, lonely zoo employee, who becomes concerned about the orphaned kid and lets him sleep in an unused storage room. Before long, the old man’s concern transforms the shabby environment: “Maniac had a toaster oven now, compliments of his whiskered friend. In fact, little by little, Grayson had brought him a lot of things: a chest of drawers for his clothes, a space heater, a two-foot refrigerator, hundreds of paper dishes and plastic utensils, blankets, a mat to sleep on [...] In time the place was homier than [Grayson’s] own room at the Y.” But it isn’t the accumulation of possessions that makes the little room feel like home. Rather, it’s the fact that Grayson cares about Maniac and quietly goes out of his way to demonstrate it—giving Maniac a place to feel tangibly cared for, which he’s lacked for most of his life.

This is further illustrated when Maniac and Grayson celebrate Thanksgiving together in their makeshift home. After a generous feast and dancing to Grayson’s polka records, Maniac finds some paint and carefully marks the outside of the park shelter with a 101, naming their residence “101 Band Shell Boulevard.” It’s not a real address, but that doesn’t matter—by labeling their shelter, Maniac makes the symbolic point that he and Grayson, through shared affection, hospitality, and celebration, have now made a home together.

Having now experienced others’ love, Maniac comes to a more mature understanding of home, even amid loss. After Grayson dies of old age a few days after Christmas, Maniac, grieving and feeling orphaned anew, eventually finds his way back to Two Mills. He goes to live with the McNabs, an impoverished, dysfunctional household filled with trash, beer, and pests. Maniac realizes that he might have physical shelter here, but he doesn’t have a home: “Maniac lies between the two brothers, on the bed. […] Unable to sleep, asking himself: What am I doing here? Remembering: Hester and Lester [Beale] on his lap, Grayson's hug, corn muffin in the toaster oven. Thinking: ‘Who’s the orphan here, anyway?’” In other words, since getting a taste of a real home—a place where affection and simple comforts are shared—Maniac realizes that he, though an orphan, has had something that the neglected McNab kids still don’t have.

Later, Maniac leaves the McNabs and wanders back to the zoo where he first met Grayson, taking shelter in the buffalo enclosure. Discouraged and imagining that there’s nothing left for him in Two Mills, he’s awakened by a furious [**Amanda Beale**](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/maniac-magee/characters/amanda-beale), the first friend he made in town. Ranting at his stubbornness, Amanda talks sense into Maniac: “I don't care if you sleep on the floor or the windowsill or what—but you are going to sleep *there*and not *here*. And you are going to sleep there *tonight* and *tomorrow* night and the night after *that* and the night after *that* and *every* night […] *This* is *not* your *home*!” Amanda confirms what Maniac had perceived earlier—that home is where people care about him, a place where he can take for granted that he’s welcome.

The story ends with Maniac quietly walking home with Amanda, finding her sisterly outburst comforting. “He was quite content to let Amanda do the talking, for he knew that behind her grumbling was all that he had ever wanted.” To discover home in this way, Maniac has had to face his worst fears—rejection, loneliness, and effectively being orphaned all over again. Ultimately, he comes to believe that while loss cannot be outrun, real love is worth the risk.

***Human Dignity, connection and community:***

In some ways, *Maniac Magee* is the story of an exceptional individual: many scenes revolve around Maniac’s attention-grabbing accomplishments and the sensation they create around Two Mills. Yet, in another way, Maniac’s real achievements go relatively unnoticed, most notably his relationships with ignored or neglected people and the transformative effects these relationships can have. Such relationships, like those with Earl Grayson and the McNab boys, are sustaining for Maniac as well, as he sees that his own struggles and potential are connected to others’. By portraying Maniac’s quiet but meaningful relationships with other people in this way, Spinelli argues that human lives are interconnected, and that recognizing others’ potential can be transforming both for individuals and for communities at large.

After Maniac begins living with Grayson, an elderly zoo employee who becomes concerned about the homeless kid, Grayson’s life, too, is transformed when Maniac affirms his dignity and potential. When Maniac first meets Grayson, he sees a grizzled old man who’s been down on his luck. But when Grayson talks about the position he played in baseball’s minor leagues, he transforms before Maniac’s eyes. “Grayson said, ‘Pitcher.’ This word, unlike the others, was not worn at all, but fresh and robust. It startled Maniac. It declared: I am not what you see. I am not a […] bean-brained parkhand. […] I am a Pitcher.” Having fallen short of his baseball dreams, Grayson has spent most of his life believing he isn’t fit for much except maintenance jobs. But Maniac’s genuine interest helps Grayson reconnect with his old passion—and, more importantly, with his dignity.

Maniac sees Grayson’s inherent dignity, and, while it’s too late for Grayson to become a successful ball player, Maniac harnesses Grayson’s passion in order to teach him how to read—something Grayson’s always been ashamed of not knowing how to do. One of their reading lessons is described in baseball coaching terms: “But the kid was a good manager […] He would never let [Grayson] slink back to the showers, but kept sending him back up to the plate. The kid used different words, but in his ears the old Minor Leaguer heard: ‘Keep your eye on it. . . Hold your swing. . . watch it all the way in . . . Don't be anxious . . . Just make contact.’” This touching scene shows how Maniac cares for Grayson by recognizing his potential and encouraging him to be his best.

Maniac’s loving encouragement helps Grayson to reconnect with his own sense of purpose and dignity for the first time in decades: “The old man gave himself up willingly to his exhaustion and drifted off like a lazy, sky-high fly ball. Something deep in his heart […] soared unburdened for the first time in thirty-seven years, since the time he had so disgraced himself before the Mud Hens' scout and named himself thereafter a failure. […] it was the boy's embrace that covered and warmed him.” Grayson recovers a sense of his own dignity, thanks to Maniac’s readiness to see him as a person worthy of respect and encouragement.

When Maniac himself loses his sense of purpose through grief, caring for others helps pull him out of it—the recognition of others’ potential is connected to the recognition of one’s own. After Grayson’s death, Maniac, devastated, “drifted from hour to hour, day to day, alone with his memories, a stunned and solitary wanderer. He ate only to keep from starving, warmed his body only enough to keep it from freezing to death, ran only because there was no reason to stop. […] He returned only long enough to pick up a few things [including] the old black satchel that had hauled Grayson's belongings around the Minor Leagues.” When Maniac finds himself a “solitary wanderer” once again, he nearly stops taking care of himself, because he’s disconnected from other people’s sense of purpose and dignity and thus from his own.

In fact, Maniac is so stricken with grief that, once again homeless, he almost lets himself freeze to death: “Dreams pursued memories […] and the gaunt, beseeching phantoms that called to him had […] the faces of his mother and father and [**Aunt Dot and Uncle Dan**](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/maniac-magee/characters/aunt-dot-and-uncle-dan) and the Beales and Earl Grayson. […] No one else would orphan him.” Maniac is so wrapped up in sorrow over the many people he’s lost that he no longer sees any point in life—somewhat paralleling Grayson, who fell into a rut over his unrealized dreams. Spinelli doesn’t condemn this realistic response to grief, yet it’s only after Maniac is distracted by the arrival of the runaway McNab children that he pulls himself together and, by deciding to help the little boys, commits to living life again (remembering his own potential in the process). In this way, Spinelli suggests that commitment to the wellbeing of others is what makes one’s life worth living.

When Maniac moves in with the McNabs, offering himself as a positive role model in their neglectful home, he recognizes their potential, much as he did Grayson’s: “It was a maddening, chaotic time for Maniac. [...] When he asked himself why he didn't just drop it, drop them, the answer was never clear. […] In some vague way, to abandon the McNab boys would be to abandon something in himself. He couldn't shake the suspicion that deep inside Russell and Piper McNab […] were identical to Hester and Lester Beale. But they were spoiling, rotting from the outside in, like a pair of peaches in the sun.” Maniac’s reaction suggests that he knows he might have turned out much like the McNab boys if he hadn’t found loving encouragement—and that, if they received nurture, the McNabs might turn out more like the sweet-tempered, affectionate Beale kids that Maniac loves.

Maniac’s thinking about both himself and the people he meets—Earl Grayson, the Beales, the McNabs—echoes the book’s larger emphasis on community as a whole. Spinelli repeatedly emphasizes the importance of meeting people where they are, and how that mutual recognition of human dignity is transformative both for individuals and, potentially, for entire communities. In the book, the long-term outcome of such relationships isn’t always spelled out: for example, the McNab boys’ future is uncertain. But the very fact of Maniac’s commitment to them—showing concern for their welfare and resisting the racism and other harmful values they’ve absorbed—is shown to be a worthwhile effort in itself, even when the outcome is unknowable.

**Style**

**Point of View**

Maniac Magee is told through the eyes and voice of an omniscient third person narrator. The use of he, she, and it leads the reader to believe the narrator is familiar with the legend of Maniac Magee but isn’t personally involved in the story. The fact that the narrator interweaves the thoughts and feelings of the character into the story adds an omniscient element to the text.

This point of view works well for the story because it allows the reader to analyze the characters and story independently without being swayed by the opinions of a first person narrator. As the reader devours the text, he emotionally connects with the characters and rides an roller coaster of ups and downs with the characters.

**Setting**

Maniac Magee primarily takes place in the town of Two Mills, Pennsylvania. In the beginning of the novel, Maniac’s birthplace of Bridgeport is mentioned. Maniac’s aunt and uncle live in Hollidaysburg, Pennsylvania and the town is briefly mentioned as well.

The time period is vague partially to allow the story to transcend beyond time. It is assumed the novel takes place in recent times. The characters drive cars, watch TV, and eat pizza. Although the segregation of the town is more extreme than most would find in modern day towns, the reader is left to believe the time setting of the story is fairly recent.

**Language and Meaning**

The novel is easy to read and full of colorful, unusual language allowing the reader to create mental pictures while reading. Some terms such as zeps and krimpets are regional terms that are sometimes challenging to comprehend. Moderate to difficult sports terms may also pose a challenge to those who are sports novices.

**Structure**

Maniac Magee is divided into 46 short chapters and three separate parts. Each of the three parts feature a rising action, a climax, and an ending. Stories written this way are sometimes called episodic plots.

The first part chronicles Maniac’s past and his entrance into Two Mills. It continues by identifying the antagonists, Mars Bar Thompson and John McNab. This part also elaborates on Maniac becoming a member of the Beale family.

The second part tells the story of Grayson. Maniac’s relationship with Grayson is chronicled in great depth until his death.

The third part focuses on Maniac’s life after Grayson. It discusses Maniac moving into the McNab’s home and struggling to unite the East and West End. Maniac Magee culminates with the townspeople beginning to unite rather than segregate from one another.