Boomerang
Miss Peregrine’s Home for Peculiar Children
By Ransom Riggs
WEEK ONE

I had just come to accept that my life would be ordinary when extraordinary things began to happen. The first of these came as a terrible shock and, like anything that changes you forever, split my life into halves: Before and After. Like many extraordinary things to come, it involved my grandfather, Abraham Portman.

Growing up, Grandpa Portman was the most fascinating person I knew. He had lived in an orphanage, fought in wars, crossed oceans by steamship and deserts on horseback, performed in circuses, knew everything about guns and self-defense and surviving in the wilderness, and spoke at least three languages that weren’t English. It all seemed unfathomably exotic to a kid who’d never left Florida, and I begged him to regale me with stories whenever I saw him. He always obliged, telling them like secrets that could be entrusted only to me.

(Prologue, page 2)
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(Prologue, page 2)

These opening paragraphs can be summarized in one sentence: things are about to get interesting. Ransom Riggs introduces his narrator through a description of his grandfather. The narrator sounds fascinated by adventure, which foreshadows the turn
What to note

This opening sets up the overarching theme of the book: awakening. Jacob revisits the moment he discovers his true path, which will lead him to find his purpose. Young adult novels often explore the theme of growing up. This makes sense since the genre is written for people transitioning from childhood to adulthood. In that process a character might, as this one does, discover his family’s past, his identity, and his destiny. Jacob additionally learns how his past might shape his future. It’s a great way to hook us as readers. A theme of awakening immediately makes us want to follow Jacob to find out what’s going to happen to him.

All books begin strategically. Some start in the center of the action, some start at the conclusion and then loop back to the beginning, and others start at the beginning of a new chapter of the character’s life. The third option is what’s going on here—we’re placed right between the “Before and After” sections of Jacob’s story. He begins his story with the background information that will help us appreciate the significant shift in his life.

How to teach the passage

Jacob is a descriptive, observant narrator. Although his narrative voice is conversational in tone, he uses a pretty sophisticated vocabulary. Notice “unfathomably exotic” and “regale” in the passage. Do you use words like that? If so, you might say you speak with formal diction, which is characterized by advanced vocabulary and a lack of slang.
Nevertheless, the narrative voice sounds young rather than old. This is a choice Riggs has made that influences the narrative voice—since his story is in the past tense, his narrator could tell the story when he’s 80 years old or while he’s still a teenager. What clues can you find that allow you to guess the narrator’s age at the time he is telling the story?

Take a look at this part of the passage and count how many commas there are:

- He had lived in an orphanage, fought in wars, crossed oceans by steamship and deserts on horseback, performed in circuses, knew everything about guns and self-defense and surviving in the wilderness, and spoke at least three languages that weren’t English. It all seemed unfathomably exotic to a kid who’d never left Florida, and I begged him to regale me with stories whenever I saw him.

If you count six commas, you’re right. Riggs writes a long sentence with a series of commas instead of breaking it up into smaller sentences. This is no accident: the commas make us feel like we’re inside Jacob’s train of thought, which for the moment is tripping along without a long pause. Do you feel close to Jacob as you read this passage, or do you feel some distance from him? That sense usually relates to stylistic choices made by the author.

A word about grammar in this passage. Two adjectives, “ordinary” and “extraordinary,” introduce the initial movement of the story out of Jacob’s everyday existence into a surprising adventure. “Extraordinary” can mean unusual, remarkable, or wonderful. What do you think—is Jacob’s adventure one of these or all three? Note that these two words are antonyms (opposites) created by the prefix “extra-,” meaning “outside” or “beyond.”

A prefix is a letter or group of letters that, when added to the beginning of a word, contributes to its meaning. If the letter group is at the end of the word, we call it a suffix. The word affix can refer to a prefix, a suffix, or both. An affix joins with a base or root word to create the new word. Let’s take a look at a prefix in this passage.
The prefix “extra-” is not one of the most common in English. “Extra-” as a prefix functions to inflate or expand the word to which it is attached. Look in a dictionary for other words that begin with “extra” to see the variety of ways this prefix expands the original term.

Another word from the opening paragraph with a prefix is “entrust,” formed with the prefix “en-” + the base word “trust.” “En-” serves the same function as the word “in”—choosing to put our trust in someone or something. Can you think of another word with “en” as its prefix? Define it! Finding affixes can be a scavenger hunt, and a great way to explore the elasticity of the English language!
WEEK TWO

Feeling overwhelmed, I put my head down on my knees. “I don’t suppose you could let me have a sip of that wine,” I said.

“Absolutely not.”

All of the sudden I felt my chest clench up. “Will I ever be safe anywhere?” I asked her.

Miss Peregrine touched my shoulder. “You’re safe here,” she said. “And you may live with us as long as you like.”

I tried to speak, but all that came out was little stutters. “But I—I can’t—my parents.”

“They may love you,” she whispered, “but they’ll never understand.”

(Chapter Nine, page 266)
WEEK TWO

Dialogue

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(Chapter Nine, page 266)

Why this passage

Dialogue can kick the pace of a book up a notch. It can also convey information about character and move the plot forward, as it does in this passage. Consider how much happens in the small amount of text above: Miss Peregrine steps into her role as a caring guardian, Jacob feels the gravity of his situation, and we learn about the central need of all peculiars: safety and belonging.
What to note

An author constructs dialogue carefully so that readers know who is speaking. Dialogue is an opportunity to reveal information gradually, as you will see in the following example.

Note that punctuation can be used to distinguish the rhythm of one character’s speech from another’s, and to communicate emotional states. Look at the information Ransom Riggs conveys through dialogue in the last part of the passage, copied below:

- I tried to speak, but all that came out was little stutters. “But I—I can’t—my parents.”
- “They may love you,” she whispered, “but they’ll never understand.”

Riggs doesn’t just tell us that Jacob is stuttering as he speaks, he shows us with an em dash. We’ll talk about the em dash later, so make a mental note of its use here.

Miss Peregrine responds to Jacob with a nice little twist. We begin reading Miss Peregrine’s line imagining that she’s speaking in a regular voice. Midway through we discover that she’s whispering, so we finish the line in a hushed tone.

Whispering can give a line added weight. Think of Idris Elba saying “Don’t you ever touch me again” in Pacific Rim or Lord Voldemort telling Harry Potter to join him in the forbidden forest and confront his fate in Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows. What instances of whispering in movies can you think of? How do you feel reading Miss Peregrine’s whispered assertion, “but they’ll never understand”? 
We’ve analyzed this scene’s narrative content; now let’s look at the formatting and punctuation. Here are some basics that we see above:

- Whenever the speaker changes, the writer starts a new paragraph (hits “return” and indents).
- The sentence ends with the attributive tag. The attributive tag is the “she said” part of the conversation. Observe the punctuation above—the attributive tag occurs when we’re told Miss Peregrine whispers. The tag is followed by a comma and combines with the quoted speech to make a longer sentence.
- Descriptions of characters can accompany a line of the dialogue as part of the same paragraph if the character who is speaking is the subject of the sentence. Jacob puts his head on his knees before speaking, for example. If Jacob put his head on his knees and then Miss Peregrine spoke, Riggs would start a new paragraph in order to shift from him to her before her next line of dialogue.

Fun fact

The author of Miss Peregrine’s School for Peculiar Children, Ransom Riggs, has a background in film. This line is an example of his awareness of how a scene might play on the big screen. Miss Peregrine’s voice becomes a whisper in the reader’s mind before the most important phrase: they’ll never understand. This clinches the shift between Jacob’s “Before” life and his “After.” Now that he knows who he is, there is a divide between him and his loved ones. All this information has been packed into these two lines, which illustrates the beauty of well-paced dialogue.
A note about usage or phraseology (when we talk about these we are discussing word choices): you may have noticed the following sentence in our passage.

- All of the sudden I felt my chest clench up.

Does this sentence sound odd to your ear? If so, you are picking up on a usage debate related to the figure of speech that opens the sentence—a longer way of saying, “suddenly.” Some say “All of the sudden,” others say “All of a sudden,” and there’s a debate about which is accurate. A prescriptivist grammarian will go to grammar manuals in search of a ruling. A descriptivist grammarian will try to find out which usage is more commonly used among speakers and writers. In the case of all of “the/a sudden,” some people have searched on the internet to see which is used more in an effort to settle the question. According to one tally, the undisputed winner is “all of a sudden.” Either way, it’s an idiom—an informal figure of speech in which the words mean something other than they say literally. Jacob doesn’t really mean that “all” happened “of the sudden,” right? Just the feeling of his chest clenching. And if you said to someone, “Hold your tongue!” you wouldn’t expect them to jam their fingers in their mouth, right? That’s an idiom, too.
“This is all I’m proposing,” Golan continued, trying to sound reasonable. “Help us find more people like you. In return, you’ll have nothing to fear from Malthus or his kind. You can enjoy life at home. In your free time you’ll come with me and see the world, and we’ll pay you handsomely. We’ll tell your parents you’re my research assistant.”

“If I agree,” I said, “what happens to my friends?”

He made a dismissive gesture with his gun. “They made their choice long ago. What’s important is that there’s a grand plan in motion, Jacob, and you’ll be part of it.”

Did I consider it? I suppose I must have, if only for a moment. Dr. Golan was offering me exactly what I’d been looking for: a third option. A future that was neither stay here forever nor leave and die. But one look at my friends, their faces etched with worry, banished any temptations.

(Chapter 10, page 297)
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(Chapter 10, page 297)

Why this passage

Once again, we’re reminded that this book is about a split between two moments: the before and after. Jacob has become awakened (remember that this is the major theme of
the book) to his true identity and destiny. He’s caught between two worlds: his family and his peers. When Dr. Golan appears with an enticing third option, this puts Jacob’s struggle in relief. He has to choose his path. He knows he cannot side with the villains and he knows he cannot go back to his old way of life. He can only move forward. This moment marks a shift in Jacob’s role in the book—he’s no longer discovering this strange world, he’s joining it and fighting for it.

What to note

Every plot has a structure. Think about your favorite book and how it is organized. If it is written in a classic narrative arc, the characters and conflict are introduced at the beginning of the book, the conflict builds, then everything comes to a head that leads to a resolution. Finally, there is a cool down in which we observe the aftermath of the explosion and the story concludes, either answering all our questions or leaving us to our imaginations. All these points on the classic narrative arc have names. See if you can order the following points in a narrative, one (closest to the beginning) through five (closest to the ending):

- Denouement/Conclusion
- Climax
- Exposition
- Falling Action
- Rising Action

Let’s figure out which moment in the plot the above passage corresponds to. It’s not clear cut—we could say it is rising action or that it’s the climax, the moment when all the tension that has been building rises to a boiling point. We’ve gone from wondering who the bad guys are to experiencing a big reveal. Our main characters are in mortal danger, the accepted way of life is in jeopardy, and we don’t know who
is going to win. This is the part of the book where you’re so engrossed you don’t even want to get up to go to the bathroom. If we argue that this moment is rising action, it means the climax is about to happen.

The climax might be when Jacob returns to the mansion and discovers that the birds are taken. At that point the plot intensifies. If we argue that this is the climax, we’d say it begins when Dr. Golan first reveals himself and stretches all the way to when the children are in the ocean trying to save the birds. One of the pleasures of reading is that our perceptions play a role in how we perceive the meaning and pace of the story. The author works hard to get across specific themes, ideas, and feelings but we decide how to interpret them. You get to choose which moment you think has the most tension and argue that it is the climax—from your experience of the book.

How to teach the passage

You may disagree, but for the sake of clarity let’s call this scene the climax for the remainder of this discussion. Notice how Riggs uses dialogue to keep the pace moving. Climaxes are often high speed, packed with energy, tension, and action. Riggs has to get across some important plot points but he keeps the energy high with rapid dialogue.

Riggs develops character through this conversation. Check how he describes Golan’s behavior: he is “trying to sound reasonable” and makes “a dismissive gesture.” These are bullying tactics. Jacob seems to be considering Golan’s words but he doesn’t stutter like he did when he spoke with Miss Peregrine. All he needs is a quick glance at his friends to decide. This shows us that Jacob is fully committed to the peculiars’ cause. He officially identifies as one of them and is choosing to join his life with theirs. It’s a turning point in his character. Up until now, he’s had a one-foot-out approach to the world of the peculiars. As his grandfather’s life foreshadowed (hinted), it isn’t possible to live in two worlds. At one point you have to sacrifice one. In this moment, Jacob makes his choice.
Jacob asks, “Did I consider it?” Who exactly is Jacob talking to? Is he asking us, his readers? We know he isn’t asking Golan because Jacob doesn’t say anything out loud. We also know that Jacob wasn’t actually asking the question when he was with Golan. He asks the question as the narrator looking back on this moment. Is he asking himself as he narrates, attempting to remember?

This is a rhetorical question: a question with no answer or an answer so obvious as to make the question unnecessary. A rhetorical question is posed in order to draw attention to the point under consideration. By asking if he considered it, Jacob implies that he didn’t take time to consider—he knew his answer all along. By having Jacob pose this question, Riggs creates the answer in readers’ minds without actually having to state it.

This passage makes use of the colon. No doubt you’ve met this close friend of the semicolon! We’ll be talking about the semicolon in Week Four, so all we have to focus on is the colon for now. Let’s look at its use below:

- Dr. Golan was offering me exactly what I’d been looking for: a third option.

The colon is used to introduce a list or an example. Instead of a colon, imagine the words “for example” or “and by this I mean.”

Back to plot for a moment

How did you do with ordering the conventional narrative arc? Here’s the standard sequence:

1. Exposition
2. Rising Action
3. Climax
4. Falling Action
5. Denouement/Conclusion
WEEK FOUR

Hugh and I rowed the first boat. Enoch sat watching us from the bow, ready to take his turn, while Emma in a sunhat studied the receding island. The sea was a pane of rippled glass spreading endlessly before us. The day was warm, but a cool breeze came off the water, and I could’ve happily rowed for hours. I wondered how such calm could belong to a world at war.

In the next boat, I saw Bronwyn wave and raise Miss Peregrine’s camera to her eye. I smiled back. We’d brought none of the old photo albums with us; maybe this would be the first picture in a brand new one. It was strange to think that one day I might have my own stack of yellowed photos to show skeptical grandchildren—and my own fantastic stories to share.

Then Bronwyn lowered the camera and raised her arm, pointing at something beyond us. In the distance, black against the rising sun, a silent procession of battleships punctuated the horizon.

We rowed faster.

(Chapter Eleven, page 352)
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*(Chapter Eleven, page 352)*
Why this passage

We’ve reached the conclusion of the book. If you’re feeling fancy, you can call it the **denouement** in your best French accent. Riggs’s task, since this is the first in a series, is to end the book without ending the story. There are two more books! He doesn’t want his readers to feel so satisfied that they leave the world of peculiars forever. Riggs’s job is to show us that we’ve won the battle but there’s still a war. The entire story’s conclusion will be at the end of the series, not at the end of the first book.

When we’re reading a series, there are two helpful questions that allow us to evaluate the conclusion of the first volume:

1. **What was the primary problem the protagonist of this book needed to solve?**  
   (Did he solve it?)

2. **What is the overarching problem the series has presented?**  
   (Did the author arouse sufficient interest in you that you’ll keep reading?)

You get to decide whether or not Riggs is successful in each of them.

What to note

One of the most popular lines in the book comes from this passage. Can you guess which one it is? It works as an insight into life in general and creates foreshadowing for the books to come. Take a look:

> I wondered how such calm could belong to a world at war.

This line perfectly captures Riggs’s strategy for concluding the installment. The “calm” Jacob lets us know that our characters are safe, however temporarily. We can close the book with the knowledge that they’re happily rowing peaceful waters.
The “world at war” line serves a couple of functions. It is poetic; it brings to mind moments of contentment in a planet full of strife. It also speaks to the 1930s setting, which means Jacob has committed to leaving his own time period to go live with with the peculiars. Finally, Riggs foreshadows the next installment of the book by reminding readers that these characters are rowing into a war. They may be safe for the moment but it isn’t going to last, we’ve got to go read the next book to see what will happen.

How to teach the passage

First, let’s look at punctuation. Remember the em dash? You’ve seen it a couple of times in this *Boomerang*. It’s handy and quick. Once you know how to use it, you’ll be dashing your way through all your sentences, too. Please don’t abandon the comma altogether though—too many dashes can make prose seem—one might say—breathless—or worse—insufficiently thought out! (How did that sound?)

Check out its use in the following passage:

- ...one day I might have my own stack of yellowed photos to show skeptical grandchildren—and my own fantastic stories to share.

The em dash connects multiple ideas. Depending on the sentence, it can be used in place of a host of punctuation marks, such as a comma, a semicolon, or a period. In the above excerpt, the em dash creates emphasis and changes the nature of the mental pause in the reader’s mind. Riggs could have written the same line this way:

- ...one day I might have my own stack of yellowed photos to show skeptical grandchildren and my own fantastic stories to share.
In this version, all aspects of the sentence are read equally. Riggs uses the em dash to set apart the end of the idea so that it stands out. We take a pause before “and my own fantastic stories to share,” but maybe less of a pause than we would with a comma; a semicolon would introduce an even longer pause. The pause created by a period would be still greater...and an ellipsis would create its own type of pause. Play with all of these as you write sentences of your own.

Now that you know what the em dash is, let’s talk about what it is not: an en dash. This is the younger sibling of the em dash. It aids words instead of sentences. While the em dash is punctuating whole sentences, the en dash is connecting two individual words so that they create a specific meaning. Here are examples of how an en dash works:

• 5–6 weeks (here it stands in for the word “to”)
• country music–influenced lyrics (here it is used instead of a hyphen to emphasize the link in the open compound adjective “country music,” which is describing the word “lyrics”—it emphasizes the link, whereas a hyphen is thought by typographers to be more confusing to a reader in this case)
• The University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee (some universities use an en dash instead of a hyphen to link a campus location to the name of the university)

See how that differs from an em dash? Not only is the en dash shorter (the width of an n—get it?), it is used differently. The en dash most often connects ranges of numbers or dates. You can think of the em dash as a super comma.
Let’s examine the semicolon in this passage as well:

- We’d brought none of the old photo albums with us; maybe this would be the first picture in a brand new one.

A semicolon is typically used to connect two complete sentences that relate to one another. This is how it would look if Riggs misused the semicolon:

- We’d brought none of the old photo albums with us, maybe this would be the first picture; in a brand new one.

The difference between a comma and a semicolon is that the comma creates a pause and the semicolon attaches two sentences that could otherwise stand alone. Riggs uses the semicolon in the above sentence because the two independent clauses are part of the same thought. He wants to show that one of the thoughts leads into the other; they exist separately grammatically but not thematically.
Think piece questions

Dr. Peter Elbow’s term “think piece questions” comes from his work in the field of writing instruction and appears in many of his books and articles. We have adopted his language for this section of the Boomerang. The following questions are designed to offer you ways to think about Miss Peregrine’s Home for Peculiar Children. Things to remember and try:

- Use the questions to help you delve more deeply into the story. Support your answers with specific details from the book.
- Consider answering one set of questions per week.
- The finished product need not be perfectly refined. The objective of this writing is to stimulate reflection and to help you give language to your thoughts.
- If you find it daunting to write about these topics at first, use them as conversation starters with a parent or sibling who has read the books. Go out for shakes and talk about the book!
- As you get comfortable talking through a book, try answering one of the questions in writing.

1. The beginning of this book is full of foreshadowing. We get lots of hints about what is to come. How does the author slip in enough clues to hold our interest without giving too much away? Does Riggs add too much foreshadowing or just the right amount?

2. This book starts in the US but quickly moves over to Wales. What do you think of the setting? How does the change in country and choice of country affect the tone of the novel and our experience of the story?
3. Welcome to the Home for Peculiar Children! What do you think of their powers? Which power would you like to have? Reviewers have described them as both magical and creepy; what do you think?

4. This is a coming-of-age or young adult novel, which means it is targeted to teenagers and explores the theme of growing up. A theme is an overarching idea in a book. Where do we see examples of growing up? What other themes have you noticed?

5. Ransom Riggs has a background in film and the book was adapted into a movie. Do you find it easy to picture this story as a movie? Why or why not? How might Riggs’s background affect his writing style?

6. This book has a number of layered characters. Miss Peregrine both protects and controls her wards, Emma might love Jacob or she might be projecting onto him the love she has for his grandfather, and Jacob’s father both cares for and ignores Jacob. Choose a complex character and make an argument for why we should either trust the character or distrust the character.

7. This book explores big questions about time and mortality. Jacob says his life is split into a “Before and After,” the children can live forever but are stuck in time, and Victor is both dead and alive. Choose one of these contrasts or bring up a new one and explore the tension between these ideas. (Hint: Ask yourself questions like, “Would I rather live forever on one day or live everyday but have to die?” and “If keeping someone alive means leaving them almost-dead in a room all day, is that truly living?”)

8. At the end of the book, we discover that all the photos used during the story were collected rather than staged for the book. Does this affect your reading of the book or understanding of the photos? Why or why not? How would the book be different without these images?

9. The cover is creepy, the photos are unsettling, and the children are eighty years old. Who do you consider the ideal reader for this book? How would you describe this book to someone?
Golden Lines

Select one favorite passage from the book to keep in a notebook of golden lines. You'll pick a passage, copy it into a notebook, and then write the date you picked it and the location in the book (which chapter and page number). Then jot down a sentence or two about why the passage is meaningful to you. If you continue this practice each time you read a book and keep the quotes all in one journal, you'll have a lovely commonplace book that serves as a record of your reading throughout the year!