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## FILM STUDY GUIDES PROGRAM

study guide

### The Mighty

A film directed by Peter Chelsom

Based on the novel "Freak the Mighty" by  
Rodman Philbrick



## FILM STUDY GUIDES PROGRAM

### introduction

The cinema has been at the centre of life in the 20th century — and it will continue to be in the next century. Movies tell us stories about places never seen and people never met; they bring us together and keep us apart; they help us to remember childhood and to dream about the future; they tell us about each other and they sometimes even help us to understand the places we call home.

For all these reasons, and many more besides, Pacific Cinémathèque introduces the Film Study Guides Program, a collection of primers for teachers and students which examine contemporary movies through the lens of film and media education.

The study guides, while independent of each other, are linked together by a love for the cinema and a desire to create critical examinations of how contemporary films affect our lives. More than seven decades ago the Russian filmmaker Vsevolod Pudovkin grasped the power of cinema for educators. He wrote: “Film is the greatest teacher because it teaches not only through the brain but through the whole body.” As the 20<sup>th</sup> century ends and the 21<sup>st</sup> begins, this remains true and now with the introduction

of film and media studies into the Canadian secondary and elementary school curricula, an opportunity exists to explore Pudovkin’s lesson.

The Film Study Guides Program does this by providing teachers with critical tools to examine and discuss a range of new Canadian and international films in the context of various grade levels and discipline areas. Each study guide refers to provincial secondary school curricula through concepts drawn from media education, by which we mean: the critical examination of how the media affects the world and our place in it.

Pacific Cinémathèque is Western Canada’s leading centre for the study and appreciation of contemporary cinema and while we gratefully acknowledge the support of our sponsors and partners, the Film Study Guides Program is an editorially independent program of the Cinémathèque.

We look forward to hearing from teachers and students throughout the country who use these guides and welcome comments which can help to improve our packages.

**Stuart Poyntz**  
Pacific Cinémathèque

This teaching guide has three purposes:

*To help teachers address the learning outcomes in the new English Language Arts, Social Studies and Media Education curricula which deal with visual media as a form of communication;*

*To assist educators who are planning to teach film for the first time;*

*To suggest ways in which traditional literary concepts may be taught using a medium other than printed text.*

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## LEARNING OUTCOMES

This film study guide is specifically designed for teachers working with the following Learning Outcomes from the Grades 8, 9 and 10 B.C. English Language Arts curriculum. The outcomes are similar to the learning outcomes in the Western Consortium document for Language Arts adopted by Alberta, Saskatchewan and Manitoba as well as the new Ontario curriculum document and the Consortium of Atlantic Provinces curriculum.

*Identify examples of the use of stock or stereotypical characters.*

*Demonstrate an understanding of the main ideas, events or themes.*

*Make connections among different texts and media by comparing features, including themes, issues, styles and appeal.*

*Identify and explain connections between what students read, hear, and view and their personal ideas and beliefs.*

*Relate ideas and information in works of communication to universal themes.*

*Compose or create works of communication for specific audiences and purposes, including to entertain, persuade or inform.*

*Use various strategies to resolve conflicts, solve problems and build consensus.*

*Use language to demonstrate that students respect and value diversity.*

## PLOT SUMMARY

Max Kain is a really big kid who has failed a grade and is taunted by his schoolmates as dumb. He lives with his grandparents, because his mother is dead, and his father, Kenny, is in jail. Kevin, a small, disabled boy unable to walk without assistance, moves in next door to Max. He is extremely bright, and although their relationship starts off on a bad note, through his tutoring of Max, the two misfits become friends. Kevin introduces Max to the Arthurian legends and the boys encounter a number of threatening circumstances. However, they triumph over bullies young and old as a result of combining their unusual talents.

With the news that Max's father is to be released from prison, the boy's memories of witnessing his father kill his mother return to haunt him. On Christmas eve, Kenny Kain kidnaps Max, in part to prevent him from ever revealing the truth about the murder.

The study guide is broken up into seven sections, exploring different issues raised by the film. Each section includes some explanation (of terms or concepts), questions for discussion, and one or more activities.

*Written by Shari Graydon*

## THEMES

Themes are unifying ideas, images or motifs which are repeated or developed throughout a film or a book. Most well-told stories, whether in print or on screen, contain one or more themes. Identifying and exploring these themes can enrich our appreciation of the book or movie, by helping us notice the way the author or director has reinforced his or her points, building layers of meaning through the use of metaphors and symbolism.

Three messages thematically developed in *The Mighty* include:

### 1. The value of teamwork.

In the movie, much is made of the benefits Max and Kevin each gain from collaborating with each other.

*In what ways do the pair demonstrate the truth behind the saying, “The whole is greater than the sum of its parts?”*

*Cite examples from the movie -- scenes, pieces of dialogue, visual images -- that effectively reinforced this message.*

### 2. Being judged by our deeds.

Even before we meet Kenny Kain, we are told that Max closely resembles his jailed father. This physical similarity, and the sometimes unquestioned assumption that children will naturally behave as their parents did, gives rise to concerns (in both Max and his grandfather) and accusations (from the “Doghouse boys”) that Max, too, will become a killer. But in a number of ways, *The Mighty* argues that biology is not destiny, suggesting instead that we have a choice about being good or bad.

*Identify some of the deeds Max might be judged by in this movie. Does he prove his “worthiness?” How?*

*List some contemporary “heroes” who are celebrated by our culture in the same way the Knights of the Round Table might have been celebrated in their time. List their deeds. How do these deeds measure up (in terms of bravery and contribution to others)?*

### 3. Rising above our limitations.

*What are some of the limitations faced by Max and Kevin?*

*How do the two boys rise above these limitations?*



## KING ARTHUR AND THE KNIGHTS OF THE ROUND TABLE

The story of King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table has endured over many centuries, capturing imaginations in a variety of books, and many other forms, including: *Camelot*, a Broadway musical; films such as Monty Python's *In Search of the Holy Grail* and the more recent *First Knight*; the "Tales of Prince Valiant" comic strip and video games such as *King Arthur's World* and *Knights of the Round*.

*Why are Arthurian legends so popular?*

*What is it about the central concept and story elements that are so appealing to people?*

### activity 01

In *The Mighty*, the Knights of the Round Table are evoked in a number of different ways, sometimes in a deliberate way, through an explicit statement, and sometimes more subtly, simply through visuals.

*Make a list of all of the references you can think of.*

*What role and purpose does the King Arthur metaphor serve in *The Mighty*?*

### activity 02

Discuss whether or not the chivalrous ethic is alive and thriving today. Identify examples of it in other movies and/or your personal experiences.

MOVIE OR PERSONAL EXPERIENCE

HOW DOES IT DEMONSTRATE AN ETHIC OF CHIVALRY?


## CAMERA WORK

Accomplished directors and cinematographers (master camera operators) use the positioning and movement of the camera to enhance a movie's story-telling in subtle but significant ways. The position from which the camera is recording the action, the angle at which it is placed, the way it is moved -- all these choices influence how the audience interprets what's going on.

At the beginning of *The Mighty*, for instance, there is a scene in which Max is walking through the halls of his school, explaining how he is seen by others. What he is telling us in the voice-over narration is reinforced visually by the camera work, which records the scene from Max's point of view, allowing the audience to more easily understand his perspective and experience. A **high angle shot** is used, showing Max's classmates from above, reinforcing, in the process, the fact that Max stands out and towers over them.

We also see the wary expressions on the students' faces -- these are **reaction shots**, letting us know how they are responding to Max, and again, allowing us to slip inside Max's skin and experience what it must be like for him. These techniques help the director to establish our identification with and sympathy for certain characters.

The use of long, medium and close-up shots also has emotional implications. When the director wishes us to understand and relate to how a character is feeling, he or she uses a **close-up shot**. In contrast, when the purpose of the scene is to establish the context, telling us more generally where we are, a **long shot** is used to provide more information about the surroundings. The **medium shot** -- a compromise between these two -- is often used to show people relating to each other.

### activity 01

Think back to your viewing of the movie, and see if you can remember -- or guess, based on the information above -- what kind of shot was used to:

	TYPE OF SHOT USED
focus attention on the man and women fighting in the bar	
provide a sense of the surroundings of the place where Iggy and Loretta live	
tell Max that Kevin was in trouble in the cafeteria	
establish Max's grief over Kevin's death	

In addition to helping tell the story and provide insights into characters' feelings, camera work can also illuminate and reinforce a movie's themes. For instance, throughout *The Mighty*, we are repeatedly reminded in a visual way of the value of teamwork by the camera's focus on the image of Kevin on Max's shoulders. However, it is the third theme, described earlier in this guide, about rising above our limitations, that is illustrated especially well by the camera work.

## activity 02

From the very beginning of the movie, images and camera angles are used to give us a perspective “from above.” The film opens with an aerial shot (taken from an airplane), that gives us a bird’s eye view of the expanse of sky, and permits us to look down on the city -- from far above the highways, bridges and buildings.

Throughout the film, the camera work and visuals reinforce this “rising above” metaphor that is key to describing the choices Max and Kevin make in struggling to overcome their difficulties. For the following scenes, draw storyboards of the shots used in the film demonstrating how Max and Kevin escape from, or deal with, their limitations and problems.

### SCENES

### STORYBOARD

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#### SCENE 01

Max and Kevin’s first meeting is brought about by the misguided flight path of the mechanical aircraft that Kevin is playing with in his backyard. Although through most of the movie, Max’s perspective on the world is of a person looking downward, at this particular moment of discovery, he looks up at the toy airplane.

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#### SCENE 02

Several times in the movie, when Max is feeling overwhelmed by his life, he describes “a place I go in my head,” where it’s very quiet, “like the clouds.” Draw the image the director uses to represent where Max goes.

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#### SCENE 03

Skyward activity is again featured in the key scene in which Max first puts Kevin on his shoulders: they’re watching the fireworks and Max tells us: “I reached down without thinking...,” while Kevin comments: “What an amazing perspective.” Draw the shot showing Kevin’s newfound view of the world.

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#### SCENE 04

Max calls chapter two in his book, “Walking High Above the World.” The first image we see in this part of the story features Max walking across a bridge with Kevin on his shoulders. Draw this image.

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## STEREOTYPES

Stereotypes are standardized images or conceptions shared by all members of a social group. Story-telling often relies on stereotypes in order to quickly communicate character traits to an audience. Because stereotypes have been used over many years, they create a sort of unspoken but shared way of understanding people. Television commercials, for instance, use stereotypes so that TV viewers recognize who is supposed to be the perfect mother, suave businessman, mischievous kid or obnoxious neighbour.

However, real people rarely fit stereotypes, being much more than one- or two-dimensional depictions would suggest. And when we make assumptions about people based on stereotypes, we are essentially denying their full value as real, complex human beings with individual feelings, perspectives and characteristics.

### Physical Stereotypes

At the beginning of the movie, Max and Kevin appear to represent two common physical stereotypes: big and dumb; and small, nerdy and smart. Many of the other characters in the movie treat the two boys as if they could be defined by such descriptions. In addition, because Kevin uses crutches to get around, he is subjected to stereotyping by others that defines him by his disability.

1. What are some of the derogatory names Max gets called, or uses to refer to himself? How do these names reinforce the “big equals dumb” stereotype?
2. Does the movie’s ending challenge this stereotype? If so, how?
3. How is Kevin’s intelligence established from the beginning of the movie? What incidents during the movie reinforce the “brainy” stereotype?
4. Think of other movies or TV shows you’ve seen, or books you’ve read, and identify other characters who fit into these stereotypes. Use the two left columns in the following chart to explain your answers.
5. Think of real people you know who could be physically described as fitting one stereotype, but whose intelligence does not match the image we associate with their body type. How might they be affected by their physical appearance? Use the two right columns in the following chart to explain your answers.

MOVIES, TV SHOWS, BOOKS	CHARACTERS PORTRAYED AS BIG AND DUMB OR SMALL AND BRAINY	REAL PEOPLE YOU KNOW WHO CHALLENGE STEREOTYPES	HOW ARE THEY AFFECTED BY THEIR PHYSICAL APPEARANCE?



## Gender Role Stereotypes

Stereotypes relating specifically to character traits and behaviours that are supposedly found only in men, or only in women, are called gender stereotypes. Studies of popular TV programs and movies over the past 20 years have found that these forms of media reinforce stereotypes that severely limit our notions of who men are and what women can do. Most of us know real-life exceptions to the stereotypes that imply that all women are nurturing and understanding, and men are naturally competitive and aggressive.

*List six personality characteristics and categorize them as “male,” “female” or “neutral” based on your perceptions of common assumptions about how men and women think and behave.*

*Now identify people you know -- friends, family members, public figures -- who demonstrate traits that run counter to these gender stereotypes.*

### Male

With the exception of Kevin and Max, none of the male characters in this movie are particularly likable. Considered altogether, they paint a pretty negative picture of men:

*Make a list of all of the character traits demonstrated by the following men or boys in the movie: the basketball coach, Max’s grandfather “Grim,” the “Doghouse Boys,” the guy in the bar, the ex-con who lives with Loretta, and Max’s father, Kenny. What notions about men are reinforced by these depictions?*

*Make another list of male characters from action movies, TV sports and video games that you’ve seen recently. What other traits do they embody? Draw a picture of “the ideal male,” that emerges from these media describing not only what he looks like, but how he behaves and what he values.*

### Female

In contrast to the male characters, the women in *The Mighty* display almost exclusively positive traits and behaviour -- from Max’s concerned, peace-making grandmother and Kevin’s loving, tolerant mom, to the sympathetic school principal, and perceptive and sensitive classroom teacher. Even Loretta, despite her questionable surroundings and lug-like boyfriend, demonstrates her essential goodness by helping Max escape his father, and by giving him good advice.

*Make a list of all of the character traits demonstrated by the following women in the movie: Kevin’s mom, Max’s grandmother, the school principal, Loretta, Max’s teacher. What notions about femininity are reinforced by these depictions?*

*Contrast the stereotypes about women in *The Mighty* to other media stereotypes about women found in video games and/or fashion and perfume advertising? What messages do these stereotypes send to girls and young women?*

## RELATIONSHIPS

The relationships between key characters in a movie often serve to move the action forward: one person does or says something to another which sparks an entire chain of events. The strong feelings characters have for each other -- either positive or negative -- are usually fundamental to the story. (If Romeo didn't fall in love with Juliet, there wouldn't be a story.) Furthermore, the interaction between characters is one of the easiest ways of helping the audience to get to know the individual characters -- in movies, as in real life, our personal qualities are often revealed through the way we treat and respond to others.

### activity 01

*The relationship between Max and Kevin is crucial to the story. How does the interaction of the two boys contribute to the plot's development?*

*The very first words spoken in The Mighty are Max's: "It was Freak who told me about King Arthur; it was Freak who told me everything." What kind of first impression does this create?*

*How does the relationship Max has with Kevin affect his other relationships — with his grandparents, for instance, or the school bullies?*

### activity 02

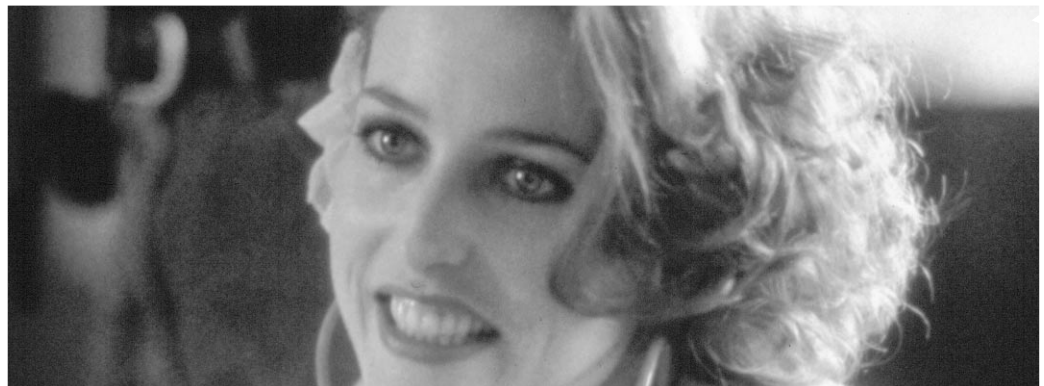
At the beginning of the movie, both Max and Kevin are isolated from their peers: Max, because he's big and the story about his father's conviction for murder is known; Kevin, because he's new and physically disabled.

*What assumptions do we make about people if they appear not to have any friends?*

*What impact does this have on them and their ability to establish friendships?*

*Have you ever been in a situation where you didn't have friends? What happened to change things for you?*

*Although our parents usually remain important to us throughout our lives, for most people, friends become particularly influential at some point. Why is this? When does it usually seem to happen?*



### activity 03

Sometimes a film will fail to fully explain the nature of the relationship between two characters, leaving question marks in the minds of audience members about what has occurred between them.

*Did you have any unanswered questions at the end of The Mighty?*

*Can you think of other movies you've seen that left you wondering about a particular relationship -- in particular, about how one might turn out?*

MOVIES	KEY RELATIONSHIPS LEFT UNRESOLVED

*Do you think such question marks are accidental or deliberate? Why might a filmmaker want to leave a relationship ambiguous?*

## VIOLENCE

Many contemporary movies, television shows and video games rely on scenes of violence to engage the audience and move the story forward. Critics of the use of violence in popular culture suggest that:

1. The excess use of violence is a filmmaker's cop-out: it's cheap to produce and usually means that less attention is paid to writing an interesting plot, developing realistic characters, or hiring actors with talent. Violence is also easier to export to other countries; unlike clever dialogue or humour that is unique to a particular culture, fist fights and car crashes require no translation.
2. Frequent use of violence encourages viewers to resort to violence rather than seek other means of resolving conflict. In addition, people who witness a lot of media violence generally become more fearful, believing that the world is a more dangerous place than it actually is. They also become desensitized to the pain and suffering of others.

All media violence is not equal. Some studies into the impact of violence suggest that the way the violence is depicted can make a big difference in terms of its impact on society and the way people behave. (For reference, see *Summary and Analysis of Various Studies on Violence and Television*, report commissioned by CRTC 1991).

For instance, violent media depictions are more likely to contribute to violence in the world if:

1. The story line justifies violence as necessary to fight evil, and the characters who use violence to get what they want are rewarded and celebrated as heroes
2. No consequences of violence are shown that would arouse feelings of revulsion in viewers (James Bond movies versus *Saving Private Ryan*)
3. The violence is meant to be pleasing and entertaining to the viewer (Consider *True Lies* which many people found very funny. Research suggests that laughter make us less critical of violence, and more likely to accept it as natural.)
4. The situation is realistic and one that viewers are likely to encounter in real life (cartoon violence, or violence depicted in fantasy-type situations, such as in *Star Wars* or *Batman*, is less likely to be imitated than the violence shown on cops and robber TV series).





**activity 01** Discuss the violence in *The Mighty* and, using the points above, decide whether or not the film’s use of violence condones or criticizes violence. List three other movies you’ve seen in which violence occurs and apply the same criteria to those depictions. How do popular video games fare when judged by these points?

**activity 02** At one point in the movie, Kevin calls Max “a pacifist” for failing to tell the basketball coach that he wasn’t the one who tripped Kevin with the basketball. Discuss the meaning of the word “pacifist.” What messages do you see around you about “passing on the fist.” Is it considered an admirable thing to do in our culture? What are some of the other words that people use to describe a person who walks away from a fight?

It is natural for people to experience fear when their lives, or the lives of others whom they love, are threatened. Yet our culture encourages boys and men of all ages not to admit or express their feelings of fear.

*What does Grim do in response to his fear that Max’s father, Kenny Kain, will come to the house once he’s released from jail? Is this helpful?*

*What impact does Max’s fear of his father have on Max as a little boy, during the trial involving his father? What long-term consequences does that fear appear to have had on Max?*

**activity 03** Steven Spielberg’s film, *Saving Private Ryan*, is a war movie that criticizes, rather than glorifies, war. What other movies or TV programs have you seen or books have you read that embody a similar message?

MOVIES, BOOKS	ANTI-WAR/ ANTI-VIOLENCE MESSAGE

## AUDIENCE

Audiences are essential to films -- if a movie studio or producer didn't believe that a large collection of people would be likely to want to see a particular story, the movie wouldn't get made.

Movie-making is extremely expensive. The collaborative nature of the work usually involves hundreds of people -- writers, directors, producers, actors, camera operators, sound and lighting artists and technicians, location managers, set, costume and make-up people and many others in supporting roles, both on-screen and off. As a result, movie producers must have confidence that the number of people who will pay money to see the movie will be sufficient to more than recover all the costs involved in making the picture. After all, like most business people, they're hoping to make a profit.

Teenagers go to more movies than any other age group. Moreover, if they like a movie, they're often prepared to pay to see it a second, and sometimes third time, even before it comes out on video. As a result, many Hollywood producers specifically target teenage audiences, believing that this will increase the chances of financial success.

Making the film is only a part of the challenge; marketing it is also an important part of the process. Movie companies spend millions of dollars promoting films once they're made, so as to generate public interest in -- and hopefully attendance to -- the theatre. Trailers, television commercials, posters, magazine and newspaper ads are all designed to attract our interest in current films.

### activity 01

*Imagine that a local movie studio, wanting to increase its success rate with the sought-after teenage audience, has approached you and your classmates to consult on the studio's next film project. Your job is to come up with a list of story elements and leading actors who you feel would be popular with your peers. What and who would you recommend?*

*Use the following chart to identify three movies that have been popular with you and your friends. Make a list of the story elements and leading actors in these movies and then compose them with your list of recommendations.*

MOVIES	STORY ELEMENTS / ACTORS

### activity 02

*What elements in The Mighty are likely to interest teenagers?*

*Based on your viewing of the film, what type of audience do you think The Mighty was intended to appeal to? (age, sex, interests...)*

*The roles played by Gillian Anderson (Agent Muldaur on the X-Files) and Sharon Stone (who frequently plays very hard, aggressive characters) represent a big departure for both actors. Why would they be interested in these roles?*

*As the two biggest names in the movie, how effective are they likely to be as audience draws, considering who the movie is designed to appeal to?*

### activity 03

*Imagine you work for the promotional department of Alliance Releasing. Write a one page press release promoting The Mighty, emphasizing the aspects of the film media (story elements, lead actors, etc.) that you believe will be most likely to generate positive attention from and interest amongst the movie's target audience.*

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

### Violence

“The Killing Screens” video exploring aspects of media violence, featuring noted U.S. researcher, George Gerbner.

“Taking a Stand” anti-bullying materials available from the B.C. Ministry of the Attorney General.

### Arthurian Legends

*Camelot* — movie available on video.

*Tales of King Arthur*, by Sidney Lanier.

*Myths Within*, by David Creighton, published by Gage Educational Publishing, Canada 1992.

“Tales of Prince Valiant” — Comic strip carried in weekend newspapers.

*The Mists of Avalon*, by Marion Zimmer Bradley, published by Ballantine Books, 1982.

*Writer Biography* Shari Graydon is an educator and media analyst who has served as the President of MediaWatch for five years. She produced a 13-part TV series about women and the media for WTN, and for three years wrote a column for The Vancouver Sun. Currently she teaches communications at Simon Fraser University and Kwantlen College and contributes frequent commentary on media issues to a variety of print and broadcast media.

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