

Approved for use in all levels of English I

Summary of the Work:

After the death of his mother, fourteen-year-old Jerry Renault is searching for his identity and a place to belong. Jerry is a freshman during the 1970's at a private Catholic school, Trinity High, where Jerry is quickly exposed to a secret society of boys, The Vigils, who run the school. The Assistant Headmaster, Brother Leon, and other teachers at the school ignore the secret society and essentially allow them to rule the school using scare tactics. Brother Leon ends up recruiting the aid of the Vigils by talking to one of the leaders of the group, Archie Costello, in order to earn back school funds with an annual chocolate sale.

Jerry becomes a hero to his fellow classmates by standing up against the corrupt administration and the Vigils by refusing to sell the chocolates, but his fame dies quickly. Jerry stands alone against the entire school, but refuses to back down, which results in his eventual demise.

Rationale:

The Chocolate War is an ideal freshman selection because students can identify with the age of the main character, its school setting, and the major theme of the need to stand up for one's self even if you're the only one standing. This theme is repeated through a symbolic phrase seen on a poster in Jerry Renault's locker, "Do I Dare to Disturb the Universe?" Because of the theme and diverse characters, *The Chocolate War* easily lends itself to entire units on the breaking down of stereotypes, anti-bullying messages, and debates on the power and meaning of the final resolution.

The readers of this novel can not only relate to Jerry's inner conflicts and struggle for identity, but they can also relate to the harsh realities of school life, and the cruelty of bullies and abuse of authority. The novel paints a depressing picture of an individual fighting injustice alone.

The novel does not end wrapped up in a nice uplifting package, in fact, it is quite the opposite. It exposes the reader to the realities of the world through its microcosm setting of the school. Moreover, it uses the symbolism of the crucifix to show the sacrifice of the main character—the sacrifice of one's self in order to prove a point to the greater good. It's a discouraging end, but unfortunately, a realistic one that can empower the reader to think for him/herself, and stay true to his/her convictions against injustice. The final lesson for many students is to look beyond the mob mentality and always think for themselves in any situation.

Professional Reviews and/or Critical Essays:

Wilson's Senior High School 11/01/02
Notable/Best Books (A.L.A.)
Book Links (A.L.A.) 07/01/06
Wilson's Junior High School 11/01/05
School Library Journal

* Print resources are available from the library media center and libraries in the district. Contact any library media specialist to view the scholarly sources.

* Scholarly reviews are also available online through Books in Print and Gale. Contact the library media specialist to obtain username and password information to access the subscription database of full-text reviews.

Noted Distinction:

Readability:

- Lexile Score: 820
- Readability Level: 5.9

Learning Resources Guidelines:

- The novel meets the Learning Resources Guidelines.

Standard Alignment: ([link](#))

Approval:

Submitted to Committee:

Approved for Adoption: 1984

Notes on the Text:

(The best way to evaluate and understand a novel is to personally read the book in its entirety.)

Jerry Renault is a character students can easily relate to because of his desire to make his mark in the world in order to fight against the mundane as well as injustice.

The novel does have violence, some language, and realistic sexual content, which is why it is important to discuss the affects of bullying and abuse with students. The novel should be prefaced with discussion of maturity and strong content so that students are prepared for its stark realism and depressing themes.

Connection to the Curriculum:

The Chocolate War meets the curriculum focus of examining the human condition through the study of literature. It also provides the opportunity for students to study a variety of literary terms.

Additional Connections:

(AP, Honors, Essential/Applied, Dramas, Films, etc.)