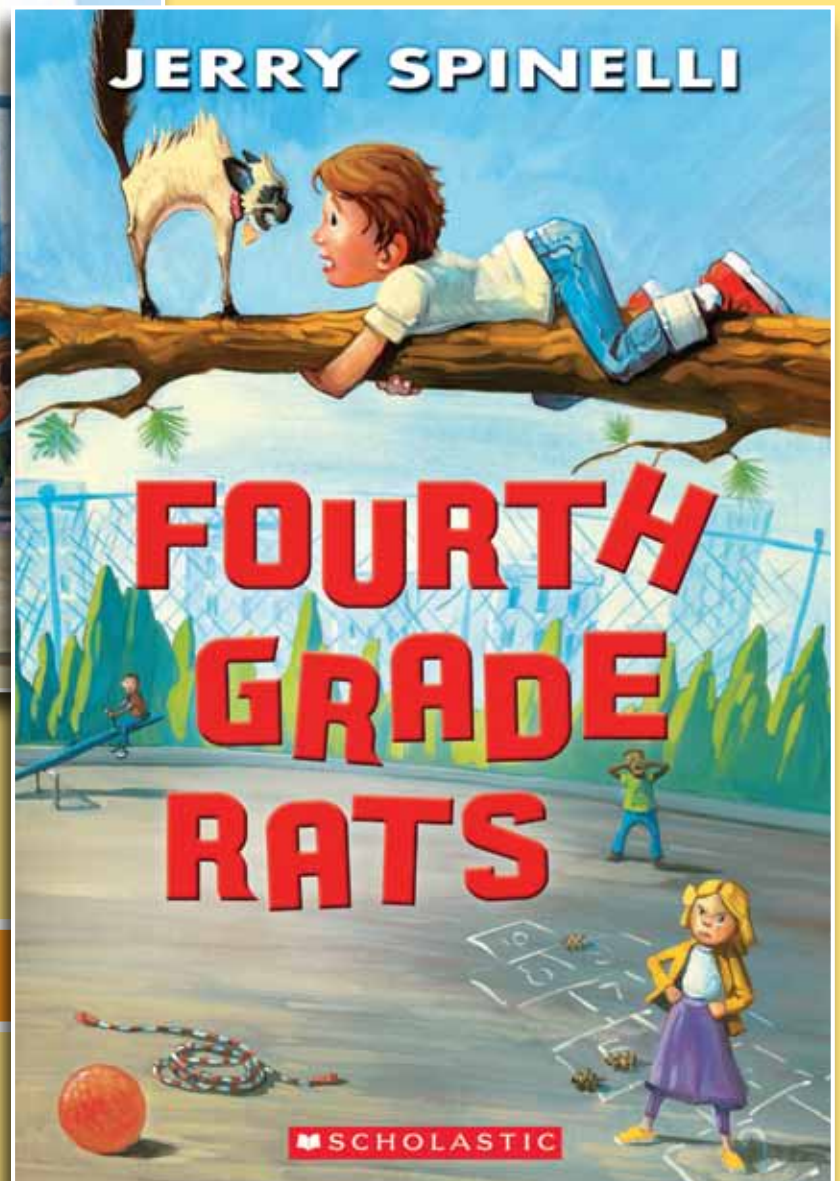
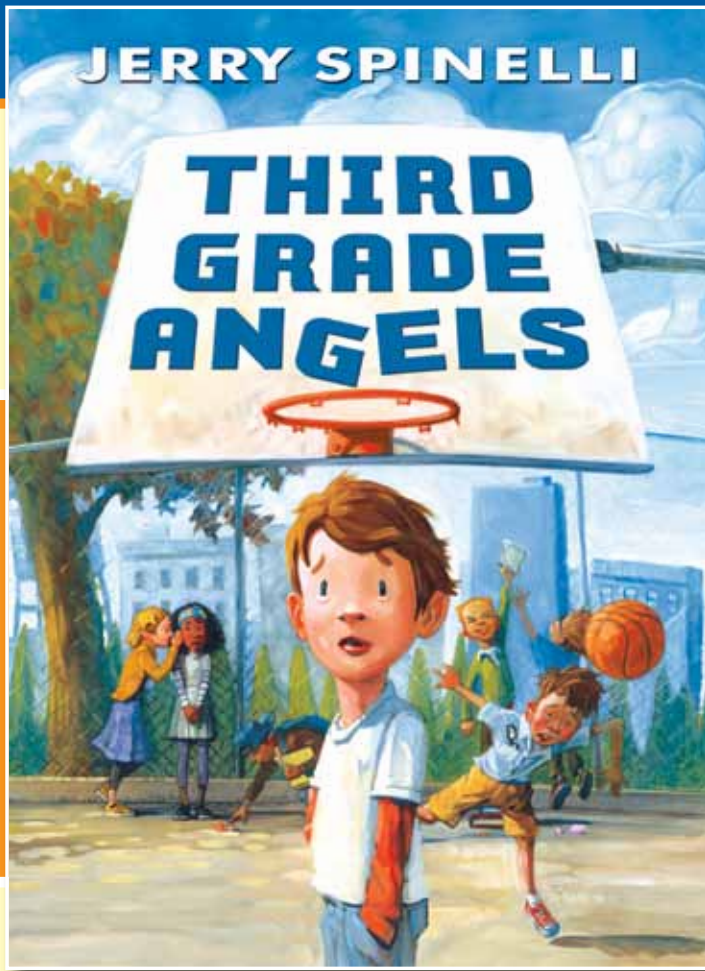


DISCUSSION GUIDE

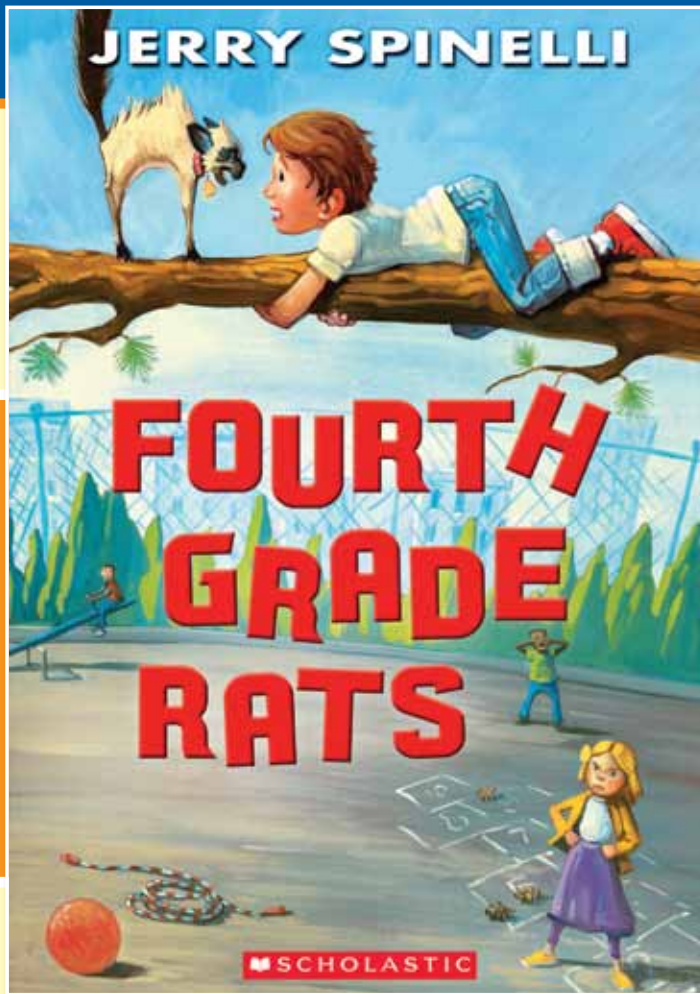




*First grade babies!
Second grade cats!
Third grade angels!
Fourth grade rats!*

Ever since kindergarten, George—aka “Suds”—has known the famous rhyme that rules his school. Now that his “baby” year and his “cat” year are long gone, it’s time to sort out what the rest of the poem will mean for him as he heads into the tricky territory of being a big kid.

In *Third Grade Angels*, Suds and his classmates find themselves catapulted into the contest of a lifetime: Who will win the coveted halo, awarded to the student with the most perfect behavior? Suds wants the title “boss angel” passionately, but quickly finds out that being courteous, friendly, quiet, helpful, neat, respectful, scholarly, and modest all at the same time is a lot more stressful than he ever imagined! Does he have to be just as perfect at home as he does at school? And what if his greatest good deed happens when his teacher, Mrs. Simms, isn’t watching? How will she ever find out? Throw in the fact that his new buddy Joey is a topnotch troublemaker and the love of his life, Judy Billings, doesn’t even know he exists, and third grade turns out to be mighty confusing.



In *Fourth Grade Rats*, Suds is overwhelmed by a whole new set of rules. “Rats” are supposed to be tough. They aren’t afraid of spiders, they don’t carry babyish lunch boxes, they push little kids off the swings, they rebel against their moms... and they certainly don’t cry! To make matters worse, Joey has appointed himself the new sheriff in town, bossing Suds around and hogging all of Judy’s attention with his manly new attitude. Can Suds survive this rat race and still be his old, comfortable self?

In this delightful pair of novels, master storyteller Jerry Spinelli takes Suds on a whirlwind adventure navigating peer pressure, forming friendships, and figuring out how much to grow up—while remaining true to himself.

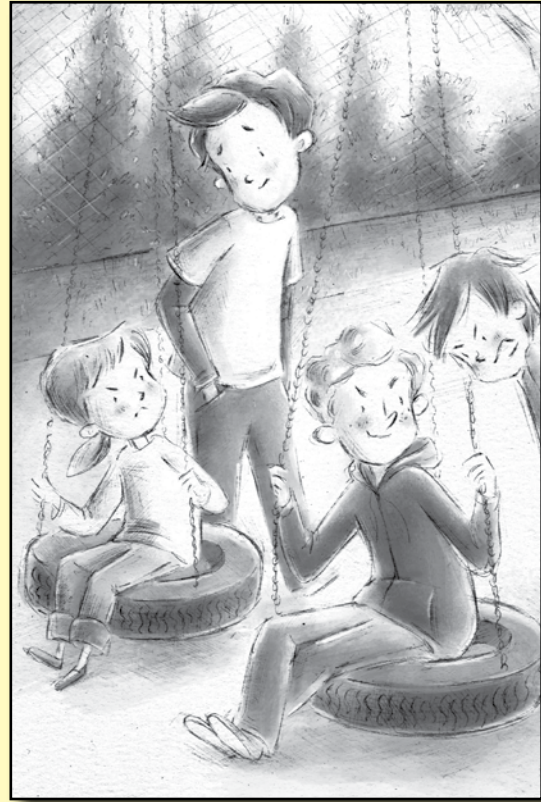
DISCUSSION QUESTIONS FOR *THIRD GRADE ANGELS*

1. How does Mrs. Simms put the whole class at ease and make them laugh on the first day of school? How does this set the tone for all that happens during the first month of third grade? Do you know any adults like Mrs. Simms?
2. What happens during Suds's very first conversation with Joey that makes Suds think, "Things were getting complicated" (p. 24)? How would Suds's story be different if he had decided then and there to steer clear of Joey?
3. What event in the classroom gives Suds the feeling that he shares a special secret with Judy Billings? What do we learn about Suds from his vow never to rat her out?
4. On day two of the contest, the class is angelic. "All day long *pleases* and *thanks yous* and *pardon mes* were flying around...We sat straight in our chairs and raised our hands...and were quiet as mice the rest of the time" (p. 40-42). Why does Joey misbehave? What do you think he's trying to accomplish by clowning around? Does he get what he wants?
5. What happens to the jogger's hat and why? Why does Mrs. Simms blame the whole class for the incident, even the students who did not directly participate? Look up the term Suds's dad uses: "accessory to the crime" (p. 52). Have you ever been an "accessory to the crime"?
6. Why does Mrs. Simms start each year by asking her third graders to focus on behaving like angels, rather than on an academic goal like straight A's? What will each child gain by earning the title of "boss angel" for a week?
7. Chapter eight details a fantastic day in Suds's life at school. He does some beautiful cursive, finds the Indian Ocean on a globe, identifies the number 10,000, correctly looks up the word "husbandry" in the dictionary, does a good deed by picking a klutzy kid for his team in gym, eats his green veggies at lunch, and is the first one on the school bus. He's feeling perfect. What "scary question" pops into his head as a result?
8. Suds's mom tells a little white lie to encourage Suds to be good even when he's not at school. What is it? When does Suds realize that his mom has exaggerated? Do you think it's unfair of her to mislead him?
9. What bothers Suds's mom about how Suds treats Zippernose during the halo contest? What does she mean by "Being nice means doing *something*, not doing *nothing*" (p. 85)? Do you agree with her?
10. Why is Constantina's note to Mrs. Simms so important and unusual? Why does it win her the halo?



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS FOR *FOURTH GRADE RATS*

1. The very first sentence we hear Suds say in this novel is: "I wish I was still in third grade" (p. 1). What does this reveal about his personality right from the start? Is he nostalgic? Nervous? Afraid? Why? Joey, on the other hand, shouts his pride and enthusiasm from the top of the monkey bars. How do you tend to react to big changes in your life? Are you more like Suds or like Joey?
2. In chapter two, Suds does a pretty good job of defending his elephant lunch box and peanut butter sandwich from Joey's mockery. Yet by the time they leave the lunchroom, he does wonder to himself "if anybody was looking at my lunch box" (p. 9). Discuss the power of peer pressure in this scene. What is it about Joey that makes him seem like an authority on how big kids ought to act? Do you think that Joey is a bully?
3. Why does Joey destroy his own bedroom? Why does he insist that pain is part of the process of becoming a man? Where do you think he has gotten this idea? Why doesn't Suds try to stop him?
4. By chapter eleven, the two friends have traded roles. Suds is now the loud, tough, confident "Black Widow Man" and Joey is quiet and uncertain. How do you feel about this new version of each character? Is Suds still a likeable guy? Is Joey?
5. *Fourth Grade Rats* explores the idea that there is a little bit of sadness in growing up. Suds thinks, "I always thought when you grew up, stuff like bikes and bubble gum just sort of disappeared from your life. You didn't want them anymore. They got replaced by cars and coffee and all. I never thought you actually had to give them up, whether you were ready to or not" (p. 21). In what ways do Suds's parents help him keep a little bit of his early childhood alive and safe at home? Why are these routines and rituals so important? Do you or your family do anything special at home to counteract the stress of school?
6. It takes the dire circumstance of being trapped high in a tree to make Suds finally pause and think about all that has happened. "I thought about rats and real men and Number One and angels and fame and first and last and love and nature's way. And for the first time since I started fourth grade, I knew exactly who I was – a scared kid up a tree" (p. 75). Do you think Suds is embarrassed or relieved to reach this conclusion? Have you ever gotten yourself into a tricky situation that made you think hard about your life? What was the result?
7. How do you think Joey feels when his mother forces him to apologize to Suds—in front of both moms—for urging him "into the rat stuff" (p. 77)? Write a monologue for what is going through Joey's head in this scene. Mrs. Peterson claims that Joey "has dropped out of the rat race and has rejoined the human race." Do you believe that Joey has really changed, or is he putting on an act in front of his mother?



8. In the dedication of this novel, author Jerry Spinelli includes his own fourth grade teacher, calling her “an angel among rats.” How do you think your current teacher would react to “rats” in your class?
9. At the end of the novel, Suds confesses to his mom that, while he was acting like a rat, he was lying to himself about his own feelings: “I thought I was having a great time. But I wasn’t. I was having a rotten time” (p. 81). Do you think Suds’s mom already knew this? Have you ever convinced yourself you are feeling one way, when you’re really feeling the opposite way? What snapped you out of it?

PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER

1. What is a prequel? Why do you think the characters from *Fourth Grade Rats* inspired author Jerry Spinelli to write more about them? Why did he go backwards in time to their third grade year, rather than show them all in fifth grade? Think about your favorite book and come up with an idea for its prequel.
2. Early in *Third Grade Angels*, Suds’s mom sums up Suds’s relationship with Judy Billings this way: “She *ignores* you. She doesn’t smile at you. She doesn’t say hello” (p. 37). As *Fourth Grade Rats* opens, we learn that Judy is still ignoring Suds a year later. Even worse, she publicly humiliates him in the lunchroom, and ditches him after he tries to do a good deed by rescuing her cat. Why does Suds continue to like this girl, after all her poor behavior? Do you think he has changed his opinion of her by the end of the second novel?
3. In *Third Grade Angels*, Zippernose complains that Suds “always has to be first!” (p. 53). This observation really bothers Suds because he realizes that it’s true: “It’s like *everything* is a race that I have to win,” he worries (p. 57). Yet at the start of *Fourth Grade Rats*, his competitive streak has disappeared. In fact, Suds seems almost shy. What has changed?
4. What do you think it would be like to be friends with Joey? What would be fun about hanging out with him? What would be challenging? Describe the perfect friend for you. How much do you think a friend should challenge and change you, and how much should he or she just accept who you are?
5. Write a letter from Suds to Judy. What would he tell her? What would he ask her? How would she reply?
6. Suds always takes a bubble bath to help him deal with a feeling he and his mom call “chipmunky.” What does the expression mean? Do you ever feel “chipmunky”? If so, what helps you?
7. Do the different grade levels in your school have a reputation for certain behavior? Have you ever felt pressured by trends in your class to act a particular way? Write a “First grade babies!/ Second grade cats!...” type of poem or chant (it doesn’t have to rhyme!) that applies to the grades at your school.
8. How does author Jerry Spinelli use humor to tell the story of Suds? What parts of the novels did you find extra funny?

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

Lesley Choyce. *Carrie's Crowd*. Formac Publishing.

Carrie dreams of being one of the cool girls, until she learns that “cool” comes at a price.

Judy Blume. *Tales of a Fourth Grade Nothing*. Puffin, 2007.

The 1970s classic featuring the hilarious misadventures of fourth grader Peter Hatcher and his kooky kid brother Fudge.

Colleen O'Shaughnessy McKenna. *Good Grief...Third Grade*. Scholastic, 1994.

A well-intentioned third grader and her mischievous archenemy must figure out how to get along—or end up getting kicked out of school!

Cathy Hapka and Ellen Titlebaum. *How Not to Start Third Grade*. Random House, 2007.

Will's third grade debut is hijacked by the obnoxious high jinx of his rowdy baby brother.

Alexis Marcionette. *UGH...You Again*. Big IQ Kids, 2009.

Alexis is set to have the perfect third grade year...until her Worst Friend Ever suddenly moves back to town—and into the seat next to hers in class.

Also Available from Jerry Spinelli

The Library Card. A mysterious blue card changes the life of each child who discovers it.

Maniac Magee. A modern-day tall tale of a capricious runaway and the magic he works in a racially divided small town.

Report to the Principal's Office. Four feisty, unforgettable sixth graders survive the perils and pitfalls of middle school.

Do the Funky Pickle. What happens when you're hopelessly, madly in love with your best friend...but too wimpy to tell her?

The Bathwater Gang. Already bored on the second day of summer vacation, Bertie takes her spunky grandmother's suggestion to form a girl gang.

Blue Ribbon Blues. After moving to her Aunt Sally's farm, city slicker Tooter decides to show the world what she's made of by winning the blue ribbon for her goat at the County Fair.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jerry Spinelli is the acclaimed author of more than twenty-five books for young readers, including *The Library Card*, *Picklemania*, and the Newbery Medal-winning *Maniac Magee*. He lives in Pennsylvania with his wife and fellow author, Eileen Spinelli. He is the father of six and grandfather of sixteen.

THIRD GRADE ANGELS

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