

educator's guide

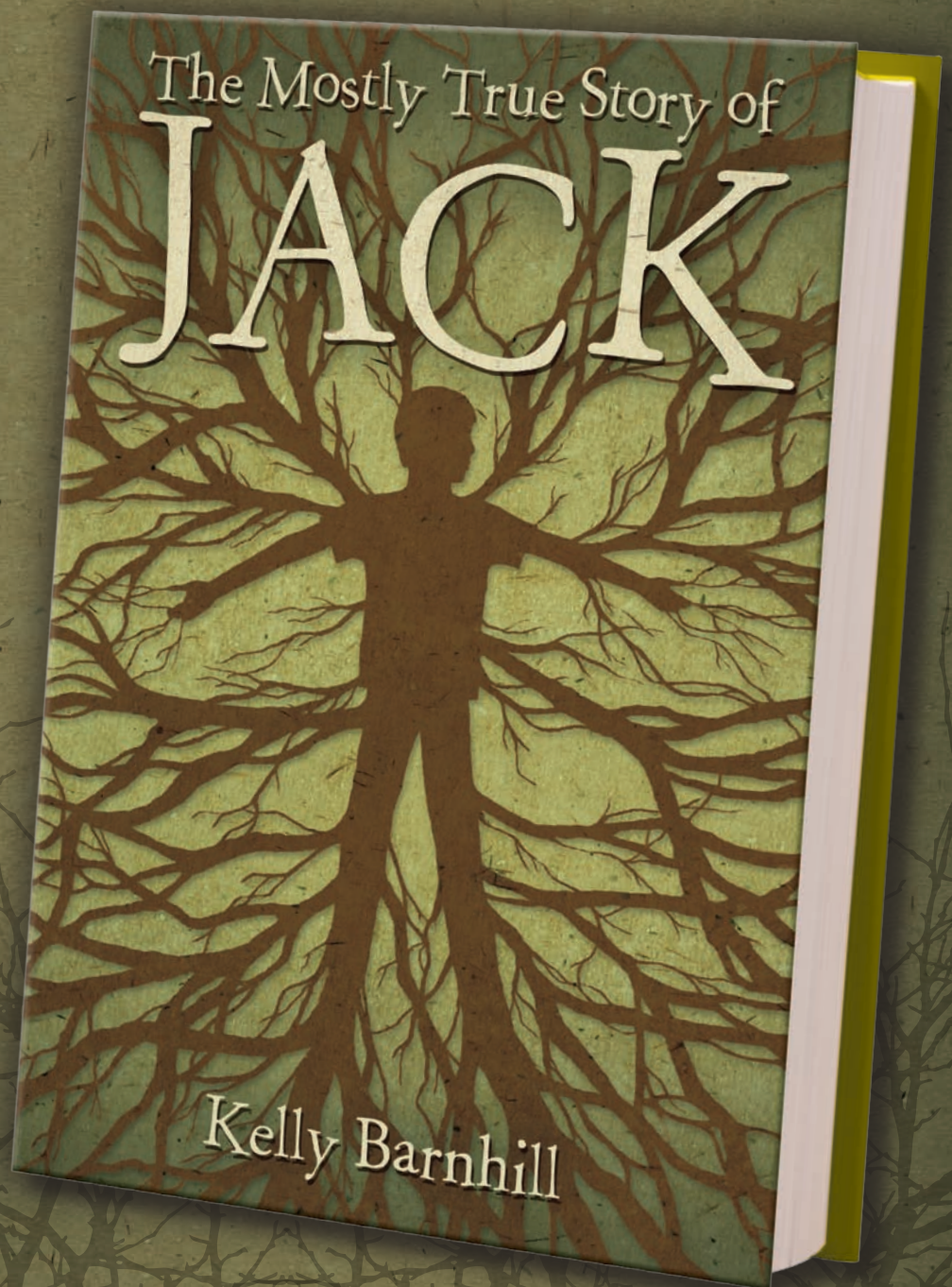
The Mostly True Story of JACK

Curriculum connections

- ❖ Family
- ❖ Folklore
- ❖ Fiction

Ages 8 -12

Written by
Kelly Barnhill



The Mostly True Story of JACK

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Why does Jack spend the summer in Iowa? What's going on with his family that forces his move?
2. Frankie, Wendy, Anders and Clayton all notice that something Very Odd is going on. What does each character notice and how do they respond?
3. Jack is not like most boys. What clues can you find that show the reader exactly *how* different Jack is?
4. Why is the skateboard so important to Jack? What does he hope to gain by learning to ride it?
5. Is there a difference between "brave" and "good"? What are some examples from the book where the characters had to be *brave* if they wanted to do *good*? Can you think of a real-world example of someone needing to be brave in order to do the right thing?
6. Why do you think Jack hates fairy tales?
7. Which of the characters in this book is most like you? Why do you think that?
8. Sometimes, adults try to protect children from scary or troubling information. Parents do this; teachers do this; everyone does. Sometimes it backfires. How would this story be different if Jack *knew what he was* from the very beginning? How would that knowledge change how Jack acts?
9. Why does Jack try to protect Clayton, even though Clayton has been so mean to him?
10. What is your opinion of Mr. Perkins? Is he a good person or a bad person?
11. There is a lot in this book about the relationship between a person's *soul* and their *memory*. In your family or culture, how do people remember their loved ones who have passed away? How do we – in our lives – keep the memories of our loved ones alive?
12. Wendy is often described as "prickly". Is that an accurate description of her? Why do you think that?
13. Why is Mr. Perkins afraid of Jack?
14. What happens to Frankie at the school house?
15. What does Mr. Avery want more than anything else in the world? What choices does he make in order to get what he wants?
16. Why do you think Jack goes to visit his "brother", Baxter? Why is it so important that Baxter remembers Jack, even when no one else in the family does?
17. What does Clive mean that there is power in the "gap between good and evil"? What kind of power? What do you think that means?
18. Why doesn't Wendy trust Jack at first? What happens to change her mind?
19. Is the Lady *really* all bad? Is the Other *really* all good? Is it possible for a person to be *all bad* or *all good*?
20. Why, in your opinion, does Anders snap off a section of the vines and bring it home? What do you think he'll do with it?
21. Do you think that Clive will see Jack again? Why do you think that?
22. What does it mean to be a hero? Who is the hero of this story – is it Jack? Wendy? Frankie? Anders? Someone else? What, in your opinion, is an example of an act of heroism?

HISTORICAL CONNECTIONS

When we study History, we mainly focus on the events and people who changed our Nation or our World as a whole – but small places have their own Histories too. Create a list of towns in your state with populations under 2000. Have each student conduct their own historic inquiry into the town. Your state’s historical society will be a great resource for community newspapers, photographs and records. Have the students ask themselves the following questions:

1. What makes this town different from other towns in this state?
2. What are some of the strange/interesting/odd/unique stories of this community that make it interesting to learn about?
3. How does a community’s history influence its culture now?

WRITING CONNECTIONS

1. Imagine this scene: It is exactly one year after Jack’s fateful trip to Hazelwood, Iowa. Wendy wakes up early, sneaks out of her house, and goes to Henderson’s Gully. In her hand, she holds a letter that she wrote to Jack. The Gully is cool and damp, and the leaves rustle as she walks by. She stops at the small stream at the bottom. She pulls the letter from the envelope and lets it fall into the stream and watches as the current sweeps it away. Write the letter.
2. Anders is.....*special*. He notices things that others do not and feels things that no one else feels. He is also clever, perceptive and tricky. Write a story where Anders is the main character – something that happened *before* the novel starts or after it ends.

3. We don’t just experience a place with our eyes. We use sound, touch, smell, and sometimes even taste. When we write, it’s the same thing – we need to use details that engage the readers’ *senses* in order for our descriptions to come alive. Write a paragraph describing a natural area that you have visited before – a park, a back yard, a forest, a meadow – whatever you want. Try to engage all five senses.
4. Mr. Avery had a brother who was given to the Lady as a way of keeping his family rich with money and power and magic. Now, imagine a scene where that *doesn’t happen*. Imagine a scene in which a very young Mr. Avery tries to keep his brother safe from harm. What would he do? Where would they go? What dangers might they encounter? Write the scene.
5. Jack doesn’t like fairy tales – until he realizes that he is *living* a fairy tale. Think about anything odd or unexplained in your life. Write a fairy tale that takes something *real or ordinary* and turns it into something Magic, Mysterious, or Odd. Turn a specific moment from your own life into a fairy tale. Mix the *true* with the *strange* and make something new.



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VOCABULARY

Vocabulary Word:	Sentence it's found in:	Hypothesize meaning from context:	Dictionary definition:
Acknowledge			
Perimeter			
Imbecile			
Gully			
Malady			
Befall			
Demolition			
Amplify			
Compensated			
Theory			

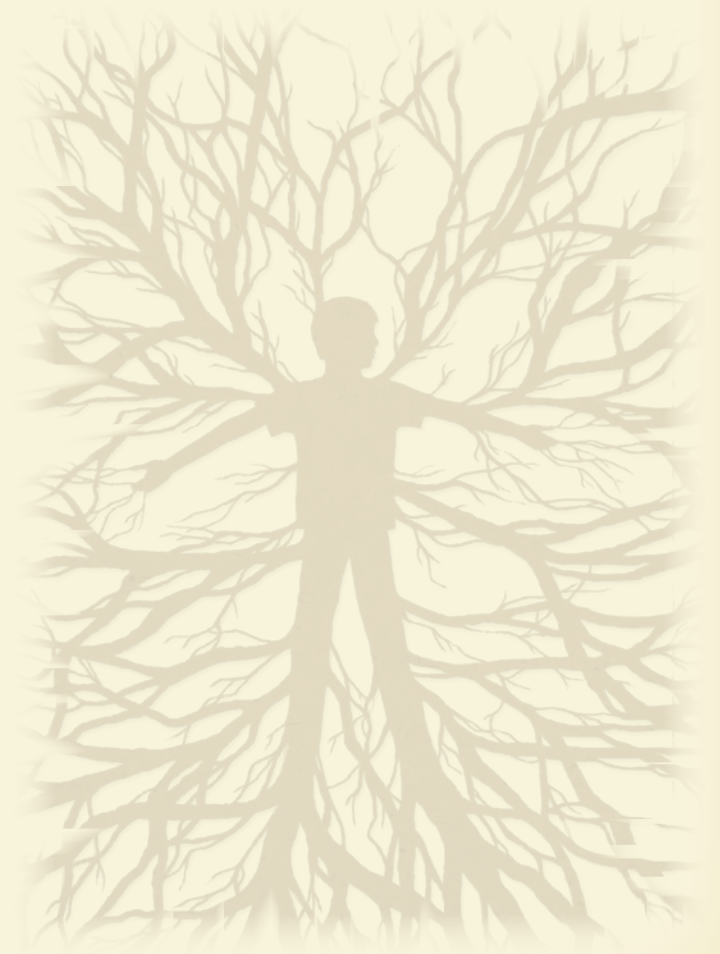
ART CONNECTIONS

1. *True story*: When the author, Kelly Barnhill, was writing this book, she drew a map of Hazelwood on a very large piece of butcher paper and hung it up in her office. She also had paper cut-outs of Jack, Anders, Wendy and Frankie. Each day as she wrote the book she traced the places where the characters went with her fingers and taped their cut-outs on the spots where they were when she left off.

Now: Take a large piece of paper, and draw a map of what you think Hazelwood Iowa looks like. Use your memory *and* your imagination. Add places and things that you think *should* be in the town. Be *detailed*. When you are done, break into small groups and present your maps. How are the maps the same? How are they different? Why do you think different readers have different visualizations of what the town looks like?

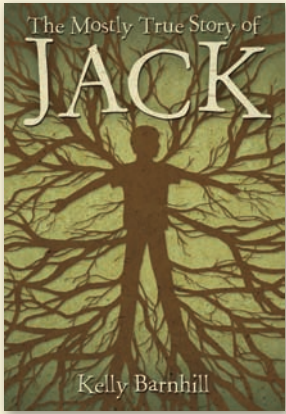
2. Each student gets eight 4x8 blank note cards – each one labeled *Jack, Wendy, Frankie, Anders, Clive, Mabel, Clayton, Mr. Avery, Mr. Perkins*. On the front of the card, draw a picture of what you think that character looks like. This can be their face, their whole body, a moment from a scene. Whatever. On the back of the card, copy down sentences and phrases that you find in the book that either describe that character, or that demonstrate each character's *personality*. In small groups, share your pictures and your quotes. How does your understanding of each character differ from your classmates' understanding? Why do you think that is?

3. In *The Mostly True Story of Jack*, we see several references of objects and structures becoming two things at once. A house becomes both house and mother. A fireplace blinks its eyes and grins with sharp teeth. A boy becomes root, leaf and vine. On a piece of scratch paper, play around by drawing doodles of an image that is two things at once – a tree that is also a man, a fence that is also a knife, a mountain on wolf's feet, a landscape with sleepy eyes. Work quickly and let your imagination drift. Try to come up with 10-20 doodles. Choose the one you like the best and make a full-sized sketch with detail.



The Mostly True Story of JACK

about the book



THE MOSTLY TRUE STORY OF JACK

978-0-316-05670-0

When Jack is sent to Hazelwood, Iowa, to live with his crazy aunt and uncle, he expects a summer of boredom. Little does he know that the people of Hazelwood have been waiting for him for a long time....

When he arrives, three astonishing things happen: First, he makes friends—not imaginary friends but actual friends. Second, he is beaten up by the town bully; the bullies at home always ignored him. Third, the richest man in town begins to plot Jack's imminent, and hopefully painful, demise. It's up to Jack to figure out why suddenly everyone cares so much about him. Back home he was practically, well, invisible.

The Mostly True Story of Jack is a tale of magic, friendship, and sacrifice. It's about things broken and things put back together. Above all, it's about finding a place to belong.

Kirkus raves in a starred review, "A truly splendid amalgamation of mystery, magic and creeping horror will spellbind the middle-grade set."

Praise for *The Mostly True Story of Jack*

★ "Truly splendid...[an] ultimate pageturner." — *Kirkus*

About the Author/Illustrator



Kelly Barnhill is a poet and literary fiction writer. This is her debut children's book. Kelly lives in Minnesota with her husband and three children.