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Pre-Reading

for

# The Pigman

by Paul Zindel



# Meet Paul Zindel



. . . *The Pigman* probably is successful now because it triggers discussions with kids about problems that are very important to them. I think that's just the way that books work and what's behind all authors writing books, whether they know it or not.

—Paul Zindel, *A Message from the Author*

**P**aul Zindel, the author of *The Pigman*, had a difficult childhood. He grew up without his father, he had a stormy relationship with his mother, and he had very little self-esteem.

Zindel was born in 1936 on Staten Island, New York. He was raised by his mother after his father abandoned the family when Zindel was only two years old. In search of work, his mother moved the family fifteen times during his childhood and adolescence. For this reason, he didn't form many close relationships with other children. Instead, he withdrew inward, observing the world around him from a distance. "All of my novels begin with real, specific moments from my own life," he says. In fact, everywhere in his work, readers can find reflections of Zindel's childhood and adolescence. In his autobiography, *The Pigman and Me*, Zindel writes:

*Eight hundred and fifty-three horrifying things had happened to me by the time I was a teenager. . . . If you haven't croaked before finishing [The Pigman], then you'd understand how I survived being a teenager.*

**Zindel Becomes a Writer** After Zindel was graduated from Wagner College, Staten Island, he taught high school chemistry for ten years. He quit his job as a teacher to begin writing. His first play, *The Effect of Gamma Rays on Man-in-the-Moon Marigolds*, is about a student from a troubled home who prepares an experiment about marigolds for her school's science fair. The play won a Pulitzer Prize as well as the New York Drama Desk Critic's Circle Award. Encouraged by an editor who had seen the play, Zindel wrote the novel *The Pigman*, a book that became a favorite of generations of teenaged readers and their teachers.

**Zindel Breaks New Ground** Most reviewers of young adult literature credit *The Pigman*, along with several other novels published during the 1960s, with establishing a new category of literature, the young adult (YA) novel. Since the novel was first published, in 1968, Zindel has written twelve other young adult books, as well as plays, a children's book, a series of books for middle school readers, and screenplays.

Zindel's ability to write about adolescents with honesty and humor has won him a wide audience and made him one of today's most well-known and respected writers of books for young people. *New York Newsday* recently wrote that Zindel is "the rare specimen of a grown-up who seems to have total recall of that emotional roller coaster ride."

Zindel is married and has two children. He says that he likes storytelling. "We all have an active thing that we do that gives us self-esteem, that makes us proud," he says. "It is necessary. I have to write stories because that's the way the wiring went in." Today, Zindel lives in Manhattan, where he continues to write.

# Introducing the Novel

*“This is a shocker of a book, written in a contemporary idiom. It is a haunting story. The book is startling and truthful and vivid.”*

—*Young Readers’ Review*

## A MODERN CLASSIC

In 1968, the year that *The Pigman* was published, few novels addressed the pressures that teenagers face in the language that teenagers themselves use. *The Pigman* does just that. A major reason for the book’s success is that it reveals teenagers’ thoughts, feelings, and longings accurately and honestly. The novel opened the door for other realistic fiction for young adults. Although *The Pigman* is more than thirty years old, it continues to speak to the needs and interest of teenagers.

The main characters in *The Pigman* are high school sophomores John Conlan and Lorraine Jensen. John wants to be accepted as the individual he is and has dreams of becoming an actor.

Lorraine has few friends, loves to read about psychology, and wants to be a writer. The lives of these two characters change dramatically when a middle-aged widower, Angelo (“The Pigman”) Pignati reaches out to them and becomes their friend. The lessons that they learn through their experiences with Mr. Pignati change the way they see themselves and the world around them.

## THE TIME AND PLACE

The story takes place in Staten Island, New York, in the late 1960s. During this period, public protests against racial discrimination and the war in Vietnam helped create a climate of rebelliousness against authority. Some teenagers openly rebelled by engaging in bad habits such as smoking, drinking alcoholic beverages, and using profanity. Teenagers held marches and sit-ins against the draft, demanded that their schools give them a voice in what they studied, and struggled to gain greater political power.

### Did You Know?

Staten Island, the setting of *The Pigman*, is the smallest of five boroughs that make up New York City, the largest city in the United States. A borough is a political division unique to New York City. The other four boroughs, in order of size from largest to smallest, are Brooklyn (which until the 1890s was a separate city), Queens, Manhattan, and the Bronx. In total,

these boroughs make up a city of over 7 million people.

When most Americans speak of New York City, they generally mean Manhattan, the home of Wall Street, the nation’s financial capital, and Broadway, the nation’s chief theater district. Staten Island residents are able to reach Manhattan by ferry.

## NEW YORK CITY'S FIVE BOROUGHS



### CRITIC'S CORNER

*"[John and Lorraine's] 'epic' makes a very funny book on one level because Mr. Zindel catches the bright, hyperbolic sheen of teen-age language accurately and with humor."*

—John Weston, *New York Times*

*"[The Pigman] is a somber and chastening story that gets better and better as it goes on."*

—David Rees, *The Marble in the Water*

*"Few books that have been written for young people are as . . . truthful about the human condition."*

—Diane Farrell, *Horn Book Magazine*

# Before You Read

## *The Pigman* Chapters 1–5

### FOCUS ACTIVITY

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Who is your best friend? Why is this person's friendship important to you?

#### Setting a Purpose

Read to find out how and why two teenagers become best friends.

### BACKGROUND

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#### Did You Know?

Some novels begin with a prologue, or short introduction. *The Pigman*, for example, begins with a prologue titled "The Oath." The purpose of a prologue is to give background information about the story that follows. As you read "The Oath," notice that it tells you what kind of story *The Pigman* will be and when, where, and how it will be told.

#### Who Is Talking?

*The Pigman* has two first-person narrators, John and Lorraine. They are the main characters in the novel as well as the "voices" that tell the story. John and Lorraine take turns explaining what happened, so that readers see events from John's point of view in one chapter and Lorraine's point of view in the next. Pay special attention to the comments that John and Lorraine make about each other. Like real-life best friends, they often have insights into each other's personality.

### VOCABULARY PREVIEW

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**avocation** [av ə kɑ' shən] *n.* hobby (p. 1)

**compassion** [kəm pash' ən] *n.* sympathy for other people; pity (p. 5)

**distort** [di stɔrt'] *v.* to twist the truth; to give a false impression (p. 5)

**mortified** [mɔr' ti fīd] *adj.* extremely embarrassed or ashamed (p. 7)

**patron** [pɑ' trən] *n.* person who provides financial support to artists or writers (p. 16)

**philanthropy** [fi lan' thrə pē] *n.* act of charity intended to help a person or a group of people (p. 12)

**prevarications** [pri var' i kɑ shənz] *n.* lies (p. 14)

**subliminally** [sub lim' ə nəl lē] *adj.* unconsciously (p. 4)

**subsidize** [sub' si dīz'] *v.* to provide financial aid (p. 16)