



Just Call Me Joe Frieda Wishinsky

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Life in New York City in the early twentieth century is tougher than Joseph ever dreamed it would be.

A Sample

A ball bounced hard into his chest. Startled, Joseph glared at the thin, tall boy with cropped black hair who had thrown the ball.

“Gimme that ball,” the boy barked in English.

Joseph didn't understand the boy's words, but from the boy's tone and sneer, Joseph knew he wasn't apologizing.

“Watch where you throw,” said Joseph, throwing the boy back his ball.

“Watch where you sit, greenie,” the boy snarled back, this time in Yiddish.

For a minute both boys stared at each other. Then Joseph's face broke out into a smile. “I am a greenie now,” he told the boy, “but soon I'll be a regular American. I catch on to things fast.”

The Story

The year is 1909 and Joseph has just immigrated to the United States from Russia. He thinks that life in New York City will be wonderful, but he has not bargained for the challenges of learning English and of resisting the pressures to skip school, steal and fight to earn a place among the boys in his neighborhood. *Just Call Me Joe* presents a full picture of life in New York City for the working poor. Anna, Joe's older sister, struggles to cope with the terrible factory conditions of the time. Aunt Sophie must take in boarders to make ends meet. And Joseph must both accept change and remain true to himself in a new city with new challenges.

The Author

Born in Germany, Frieda Wishinsky was raised and educated in New York City. Her thorough knowledge of the city shows in *Just Call Me Joe*. She knows what it feels like to be an immigrant kid and she loves how New York has taken in people from so many places, how they've become part of a vibrant

ever-changing landscape. She is the author of many other books, including *Each One Special* (Orca, 1998) and *So Long Stinky Queen* (Fitzhenry). Frieda lives in Toronto with her husband and her sixteen-year-old daughter and twenty-two-year-old son.

The Ideas

- Think of a time when someone tried to convince you to do something you didn't want to do. Write about it as a scene with dialogue. Either write what really happened or make up a story about it.
- Make a list of names and nicknames that people call you. Do some people have names for you that only they use? Has your name changed over time? Do you like your name? If you could change your name to any other name in the world, would you? What would you change it to? Why? Are you named after anyone? Have you ever met that person? Make a list of other people who have the same name you do. If you can, ask your parents why they gave you the name they did. Write a few paragraphs about your name or make a big poster providing as much information about your name as you can.
- In the library or on the internet look up maps of New York City in 1910 and today. Find the places that are named in the book. What about New York has changed and what remains the same?
- Read three or four other novels about children immigrating to Canada or to the United States or from any country to any other country. What are some of the experiences those children have in common with Joe? What are some of the differences?
- Joe doesn't like being stuck in a lower grade and he has trouble making friends at school, but in the end he has some good experiences in his class and in his school. Write or draw about the most wonderful experience you have ever had at school.
- Find the poem "Sea Fever" by John Masefield, the one that Joe reads aloud to his class. Read it in small groups and talk about why Frieda Wishinsky

might have chosen that particular poem for Joe to read. Share your thoughts with the class.

- Do you have family members who immigrated to Canada? Or did you? Interview your parents or grandparents or great grandparents to find out as much as you can. Look up on a map or a globe where your family came from. How did they get to Canada? How long did the trip take them? Write a story or draw pictures showing what their trip might have been like.
- If your family has always lived in North America, what can you find out about the lives of your grandparents and great-grandparents? Write a story or draw pictures showing where they lived and what their lives might have been like.
- The statue of Liberty is one of the most famous statues in the world. Research its history and write down the famous words written on it. What do the words mean to you?
- Ellis Island welcomed immigrants to New York for many years. Pier 21 in Canada was a place where many immigrants to Canada arrived. Research Ellis Island and Pier 21. Write two paragraphs about each place, why they were important and what it was like to arrive there.
- *Just Call Me Joe* mentions special food Aunt Sophie prepared like knishes. What special food does your family prepare? Share a special recipe with your class.

A Letter to Readers

Hello Reader,

Just Call Me Joe was a special book for me to research and write.

I came to New York as an eight-month-old from Germany with my parents. My parents came from Poland but lived in Munich, Germany for two years, where I was born. Since I was so young, I don't remember anything about the trip by ship to New York. My parents told me I had measles on board and was

very sick. My whole family was quarantined because of that. My parents also told me I gave the doctor a very hard time and howled every time he came near with a needle. He tried wearing disguises so I wouldn't guess he was coming, but he couldn't fool me! Luckily by the time we reached New York I was better and they let us off the ship.

I grew up hearing my parents speak Yiddish but refused to speak Yiddish back to them. I wanted to be an American like Joe and I wanted to speak only English. To this day I understand Yiddish but don't speak it very well. New York was a great place to grow up and I knew many immigrant children. I knew children whose parents came from many other countries in Europe and every family had a story. I loved hearing my family's stories and those of my friends' families.

Now I live in Toronto and I'm an immigrant again. Canada, like America, has welcomed immigrants, but it's not an easy experience to be new to a country, a school or a class. It's not easy being in any new situation.

I hope you enjoy *Just Call Me Joe* and that it will make you think about a time when you were in a new situation and how it felt.

Frieda Wishinsky's Other Books

Manya's Dream, A Story of Marie Curie, Maple Tree Press, 2003, picture book biography.

What's The Matter With Albert?, Maple Tree Press, 2002, picture book biography.

Give Maggie A Chance, Fitzhenry & Whiteside, 2002, picture book.

Just Mabel, an I Am Reading Book, Kingfisher, 2001.

Nothing Scares Us, Scholastic, Canada, Bloomsbury, U.K., Carolrhoda, U.S. 2000, picture book.

A Quest In Time, Owl books, 2000, chapter book.

So Long Stinky Queen, Fitzhenry and Whiteside, 2000, chapter book.

No Frogs For Dinner, Fitzhenry and Whiteside, 1999, easy-to-read.

The Man Who Made Parks, Tundra, 1999, picture book biography.

Each One Special, Orca, 1998, picture book.

Oonga Boonga, Scholastic Canada, 1998, Transworld, 1998, Dutton, 1999, Juventud, 1999 and Sesam, 1999, picture book.

Crazy For Chocolate, Scholastic, 1997, chapter book.

Jennifer Jones Won't Leave Me Alone, HarperCollins, 1995, picture book.

Why Can't You Fold Your Pants Like David Levine?, HarperCollins, 1993, picture book.

Awards

Give Maggie a Chance: Nominee 2003 Blue Spruce Award; Resource Links "Best of 2002," Nominee Tiny Torgi Braille Book of the Year, 2003.

Nothing Scares Us: "Book of the Week," London Sunday Times, IRA/CBC "Children's Choice 2001."

Each One Special: 1999, Print Braille of the Year, Nominee Governor General's Award for text, OLA Best Bets, numerous starred reviews.

The Man Who Made Parks: voted an "outstanding" book by the Parents Council of the U.S., 1999.

Oonga Boonga: "Pick of the List," American Bookseller.

All titles—"Our Choice" books .

A List of Children's Books about Immigration

Ellie's New Home by Becky Citra

Lights for Gita by Rachna Gilmore

When Jessie Came Across the Sea by Amy Hest

Letters From Rifka by Karen Hesse

Faraway Summer by Johanna Hurwitz

The Belonging Place and *From Anna* by Jean Little

Habibi by Naomi Shihab Nye

The Always Prayer Shawl by Sheldon Oberman

The Keeping Quilt by Patricia Polacco

Petranella by Betty Waterton

**Novels about the internment of Japanese Canadians,
another theme of displacement:**

The Reunion by Jacqueline Pearce

Naomi's Road by Joy Kogawa

Caged Eagles and *War of the Eagles* by Eric Walters