

FREAK THE MIGHTY

RODMAN PHILBRICK
TEACHERS' NOTES

SYNOPSIS

Max lives in the basement (down under) of his grandparents' house and is perfectly happy to stay there. His brain is vacant, and he's at a 'dangerous age', or at least that's what Grim tells him. Besides, he reminds people too much of his father, on account of his size, so maybe it's better for everyone.

But then Kevin moves onto his street and everything changes. Max steps out from the shadows, and together they go off in search of yonder, in a fantasy world that Kevin's mind creates. Together they are nine feet tall. Together they are Freak the Mighty!

Inseparable, their lives become better in ways that neither could have imagined, but always lurking in the background is Kevin's life-limiting disability, and the dangers of Killer Kane – Max's criminal father.

When Killer Kane returns one night, the safety of Freak the Mighty is shattered, and Max finds himself in terrible danger. Memories of what happened to his mother resurface, and Max is left fighting for his life, and that of his surprising rescuers.

Reunited once more, the pair continue to adventure, until Kevin's disability finally overtakes him, and it becomes up to Max to tell the story of Freak the Mighty.

THEMES

This incredible novel explores what it means to be human. It teaches us not to judge people by their appearances, and the beauty that can be discovered from looking deeper than face value. It shows us the power of friendship and how it can transform people's lives and show them that they are much more than they ever thought they could be. Finally it allows us to see the magic of stories, and how anything can seem real, if we just believe hard enough.

DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS ACTIVITIES

MEMORIES

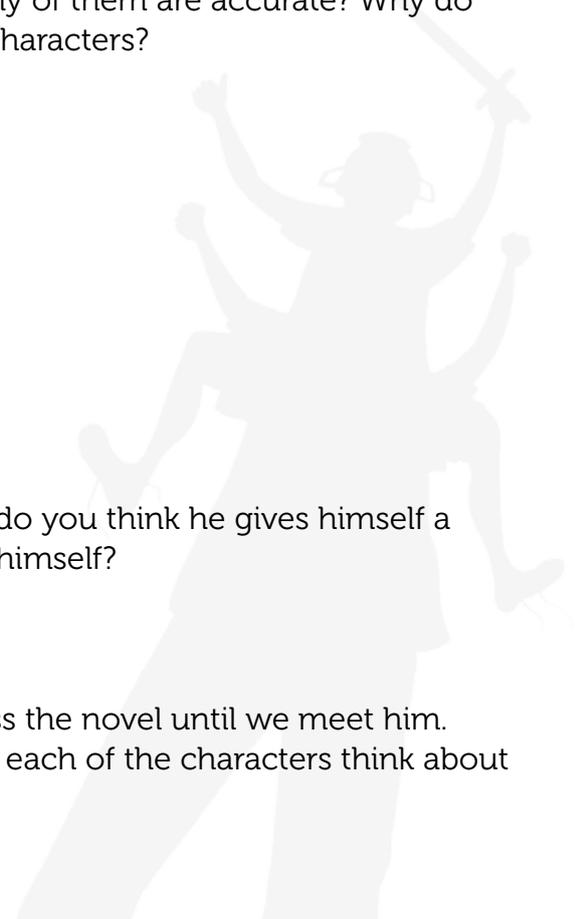
- The novel starts with Max's early childhood memories, and his first memory of Kevin. 'Looking sort of fierce is how I remember him.'p8. How accurate do you think this memory is? How does it marry with what you know about Kevin?
- Discuss your early childhood memories? Do you see any of them differently now you are older?
- Do you remember any of your friends from nursery school? What did you first think of them? Has that opinion changed now?
- Kevin says that 'Remembering is just an invention of the mind. [...] It means that if you want to, you can remember anything, whether it happened or not.'p175 Do you agree with this statement? Do you have any memories that you think are really inventions? How does this link to Kevin and Max's friendship?
- 'So I wrote the unvanquished truth stuff down and then kept on going, for months and months, until it was spring again, and the world was really and truly green all over. By the time we got here, which I guess should be the end, I'm feeling okay about remembering things. And now that I've written a book who knows, I might even read a few.'p197 Why did Max not want to remember things before Freak? How did his friendship with Kevin change his opinion of memories?

NICKNAMES

- Nicknames (or sobriquets!) are a key feature of the novel. What do you think each of these nicknames suggest about the characters? Do you think any of them are accurate? Why do you think Max has so many more nicknames than other characters?
 - Kicker
 - Mad Max
 - Max Factor
 - Maxi Pad
 - Earthling
 - Grim
 - Fair Gwen of Air
 - Faithful Steed
 - Freak
- Kevin calls himself 'Robot Man' when he is younger. Why do you think he gives himself a nickname? What do you think he wants it to show about himself?

MAX'S FATHER

- Information is gradually revealed about Max's father across the novel until we meet him. Which points made do you think are significant? What do each of the characters think about him? How does that impact their thoughts about Max?



- How does looking like him impact Max? How does it affect his relationships with others?
- How does Max describe him when they meet again? How does he change Max, even in a short space of time?
- There are lots of juxtapositions in the ways that Max describes being around his father such as feeling empty even though his father is filling all the space. Find three examples of juxtapositions and explain what they suggest about the impact of Max's father on Max.

MAX'S BRAIN

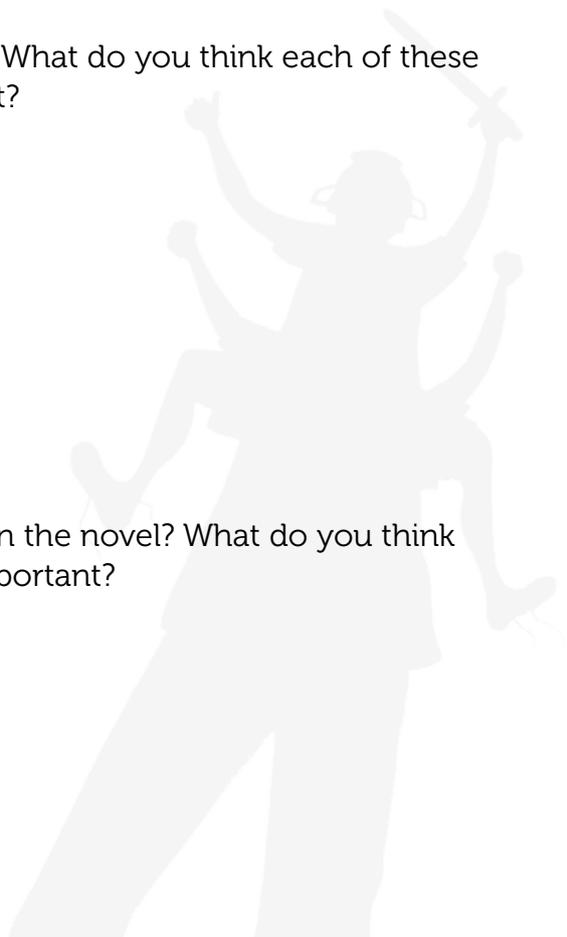
- Max talks constantly about having a vacant brain. Which moments in the novel suggests that this isn't true? Where is Max shown to be observant and intelligent?
- After realising that Kevin has succeed in teaching Max to read, Max's reading skills tutor says that 'Max, the tests have always shown that you're not dyslexic or disabled, and this proves it. As you know, heh heh, my personal opinion has always been that you're lazy and stubborn and you didn't want to learn.'p102 What do you think the truth is? Why do you think Max always struggled before Kevin?
- Max talks about being empty when his father returns. How does this link to his life before Freak?
- At the end of the novel, Max writes the story of Freak the Mighty. Why do you think he was able to do this, when at the start of the novel he believes he is unable to read or write?

SYMBOLS

- There are several recurring symbols that across the novel. What do you think each of these suggest? Are there any others that you think are important?
 - Kevin's crutch
 - Photos of Grim
 - Kevin's dictionary
 - Max's fake walkman
 - Kevin's watch
 - The ornithopter bird

THE USE OF STORIES

- What is the significance of each of the stories referenced in the novel? What do you think each of them suggest? Which do you think is the most important?
 - King Arthur
 - Frankenstein
 - The nativity story
 - Gulliver's Travels
 - The Ice Age





- Kevin creates multiple stories across the novel and plays multiple roles. Why do you think he does this? How does each role help him? Who do you think the real Kevin is? 'sometimes I'm more than Kevin.'p97

APPEARANCES

- There is a real focus on appearances in the novel, and in making assumptions about others based on these. Why do you think Max describes the appearance of every person he meets in such detail? Why does what they look like matter to him? Find 5 examples of his descriptions and explain what they show us about each character.
- Why do you think Kevin is the first character to look beyond Max's appearance? Why do you think he doesn't focus on appearances like Max does?
- What was your first impression of Loretta? Which quotations made you feel that way about her? Were you wrong? What about Iggy?
- Max says 'It all goes to show, like Grim says, that you can't always judge a book by the cover.'p168 What do you think he learns about appearances throughout the novel? How do you think he changes his opinions?
- Towards the end of the novel, Grim says 'The man is an accident of nature [...] All you got from him is your looks and your size. You've got your mother's heart, and that's what counts.'p172 What does this suggest about the value of appearances? What does this show us about Grim's character development?

FAMILY

- How does Max's family differ from Kevin's? How is it similar? How do their different families impact their senses of self?
- What is the difference between Grim and Gram, how do their differing parenting styles affect Max?
- Is Grim always a bad parent figure for Max? Find some examples in the novel that show you that this isn't always the case.
- Neither Max, nor Kevin has a father that is present in their lives. How does this impact them and their friendship?

FRIENDSHIP

- Is the friendship between Max and Kevin equal? Does it need to be? Find quotations from the novel to support your ideas.
- Why is the 'Freak the Mighty' moment in English class a changing moment for them and their relationship? 'you can't really get what it means to be Freak the Mighty unless you are Freak the Mighty.'p177 What does Kevin mean by this? Why is the relationship between them so unique?
- After Kevin dies, Grim tells Max, 'You know what? Most of us go all the way through life and

we never have a friend like Kevin. So maybe you should count yourself lucky.’p195 Why is their friendship so special? Why were each of them so lucky to have each other?

TRUTH AND LIES

- Kevin says that ‘Books are like truth serum – if you don’t read, you can’t figure out what’s real’p29. Do you agree with this statement? Why? Why not? How does this quote shape Max’s opinions? How does it link to the rest of the novel?
- Who do you think the most truthful character is in the novel? Who do you think is the least?
- On Christmas Eve, Grim says: ‘I’m telling tales, my dear, not lies. Lies are mean things, and tales are meant to entertain.’p119 Which characters would you associate with lies in the novel? Which ones with tales? What do you think the difference is?
- When Max’s father returns he tells Max that ‘They poisoned you against me, I know that [...] Give it time, you’ll see the truth.’p129. Do you think Killer Kane believes his own lies? Why does Max initially not question him?
- After Kevin dies, Dr Spivak says ‘I don’t think it was a lie, Maxwell, do you? I think he needed something to hope for and so he invented this rather remarkable fantasy you describe. Everybody needs something to hope for. Don’t call it a lie. Kevin wasn’t a liar.’p193 How does Dr Spivak’s point link to what Grim said earlier in the novel? Do you think Max really believed Kevin, or did he too ‘need something to hope for’?

SIMILES

Rodman Philbrick uses lots of similes throughout *Freak the Mighty*. Find one for each character and explain what it suggests about them.

CREATIVE TASKS

USING A STIMULUS

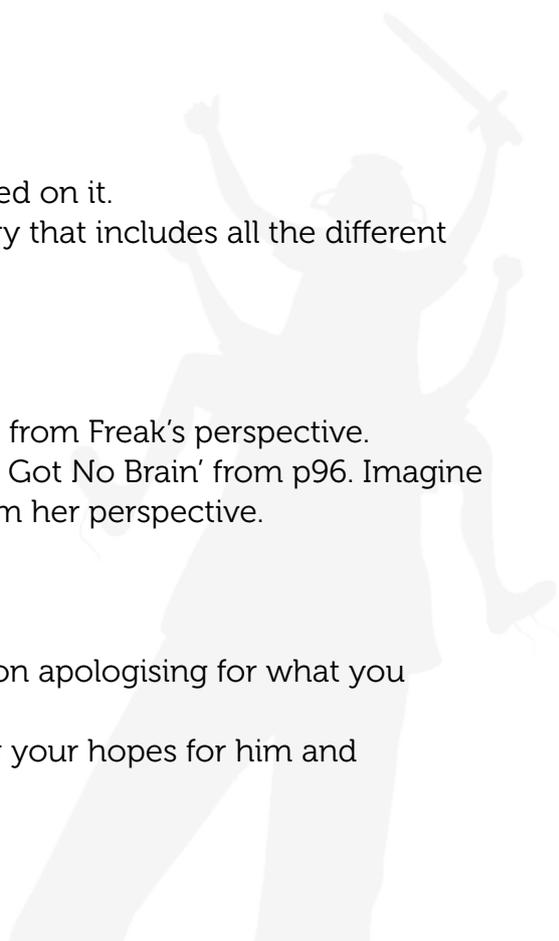
- Pick one of the chapter names and write a short story based on it.
- Using the front cover as your inspiration, write a short story that includes all the different elements of it.

CHANGING THE PERSPECTIVE

- Re-read Chapter 2 ‘Up From The Down Under’ and retell it from Freak’s perspective.
- Re-read Chapter 12 ‘Killer Kane, Killer Kane Had A Kid Who Got No Brain’ from p96. Imagine you are the teacher, Mrs Donelli, and retell the chapter from her perspective.

UNWRITTEN LETTERS

- Imagine you are Max’s dad. Write a letter to Max from prison apologising for what you have done.
- Imagine you are Kevin, write a last letter to Max explaining your hopes for him and his future.



FREAK THE MIGHTY

- Imagine a new quest for Freak the Mighty and write it as a cartoon or short story.
- Create your own superhero. Pick a name and create a character profile for them.

PROMOTING THE NOVEL

- You work in the marketing department for Usborne publishing. Plan a marketing campaign to promote Freak the Mighty. Include:
 - A poster to go up in school libraries
 - A bookmark to be given to secondary school students
 - A review of the book (can be written or recorded)
 - An advert in a newspaper or magazine
 - Merchandise to be sold in bookshops

