



A Teacher's Guide to *Jerk, California*

by Jonathan Friesen

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Ages 12 up

Reading levels: Middle and High school

Curriculum tie-ins: English, Psychology, Geography, Social Studies, Sociology, Family Planning units, Chronic disease studies, Inter-personal relationships/Ostracism units.

Creative writing: Reclaim the Name Teen Fiction writing contest. Entries due October 31, 2008. For information, please visit <http://www.jonathanfriesen.com/contest.html>

About the Book

Twitch, Jerk, Freak—Sam Carrier has been called them all. Because of his Tourette Syndrome, Sam is in near constant motion with tics and twitches and verbal outbursts. So, of course, high school is nothing but torment. Forget friends; forget even hoping that beautiful, perfect Naomi will look his way. And home isn't much better with his domineering stepfather reminding him that the only person who was more useless than Sam was his dead father, Jack. But then an unexpected turn of events unearths the truth about his father. And suddenly Sam doesn't know who he is, or even where he'll go next. What he does know is that the only girl in the world who can make him happy and nervous at the same time is everywhere he turns . . . and he'd give anything just to be still.

About the Author

Jonathan Friesen lives in northern Minnesota on a small farm with his wife, three children, and a growing number of animals. A public-school teacher for fourteen years, he brings the passion and emotion with which he taught into the pages of his young adult novels. Described as “riveting” and “passionate,” his raw style is the answer for teens looking for something real and unvarnished. Visit his web site at: www.jonathanfriesen.com.

A Note to Teachers

Dear friends,

I'm so pleased to share *Jerk, California*, my debut novel, with you and your students. From page one, the tormented heart of Sam Carrier, a high-school senior reeling from the isolation brought on by Tourette Syndrome, is thrown wide open. His cross-country journey to self-acceptance will have you cheering.

It's the story I spent a lifetime trying not to tell. Not because it didn't need to be told, but because it contains so many elements of my own thirty-year fight with Tourette's. In a real sense, this story, this condition, is my own heart-shaped beach ball jammed underwater. I hoped to hide it—hoped no one would notice. Thankfully, I lost my grip, and my heart popped into the light for all to see. The agonies and victories portrayed in the book are brutally honest, and together paint a picture of a young man desperate to discover how to live and love inside a constantly jerking body.

But for all the “me” that fills these pages, the greater story here is as universal as hope itself. Sam discovers his core problem is not the disease that racks his body, or even the girl who consumes his thoughts, it's the deceased father who lays claim to his heart.

Like so many teens, Sam realizes he can't know who he is until he settles the question of whose he is. His answer, and the life-change that results, makes this book so important for young readers. As teens walk their own paths, it's time that they reclaim their true names.

I hope you enjoy *Jerk, California*.

Warmly,

Jonathan Friesen

Pre-Reading: About Tourette Syndrome

Tourette Syndrome (TS) is a neurological disorder characterized by multiple involuntary body movements and vocalizations called tics. These tics are rapid and sudden movements that occur repeatedly in the same way and occur over a period of more than one year. Tics periodically change in the number, frequency, type, and location and wax and wane in their severity.

Symptoms can include: eye blinking, squinting, mouth stretching, head jerking, shoulder shrugging, arm or leg jerking, hopping or jumping, throat clearing, sniffing. The symptoms of TS vary from person to person and range from very mild to severe. Many people who have TS symptoms are not diagnosed if the symptoms do not significantly interfere with their lives or due to lack of awareness.

Many people with TS also have associated neurological disorders such as ADHD and/or Obsessive Compulsive Disorder.

Tourette Syndrome is usually inherited.

At this time there is no cure for TS. Researchers are working to find the cause of TS in the hopes of finding a cure in the future. Positive interventions can help individuals with TS reach their fullest potential.

For more information and great educational resources, visit the Tourette Syndrome Association's website:<http://www.tsa-usa.org/>

Major Characters

Sam Carrier—Tourette Syndrome has made life miserable. He's grown to hate the biological father that he never met and through whom the disease came.

James Keegan—Sam's biological father. A good, loving man who died when Sam was two, and passed on the inherited disease.

Old Bill Carrier—Sam's abusive step-dad who fills Sam's mind with lies about his true father.

Lydia Carrier—Sam's mother, who is terrified of her abusive second husband.

Naomi Archer—A wealthy and beautiful girl, out of Sam's league, but never out of his mind.

George the Coot—Naomi's Grandfather, and James Keegan's best friend. He's the town "crazy" who mentors Sam throughout the summer. From him, Sam begins to hear the truth about his Dad.

Geography: Major Settings and stops on Sam and Naomi's Journey to California

Pierce—fictional town in central Minnesota

Henderson—actual town in Nebraska

Hillsboro—actual town in Kansas

Grand Junction—actual town in Colorado

Las Vegas—actual town in Nevada

Jerk—fictional town in California

Major Themes and Threads

Being Different

Family/Love/Forgiveness

Isolation/Ostracism

Personal Responsibility

Blame

Discussion Questions

- When we first meet Sam, Tourette's syndrome controls him. What do you see as the biggest challenge to living with this condition?
- Embracing his rightful name is a turning point for Sam, as is his secret naming of Naomi's child. What role do names play in who people become?
- We all attempt to hide the obvious, and like Sam who attempts to draw attention away from his Tourette's, we all fail. Have you caught yourself trying to conceal something that might just need to be accepted?
- Sam desperately wants to be with Naomi, yet he can barely look her in the eye. Is it possible to have a deep relationship with another before accepting one's own unattractive features?
- George doesn't seem to care about Sam's comfort, yet he makes the perfect mentor, and Sam warms to him. Who are the mentors or "trusted guides" who have affected your life for the better and why?
- In the beginning of the novel, Naomi calls Sam her hero. How do Sam's actions throughout the story live up to your definition of a hero? In what ways does he fail?
- Sam hates Old Bill, yet longs to make him proud. How can these feelings exist at the same time?
- What circumstances justify a peace-at-all-costs attitude, such as the one Lydia displays?
- Sam's journey frees him because he discovers the truth about who he is and whose he is. Has a personal journey ever changed how you view yourself and the world around you?
- Why was it necessary for Sam/Jack to return and face Old Bill?
- When Sam moves out of the house, his mom begins calling him by his rightful name. What is responsible for this change?
- Compare Sam Carrier and Jack Keegan. What are the greatest differences between them?
- What qualities does Sam possess that enable him to persevere despite a life of ridicule?
- How did the birth of Lane, the "Golden Child," affect Sam?
- Why did George the Coot wait so long to get involved in Sam's life?
- As the road-trip proceeds, Sam becomes more confident, and Naomi more needy. What causes this turnaround?
- At what point in the story does Sam first feel a sense of connection with his father?

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--Naomi attempts to convince Sam to leave George's trail. What does Sam's reaction say about the change that's occurring inside him?

--Discuss the ways that Sam feels personally connected to Naomi's unborn child.

--Sam never outright lies to Turk or Trish, yet for a time, he allows them to believe the marriage story. Naomi tells a boldface lie about the matter. Discuss the moral difference between the two deceptions.

--Discuss the evidence that Old Bill suffers from self-hatred.

--Naomi's relationship with Sam begins as one of convenience. At what point does it first become more?

--After George dies, Sam sits with the shoebox, the gift George had planned on giving him. Why is he afraid to open it? What is he afraid of?

--How would Sam's life be different had he never gone on the road trip?

--Why was Sam unable to leave the pictures of his father hanging on his wall?

--The legend of Farkel the Animal-Hating Butcher turns out to be untrue. Discuss how hearsay can destroy a person's life.

--Speculate on what the future holds for Jack and Naomi.

--George and the people Sam meets on the trip refuse to call him anything but Jack. What effect does this have on him?

--In what ways does Sam's arrival in California bring healing to his grandmother?

--As the story begins, what is Sam's greatest desire? Has this changed by the end?

Writing Activities and Projects

--What do you think would have happened if the book had one last chapter? What might be the outcome of Sam/Jack and Naomi's return to Minnesota? How would their relationship be affected? What is their future like? Brainstorm about the many directions a last chapter might have taken. Then, pick one idea and write the chapter.

--Author Jonathan Friesen says, "Before I begin to write a new book, I 'ask' each character to write a letter to me. I find out much I did not know! One of the most interesting letters I received was from Sam. Here is a portion of Sam's letter:

It's not so bad, really. I mean, you settle in—settle in to loud and ugly (which describes life with Old Bill well). The jerking is a constant. It's like blinking, but noticeable. You

don't even realize when you blink, but what if you did? And what if it wasn't a blink, but a shoulder jump so fierce it rams into your ear and sets it ringing? What if your shoulder jumped up and nailed your head ten times every minute, six hundred times an hour, 9,600 times every sixteen hour day? Well, then you'd have me.

And you'd know why Old Bill is embarrassed—why he doesn't claim the twitchy freak as his own. You'd know why loneliness sucks, and why I hang on to it so tight. Finally, you'd understand why I hate Dad so much. Cause it's all his fault. He gave it to me and kicked. Great inheritance.”

If you were the character in a novel, and you were writing a letter to the author, what would you say about your life? Write that letter.

--Have you ever been embarrassed by the actions or habits of a friend or family member? Or has a friend or family member displayed embarrassment at your conduct? What affect did this have on your relationship? Using examples from both your life and Sam's, write a brief essay on the pain this emotion causes.

--Listen to the song, *JerkCA*, by the band *Halloween, Alaska*. What sentiments do the words express? How does this song relate to the book?

Speak

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