



EDUCATORS GUIDE

Penny from Heaven

JENNIFER L. HOLM



GRADES 3–7

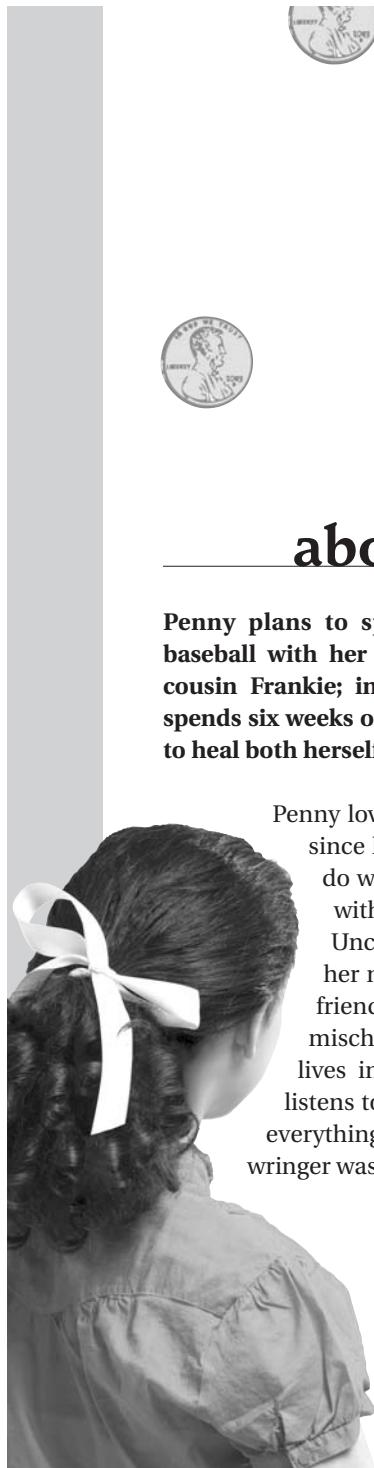
themes

Family • Friendship
Intergenerational Relationships • Death
Coming-of-Age • Forgiveness

curriculum connections

Language Arts • History • Science
Drama/Arts • Writing





about the book

Penny plans to spend the summer of 1953 listening to baseball with her Uncle Dominic and swimming with her cousin Frankie; instead she severely injures her arm and spends six weeks of her summer in the hospital, which helps to heal both herself and her family.

Penny loves her father's big, noisy Italian family, but since he died, her mother won't have anything to do with them. Still Penny gets to spend Sundays with her paternal relatives, and she helps her Uncle Nunzio in his grocery store as much as her mother will allow. She and Frankie, her best friend and cousin, always manage to get into mischief, and her favorite uncle, Dominic, who lives in his car and wears house slippers, often listens to the Dodgers with her. All in all, Penny has everything she wants, until her arm is caught in a wringer washing machine, and she almost loses her life.

pre-reading activity

Holm's portrayal of 1953 familial social life contrasts dramatically from that of today. After brainstorming a list of questions to ask, focusing on changes in technology, morals, medicine, education, and family values, ask students to interview someone they know who was at least 11 years old in 1953. Students may choose audio or video tape for their interview, and provide a written transcript of their recordings. Have students share the most interesting answer they receive with the class and post transcripts within the classroom.



vocabulary/ use of language

After looking up the words in the dictionary, have students use the following words in a complete sentence using context clues so that the reader will be able to determine the meaning of the word: *hermit* (p. 3); *frothing* (p. 31); *mischiefous* (p. 63); *smirks* (p. 92); *traitor* (p. 129); *grimaces* (pp. 142 and 229).

In small groups have students share their sentences and write a short humorous paragraph using some of their "found" sentences, adding, deleting, and rearranging as necessary. Have students present their passages to the class.

thematic connections

questions for group discussion

Family—Holm emphasizes the differences between Penny's Italian family and her mother's family throughout the story. Ask students to identify the characteristics that make the families so different. Why are the traditions of each family equally important to Penny? How do the families show their love to Penny in different ways? How are their expressions of love the same?

Friendship—Even though Frankie and Penny are cousins, they are also best friends. What qualities do each of them possess that draws them to one another? Discuss with students how their differences make their friendship stronger. How do they rely on one another to help them through the rough times? Why is Penny so willing to do what Frankie asks of her, even when she knows she might get in trouble?

Intergenerational Relationships—Penny's relationships with her grandmothers are as different as the grandmothers themselves. What lessons does she learn from Nonny that she can't learn from Me-me, and vice versa? Why does Uncle Dominic play such an important role in her life?



Death—The death of Penny’s father drastically changes the lives of his family members, in part because of the way he died. How is Uncle Dominic’s life changed by his brother’s death? How does the truth about her father’s death alter its emotional impact on Penny’s life? How is Penny directly influenced by her mother’s loss? On page 233, Penny wants to tell people, “almost dying is awful easy. It’s the living that’s hard.” How has her life reflected this statement?

Coming-of-Age—Penny experiences a series of traumatic situations during the summer and her life is altered because of each event. Her dog, Scarlet O’Hara, dies; she almost dies in an accident; she discovers the truth about her father’s death; and her mother begins to date. How is Penny a better person because of her responses to what occurs?

Forgiveness—On page 242, Penny says, “It’s my turn finally to give him something he won’t give himself. Forgiveness.” How does Penny give Uncle Dominic forgiveness? What other characters give the gift of forgiveness?



connecting to the curriculum

Language Arts—The author uses allusion by referring to the song “Pennies from Heaven” throughout the book. Ask students to read the lyrics, which are printed in the front of the book, then discuss how the song relates to the story and the characters in the book. In small groups have students rewrite the lyrics, using original wording where appropriate, to tell the specific story of Penny and her family. Have groups present their new song to the class.

History—Penny doesn’t understand why her father was put in an internment camp, and no one seems to be able to answer her questions. Ask students to research the arrest and internment of non-naturalized Italian Americans during World War II and to write a letter of explanation to Penny. Students should assume the voice of a government official, the arresting officer, one of the family members, or someone else that might have had a role in the arrest.





Science—Penny's mother is fearful that Penny will contract polio from swimming in a public pool. Ask pairs of students to investigate polio to discover its history, causes, effects, and cures. Then ask them to make a "Polio—Then and Now" public health brochure with the information they discovered. Display the brochures in the classroom.

Drama/Art—Chapter 13 is about Penny's birthday, and the imagery allows the reader to clearly picture the different events. Ask students to create a birthday card, illustrating one aspect of Penny's birthday to display or to write a script of one of the events in the chapter and perform it for the class.

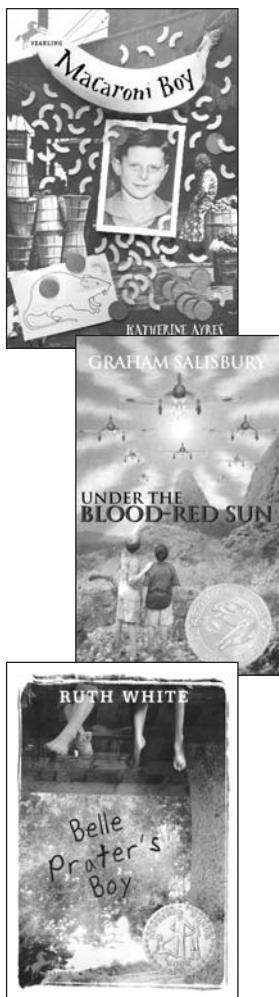
Writing—*Penny from Heaven* was inspired by the author's mother's family. At the end of the book, there is an Author's Note and a family album. Have students bring in a family photo or memento that is special to them. Then ask each student to write the story behind the item including descriptions of the relatives involved. Ask for volunteers to read their stories to the class.



Guide prepared by Susan Geye, Library Media Specialist,
Crowley Ninth Grade Campus, Crowley, Texas.

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Katherine Ayres

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Belle Prater's Boy ♫

Ruth White

Grades 5 up

Friendship • Family Relationships
Coming-of-Age

Yearling paperback

978-0-440-41372-1 (0-440-41372-9)

♫ = Listening Library audio available

internet resources

Wikipedia

en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Italian-American

The free encyclopedia's page on the history of Italian Americans in the United States.

CNN

www.cnn.com/US/9709/21/italian.relocation

A CNN news report about the internment of Italian Americans during World War II.

Una Storia Segreta

www.segreta.org

This Web site is based on the book that inspired Jennifer L. Holm to explore the "secret story" in *Penny from Heaven*.

Kids Health

kidshealth.org/parent/infections/bacterial_viral/polio.html

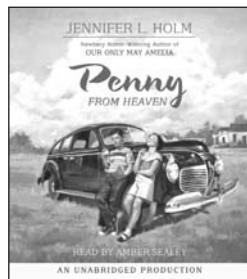
The definition, causes, and cures of polio.

Ad Classix

www.adclassix.com/ads/46gewasher.htm

A picture of a 1946 wringer washer.

also available on audio



Penny from Heaven

Listening Library unabridged CD

978-0-7393-3111-8 (0-7393-3111-6)

LIISTENTING
LIIBRARV

about the author



Photo © 2006 Jodi One

When I was a kid, I liked to read. A lot. One of our neighbors said recently that his clearest memory of me as a child was watching me rake the lawn one-handed while I read a book with the other! In fact, the highlight of a particular summer vacation was not, for me, going on the water slide at an amusement park, but rather stopping at a bookstore with a great kid's section and discovering—gasp!—that my favorite author had written four more books.

I was born in California across from a zoo and then we lived on Whidbey Island in the Puget Sound, and then moved again to Audubon, Pennsylvania, where I spent most of my childhood. My dad was a pediatrician, and my mom a pediatric nurse. We had a dog named Ruffy who had a bad habit of chasing skunks and a hamster named Sneaker who liked to curl up in my hair and fall asleep (he was a very mellow hamster). My childhood has always been my main source of inspiration for my writing. Another big influence during these years were comic books and cartoon strips. My brothers and I would fight over the big color funny section of the Sunday newspaper. I still love comic books and graphic novels and I think reading them has helped make me a better writer.

I really started writing as a student at Dickinson College. After I graduated, I moved to New York City where I became a broadcast producer of television commercials and music videos. I enjoyed working in television, but I had always wanted to be a writer. . . .

I'm trying to stay out of trouble these days. I still prefer reading to amusement parks, and on occasion, I rake the lawn while reading a book. Although I confess I don't seem to get many leaves up that way. I now split my time between writing and taking care of my son, Will, and my daughter, Millie. My children, my husband, Jonathan Hamel, and I live in northeastern United States with one slightly stinky cat named Princess Leia Organa.

*For more information on Jennifer L. Holm, visit her Web site at:
www.jenniferholm.com*

**a conversation with
jennifer l. holm**

**Q: What were you like as a child? Is there any of you in Penny?
You write such a rich family story. What was your family life
like during your childhood?**

A: Actually, my childhood doesn't bear much of a resemblance to Penny's. This is mostly because I didn't grow up in a town with a lot of relatives (except for my four brothers!) We did spend a fair amount of time with my mother's family in New Jersey, so I had a good sense of what her childhood was like from a young age. I guess I was envious of having all those relatives nearby.

In terms of personality, I was a little like Penny. I was a real tomboy because of all those brothers, and my best friends were always boys (like Penny and Frankie).

Q: *Penny from Heaven* was inspired by your mother's childhood. When did it occur to you that there was a novel to be developed from her story? Did your mother read the novel in its various stages? What was her reaction upon reading the final novel and upon hearing that it received the prestigious Newbery Honor?

A: My parents, my husband, and I had dinner one night and my mom and I started reminiscing about her family and the Italian American traditions. My husband found it all very fascinating because he had never heard of what we were talking about (many of my Italian relations died before we married, so he never met them).

It sort of hit me that many of these things that I took for granted as a child—meals that lasted all day, family dropping in and out—were dying traditions and I wanted to remember them before I forgot. So writing *Penny from Heaven* really became an exercise in remembering for me.

My mom read one of the later drafts of the manuscript and she loved it. When I called to tell her about the Newbery Honor, she cried (happy tears!)

Q: While doing research for the novel you stumbled upon the “secret story” or “storia segreta” of the treatment of the Italian American community during World War II. How did you feel when you discovered this information? Did you know right away that you’d incorporate this piece of history into *Penny from Heaven*? What do you hope young readers gain by learning this secret?

A: It was very surprising for me to learn about how Italians were treated during World War II. As I had never heard about it, I assumed that a lot of people my age and younger hadn't either, and I felt it was a story that needed to be told. Also, my great-grandparents were from Italy and they didn't speak English very well and I could see how in this situation, they might have been quite fearful.

I hope young readers are not quick to judge people harshly just because they are from a different background.

Q: What is your advice to aspiring young writers? To students doing research? What type of questions do young readers ask when you visit schools, libraries, and bookstores?

A: My best advice is to read, read, read! Read *anything*—books, comics, the back of the cereal box. It will give you the best background for becoming a writer. As for research, don't be afraid to ask questions. You'll be surprised how helpful people can be!

Kids really seem to connect with Penny's family. Especially how the relatives are quirky, and don't get along at times, but in the end the one thing they have in common is their love of Penny.

They're also fascinated with some of the period details, like the wringer washing machine and the polio epidemic. One girl told me, "Wow, it sure was dangerous to do the laundry back then! Maybe I'll stop complaining."

And everyone wants to talk about Frankie. As a character, he really seems touch a nerve with kids and adults. I guess because we've all known someone who was a little Frankie-esque . . . a good friend who skirted trouble.

Q: What are you writing now that we can look forward to reading?

A: My next novel takes place in Key West, Florida. I sort of hinted at my family's Key West connection in *Penny from Heaven* with Me-me being from there and missing sugar apple ice cream. In real life, my mother's maternal grandmother was a "Conch" (native of Key West). This novel has been especially fun to research as I've gotten to spend time in beautiful Key West. My husband likes it, too, since he's gotten to do a lot of scuba diving!



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MAUDE MARCH
Audrey Couloumbis

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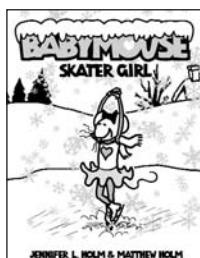
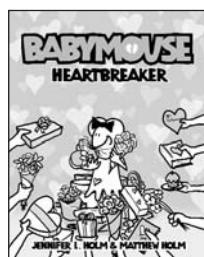
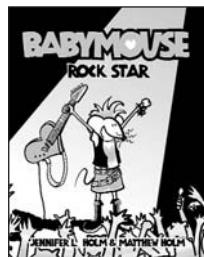
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