Rain Man

Leonore Fleischer

About the authors

Rain Man is based on a story written by Barry Morrow. Morrow then collaborated with Ronald Bass to write the screenplay. Bass was the principal screenwriter. Fleischer's novelisation is based on the screenplay.

Barry Morrow was the lead singer in a rock and roll band for a long time. He became interested in handicapped people and formed a theatre company to perform for them. He has written a number of plays for television. Rain Man is his first screenplay.

Ronald Bass has a law degree from Harvard University. He published three novels and then began to write successful screenplays. He now writes full-time, but he still works as a lawyer occasionally.

Leonore Fleischer has worked in every area of publishing over the last twenty-five years. She has novelised approximately fifty screenplays.

Summary

The novel Rain Man is based on the screenplay of the hugely successful 1988 film of the same name. The performances of its stars, Tom Cruise and Dustin Hoffman, played a great part in the film’s success, but the story is powerful and moving on its own, and therefore Leonore Fleischer’s novelisation of the film deserves to be read in its own right.

Rain Man revolves around Charlie Babbit, a tough young man eager to get rich quick. His business is in trouble and he needs money badly. He receives news of his father’s death. ‘Nothing I did was ever good enough for him’ says Charlie bitterly to his girlfriend, Susanna. Then he learns that his wealthy father has left him only his 1949 Buick and his roses, and that he has left all his money to ‘someone very important to me’. Charlie is understandably angry – he feels that the money belongs to him. He discovers that his father has left the money to his older brother Raymond – a brother he never even knew he had. Raymond is autistic. He can’t feel things the same way that other people do, and therefore he is unable to have normal relationships with people. Requiring a very secure environment, he lives in an institution.

Charlie ‘kidnaps’ his brother, although he refuses to admit to his girlfriend that this is what he has done. He tells her, ‘I’m keeping him until I get my money.’ He and his brother drive across the United States to Los Angeles, where he plans to live with his brother. During their journey, Charlie gets to know Raymond, who has some extraordinary skills. For example, he can count 246 toothpicks in a second, and he can memorise a page of telephone numbers in a minute. More importantly, however, Charlie realises that Raymond is the ‘Rain Man’, whom he vaguely recalls from his childhood. Charlie didn’t know it at the time, but his secret friend was actually his brother.

Charlie takes Raymond to Las Vegas. He has decided to solve his money problems by using Raymond’s unusual skills to win at cards. Raymond indeed wins $90,000 for Charlie, but by now, Charlie is beginning to care for his brother. When Charlie reaches Los Angeles, he finds Raymond’s guardian waiting for him, and the two agree that a specialist will decide who should look after Raymond. Raymond’s guardian offers Charlie $250,000 ‘to have Raymond back now’, but Charlie refuses. He says, ‘I don’t want your money, Dr Bruner. I want my brother’. He has changed. The specialist questions Raymond, and Charlie begins to realise that his brother needs to be cared for in an institution. By now, Charlie loves Raymond enough to want what is best for him. ‘Can I visit him?’ Charlie asks in the end.

About autism

Autism is a rare mental disorder. Autistic children are physically well-developed, but they are very limited in their ability to understand and communicate with other people. They seem isolated from the world around them. Many autistic people hardly speak at all. Some of them (around ten percent) are called ‘idiot savants’, as they also have a condition called Kanner’s syndrome. They have an exceptional memory, and many of them possess unusual skills in music, art or mathematics. They insist on being
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surrounded by ‘sameness’. Raymond suffers from this syndrome.

About the film

Rain Man was the most successful film of 1988. It won four Oscars at the Academy Awards: Best Picture, Best Director, Best Actor (Dustin Hoffman) and Best Original Screenplay. Before the film’s release, few people knew much about autism, and cinema audiences all over the world were moved by Hoffman’s portrayal of an autistic savant. It is difficult to play a man who lacks the ability to feel while remaining sympathetic to the audience, but Hoffman accomplished the feat. He conveyed the desperately insecure world of an autistic person, with his small, monotonous voice and the tense set of his shoulders. Tom Cruise, who played Charlie, had a less obvious challenge. Unlike Raymond, who is unable to change, Charlie undergoes a transformation in the film. He begins as a hard, me-first materialist, and he ends by learning that there are more important things than money.

Background and themes

Rain Man shows us something new – the strange world of an autistic individual. However, the novel is also an in-depth study of character and relationships. In seven days, Charlie learns to love someone who can’t give him anything in return. The critic Roger Ebert put it well when he said that Rain Man is about acceptance: ‘Charlie Babbit’s first appearance … has him trying to control his life and the lives of others. What Raymond teaches him is that he can relax, because he will always be powerless over other people. They will do just about what they choose to do – no matter how loud Charlie Babbit screams. Raymond has a lot he can teach Charlie Babbit about acceptance – even if it is the solitary thing he knows.’

Discussion activities

Chapters 1–3

Before reading

1 Discuss: Ask students if they have ever seen the film version of Rain Man. Did you like the film? Why or why not? Do you remember any of the characters in the story? List the characters the students mention on the board, and then ask them to find pictures of the characters in the book.

2 Discuss: Ask students to think about why the book is called ‘Rain Man’. What do you think ‘Rain Man’ means? Do you think the phrase refers to a person or a thing? Why do you think this?

3 Research: Ask students to bring information about autism to class. Put a large piece of paper on the wall and then get students to attach their information to the piece of paper to make a wall display.

After reading

4 Discuss: How would you feel if your father was rich and left all his money to someone you didn’t know? What would you do? Get students to work in small groups and think of answers to these questions.

5 Write: Would you like to have Raymond as a brother? Why or why not? Get students to write a sentence to answer these questions.

6 Pair work: Teach the word childhood to students. Put them into pairs and get them to ask each other how important it is to have a happy childhood. You can start the activity by asking them the following questions:

   Does a person’s childhood affect his or her life as an adult? If so, how does it affect it?
   Can a person be happy as an adult if he or she didn’t have a happy childhood? Why or why not?
   What can cause a person to have an unhappy childhood? What can cause a person to have a happy childhood?

7 Research: Put students into pairs and get them to look up the word disabled in a dictionary. Make the exercise into a competition – the first pair of students to find the definition wins. They should stand up and read the definition out loud to the rest of the class.

Chapters 4–6

Before reading

8 Read carefully: Get students to read the footnote about autism (at the bottom of page 15) as a class. Each student should stand up and carefully read one sentence out loud until the entire section has been read. When they have finished, they should discuss the condition in greater detail.

9 Guess: Ask students to predict what will happen to Charlie and Raymond in Chapters 4, 5 and 6. Will they be together? Will they get along? Where will they go? What will they do? What will happen to them? Will Charlie get his father’s money?

After reading

10 Check: Review students’ predictions about what would happen to Charlie and Raymond in Chapters 4, 5 and 6. Check if their predictions were right or wrong.

11 Discuss: Teach the word experience to students. Put them into small groups and get them to discuss the following questions:

   What new experiences does Raymond have in Chapters 4, 5 and 6?
   How does he react to the new experiences?
   Do you think the new experiences are good or bad for him? Why do you think this?
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12 **Role play:** Put students into pairs and get them to role play the scene in which Raymond gets upset at the airport (from the bottom of page 25 to the top of page 27). When they have finished, some of the pairs should role play the scene in front of the class.

13 **Role play:** Put students into pairs. Student A is Charlie and Student B is Dr Bruner. Charlie should tell Dr Bruner why he wants Raymond to be with him instead of at the hospital. Dr Bruner should tell Charlie that it isn’t a good idea for Raymond to be with Charlie and explain why this is the case.

14 **Write:** *What can Raymond do well?* Get students to make a list of the things that Raymond is good at doing.

15 **Write:** *What can Raymond not do well?* Get students to make a list of the things that Raymond isn’t good at doing.

**Chapters 7–9**

**Before reading**

16 **Guess:** Ask students to predict what will happen to Charlie and Raymond in Chapters 7, 8 and 9.

17 **Pair work:** Put students into pairs. Get them to look at the picture on page 32 and discuss the following questions:

- Who is the woman in the picture?
- What is she doing?
- Where is she doing it?
- Why do you think Charlie and Raymond go to this place?

**After reading**

18 **Check:** Review students’ predictions about what would happen to Charlie and Raymond in Chapters 7, 8 and 9. Check if their predictions were right or wrong.

19 **Write:** Write the following words and phrases on the board – *bath, Beatles song, January 21st, 1965, photograph, Rain Man, Susanna and toothpaste.* Put students into pairs and get them to write a paragraph to summarise what happens in Chapter 7. They should use each of the words from the board at least once in their summary. When they have finished, some of the pairs should read their summaries to the rest of the class.

20 **Discuss:** Where is Las Vegas? What is Las Vegas like? What do people usually do in Las Vegas? Have you ever visited Las Vegas? If so, did you enjoy your visit? Why or why not? If not, would you like to visit Las Vegas one day? Why or why not? Get students to work in small groups and discuss these questions.

21 **Write:** *What has this book taught you about autism and autistic people?* Get students to write a paragraph to answer this question.

22 **Pair work:** Do you think Charlie’s father was right to send Raymond to Wallbrook? Why do you think this? Do you think he was right not to tell Charlie about Raymond? Why do you think this? Get students to work in pairs and ask each other these questions.

**Vocabulary activities**

For the Word List and vocabulary activities, go to www.penguinreaders.com.