

# The Picture of Nobody

Rabindranath Maharaj

**Reading Level: 5**

**Interest Level: Adult/Young Adult**

## Book Summary

Tommy lives with his family in Ajax, a small town close to Toronto. His parents are Ismaili Muslims who immigrated to Canada before Tommy was born. Tommy, a shy, chubby 17-year-old, feels like an outsider.

The arrest of a terrorist group in Toronto turns Tommy's world upside down. No one noticed him before. Now, he experiences the sting of racism at the local coffee shop where he works part-time. A group of young men who hang out at the coffee shop begin to bully him. In spite, Tommy commits an act of revenge against the group's ringleader.

## Author Biography

Through his writing, Rabindranath Maharaj helps readers to understand the immigrant experience. *Homer in Flight* was a finalist for the Chapters/*Books in Canada* First Novel Award and *A Perfect Pledge* was a *Globe and Mail* Best Book. Robin was born and raised in Trinidad. He immigrated to Canada in the early 1990s and lives in Ajax, Ontario.

*Note to the educator: The following activities are suggestions only. Please choose and adjust the projects and questions according to the specific needs and level of your students as well as their experience with doing novel studies. Students can work individually, in pairs, or in small groups.*

## THINKING ABOUT THE BOOK

### Book Cover and Title

Ask students to read the title.

- (a) Ask students to speculate on what *The Picture of Nobody* might mean.
- (b) Ask students to predict what the book might be about, based on the title. Encourage students to expand on their predictions.

### Terrorism

Have students discuss the meaning of terrorism and share what they know about acts of terrorism in today's world. Then have students discuss the ways terrorism affects people and communities.

### Stereotyping

- (a) Ask students what they understand “stereotypes” and “stereotyping” to mean.
- (b) Provide students with a few examples of stereotypical thinking (e.g., punks with mohawks are a danger to society; politicians are crooked; Canadians are nice). Explain that stereotypes are oversimplified beliefs about groups of people, and that stereotypical thinking assumes the same characteristics of all people in a specific community or group.
- (c) Have students discuss (i) why people create stereotypes of other groups of people and (ii) why people should avoid stereotypical thinking.

## Racial Profiling

- (a) Ask students what they understand by the term “racial profiling.”
- (b) Put the students into groups. Have them read the following examples of racial profiling and come up with a definition of racial profiling based on the examples. Have the groups share their definitions and look for commonalities among the definitions they have come up with. Then provide the students with a more formal definition of racial profiling (see below). Have them compare their meanings with the formal meaning by determining how many of the four points in the formal definition they were able to deduce.

(Adapted from the Ontario Human Rights Commission’s racial profiling information, found at [www.ohrc.on.ca/en/resources/factsheets/whatisracialprofiling](http://www.ohrc.on.ca/en/resources/factsheets/whatisracialprofiling).)

- A police officer follows and tracks an African-Canadian man because she assumes he is likely to commit a crime.
- An employer wants a stricter security clearance for a Muslim employee after September 11, 2001.
- The owner of bar refuses to serve First Nations customers because he believes that they will get drunk and rowdy.
- A landlord asks a Chinese tenant to move out because she believes that the tenant will expose her to a dangerous illness, like bird flu.
- A woman balks at entering an Asian-owned salon because she believes the hygienic practices are inadequate.

### Definition

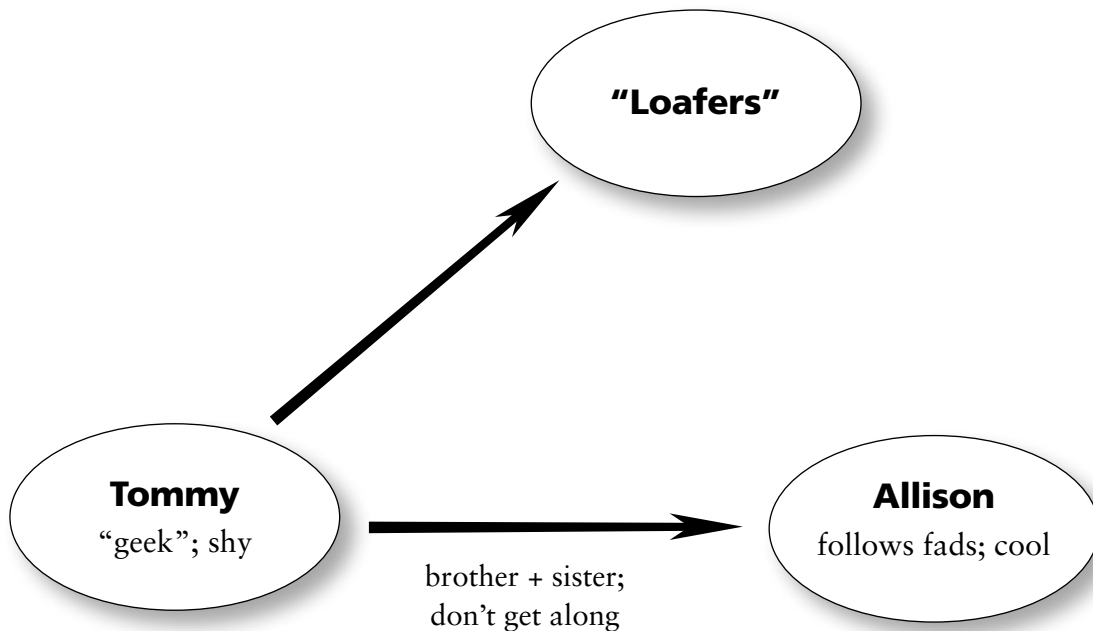
Racial profiling:

- occurs when someone relies on stereotypes about a person’s race, colour, ethnicity, ancestry, religion, or place of origin to justify treating them differently
- is not based on a person’s behaviour or evidence of wrongdoing
- is often, but not always, carried out by people in positions of authority
- can occur in many contexts involving safety, security, and public protection issues.

- (c) Ask students to share examples of racial profiling they have seen in the news or on TV, or that they have experienced.

**WORKING WITH THE BOOK****Characters****1. Sociogram**

Explain to students that a sociogram is a drawing that shows the relationships among people. Have students add characters to the sociogram below after reading Chapters 1 to 3, then again after reading Chapters 4 and 5. Have students (a) include all of the characters and jot down key words or phrases that describe them, (b) draw arrows from one character to another to show that they are connected, and (c) write a key phrase on each of the arrows to describe how the characters are connected.



After reading the entire book, divide students into small groups and have each group draw up a final version of the sociogram based on what they know by the end of the book. Then have the students discuss (a) how Tommy touched the lives of more and more characters as the book progressed and (b) how relationships among the characters changed, and why.

**Plot**

Have students keep note of the events that make Tommy feel more and more isolated, or alone (e.g., family moved a lot; Allison did not respond well to his attempt to befriend her; his father was thinking about moving again, etc.). After reading the entire book, have students discuss (a) how Tommy's response to his feelings of isolation leads to his feeling even more isolated, (b) to what extent Tommy's feelings of isolation are justified, and (c) when and why Tommy begins to feel like a part of his family and community again.

<b>Event</b>	<b>Effect on Tommy</b>
<i>Tommy's family moved a lot.</i>	<i>He found it harder and harder to make friends.</i>

**Setting**

After reading the book, have students reread pages 29 and 30. Draw the students' attention to the fact that the Sip and Sup coffee shop is the setting for much of the story. Have students identify the different groups and characters associated with the Sip and Sup. Then have them discuss (a) to what extent the coffee shop acts as a place to bring people together, (b) how these groups of people and individual characters connect with the themes of isolation, fitting in, stereotyping, and racial profiling, and (c) to what extent the people at the Sip and Sup represent people in any community.

**TALKING ABOUT THE BOOK**

1. (a) The book starts with Tommy's family watching the aftermath of a terrorist act in far-off London. How does this distant act of terrorism affect the family? People in the community of Ajax?  
  
(b) Draw a comparison between this act of terrorism and Tommy's act of revenge.
  
2. (a) Readers learn a lot about Tommy's father through his reminiscing about and references to Uganda. What have you learned about his values, beliefs, and dreams? How does he try to remain true to these things in Canada?  
  
(b) What values are respected in Canadian society? Are these values similar to the values held in the Uganda Tommy's father describes? Do you think certain human values are universal?  
  
(c) Think about your hopes and dreams. How do they compare with those of Tommy's father?
  
3. (a) How would you describe Tommy? What kind of person is he?  
  
(b) What do the things he imagines tell you about him?  
  
(c) What do his complaints about each member of his family tell you about him? Do you think his complaints are justified? If yes, why? If no, why do you think Tommy has these complaints?
  
4. Stereotyping is a major theme in the book. With this in mind, why do you think the writer gives us so much information about Tommy's father and his life in Uganda?
  
5. *"This is the tune of our catch, played by the picture of Nobody."* (page 58)  
  
(a) How does Tommy interpret this quote?  
  
(b) Give examples of when and why the following characters "changed" to fit in: Allison, Tommy's father, Tommy's mother.  
  
(c) Find other examples of how the writer uses characters to underline the theme of fitting in or belonging.  
  
(d) When is changing to belong a good idea? A not-so-good idea? Describe a time when you changed in order to fit in.  
  
(e) Think about groups that you belong to. Do people need to act in certain ways or believe in certain things in order to fit into these groups?

6. "We control the picture." (page 56)
  - (a) Why does Mr. Chum pretend to have a Chinese accent? Why does he drop the accent with Tommy when he says "We control the picture"?
  - (b) What do you learn about Mr. Chum by the end of the book? Do you feel you know Mr. Chum as a character? Why don't readers learn more about Mr. Chum?
  - (c) Did you at any point wonder why Mr. Chum puts on an act in front of customers? Imagine a white owner of a restaurant acting like Mr. Chum. Would you question his behaviour? Why, or why not? Does the writer hope to trick his readers into stereotyping? Explain your answer.
  
7. Reread pages 30 to 31 starting at "Before I started working..." and ending at "He wasn't laughing, though."
  - (a) What are the motivations behind the loafers' questions?
  - (b) Why does one loafer call Tommy a comedian?
  - (c) How does Tommy respond to these questions? Why?
  
8. The question "What's your name?"/ "What's her name?" appears on pages 21, 35, 66, and 67.
  - (a) In each spot, figure out why the question is being asked. What does the reason for asking the question tell us about the person asking the question?
  - (b) Think about the last time you asked someone his or her name. Why did you ask? Think about the last time someone asked you your name. Why did they ask? How did you feel telling them your name? Why?
  - (c) When is knowing a person's name important? Not important? Give reasons for your examples.
  - (d) People name their pets. What other things do people name? Why is it important to people to name things?
  
9. The writer does not tell readers that the loafers are racially profiling Tommy. He reveals this slowly. Reread Chapters 5 to 7. List details that provide clues to what is happening. What helps Tommy learn what is going on? How does Tommy try to prevent the loafers from racially profiling him? Do these attempts work? Why, or why not?



10. “They couldn’t have been involved in this plot, she said. They all came from good families and got high grades at school. ‘They even like hockey,’ she added as the final proof of their innocence.” (page 36)

(a) Why does the woman on the news find it hard to believe that the boys arrested were part of a terrorist cell? What personal beliefs is she revealing?

(b) What do you think this woman’s idea of a “good family” is? Make a list of the characteristics that would fit with her idea of a good family. What is your idea of a good family? Make a list of characteristics. How are the two ideas similar? Different? Which characteristics are more important: those that are similar or those that are different?

**WRITING ABOUT THE BOOK**

1. Choose a character or event from the novel that you connected with in some way. For example, did the character or event remind you of something in your life? Cause an emotional reaction in you? Teach you something? Describe what, how, and why.
2. Write about a time you judged somebody you didn't know. Who was it? What was your judgment of the person? What did you base your judgment on? Did your judgment prove to be right or wrong? Explain.
3. Imagine you are Tommy's father. Write a letter to a relative in Uganda. Describe your present life in Ajax. Tell your relative how you and your family are doing. Include your thoughts and feelings.
4. Imagine you are Tommy. Write a journal entry explaining (a) why you sent the email about Sid, (b) how you felt after sending it, and (c) what you learned from your act of revenge.
5. Imagine you are Sid's girlfriend. Write an email to Sid describing what happened after he left. Include your thoughts and feelings.
6. Contact Rabindranath Maharaj and tell him what you thought of his book:  
<http://rmaharaj.wordpress.com/contact/>.

## PROJECTS and ACTIVITIES

### 1. Knowing people

Have students think about the people they see in their community on a regular basis. Tell students to choose one person that they don't know very well but have a feeling about (e.g., a person they might see at the bus stop every morning; the owner of a corner store; a neighbour). Have students write down ten questions they could ask this person to learn about his/her life story and true character. (Encourage students to write questions that start with who, what, where, when, why, and how.) Put students into small groups and have them come up with an additional five questions they can add to their own lists. Then have the students answer their own questions in writing as if they were being interviewed. (Some of the questions may not apply but most will.) At the end of the exercise, have students write a short paragraph describing how they felt answering their own questions.

### 2. Cultural diversity

Explain to students that cultural diversity means having different cultural groups living within a specific community. Have students think about cultural diversity by asking them to examine the cultural diversity of their community for one week. Have them note: (a) which cultures are represented in their community, (b) how diversity is recognized in their community (e.g., through ads, community halls, places of worship, etc.), and (c) how diversity is celebrated in their community (e.g., through school activities, heritage days, etc.) Then, in small groups, have students share their notes and discuss the following questions: Does your community promote the understanding of different cultural groups within the community? If yes, how? Should more be done? Why, or why not? How, and by whom?

### 3. Draw a sociogram

Ask students to jot down a list of 10 to 12 important people in their lives. Then have them draw a sociogram including all the people on their list. Have students analyze their sociograms and consider the following questions:

- (a) Who was easy to describe? Who was difficult to describe. Why?
- (b) Which relationships were easy to describe? Which were difficult? Why?
- (c) Were the relationships between the people surprising in any way?
- (d) Do the important people in your life make up one community of people, or more than one? How are these different communities defined?
- (e) Would you like to change the nature of the relationships between these people in any way? If yes, why, and how would you go about doing it?

#### 4. Learn about Uganda

Bring up images of Uganda on the computer. (Type “Uganda” in the Google search box. Click “Images” in the toolbar. Pages of photos and maps of Uganda will appear.) Have students spend about five minutes looking at as many images as they can. Then have students (a) share what they learned about Uganda just through looking at the images (e.g., about city life, rural areas, markets, wildlife, location, climate, geography, the nature of the people, war and peace, traditions), (b) compare their impressions of Uganda with what they learned about Uganda while reading *A Picture of Nobody*, and (c) write up a list of questions about Uganda they would like to have answered. Have each student choose a question that they will be responsible for finding an answer to. Brainstorm how and where answers might be found (e.g., the internet, the library, cultural centres). Later, have students share the answers they have found to their questions.

#### 5. Using a map

Draw the students’ attention to the fact that the book mentions a lot of place names, such as New Brunswick, Ottawa, and Toronto. Have students scan Chapters 1 and 2 and create a list of all the place names mentioned. Put students into small groups and have them share what they know about where these places are located, or might be located. Show students how to use Google Maps at <http://maps.google.com/>. Have students verify the locations and mark them on a hard copy of a world map.

**FURTHER READING**

(Available from Grass Roots Press)

If students liked this book, they might also enjoy:

*The Dare*, John Boyne, Quick Reads (GRP)

*The Grey Man*, Andy McNab, Quick Reads (GRP)

*The Story of Joe Brown*, Rose Doyle, Open Door Series (GRP)

*Chemical Secret*, Tim Vicary, Oxford Bookworms (GRP)

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