Synopsis

Pip McLeod's got problems. The biggest by far is Dad – shouting on the sideline at every soccer match and arguing every decision the ref makes ... The trouble is, Pip's not like his big brother Nick, the ace sportsman. Pip's good at other things, just not the things that matter to Dad.

One day Pip's English teacher produces a bag of coloured balls and issues the class a challenge: learning to juggle. Juggling, she tells them, is a cool party trick; an art form; a life skill. There's just one problem: Pip doesn't have any juggling balls. But who needs juggling balls when there are mandarins in the fruit bowl? It's harder than it looked when Mrs Holland did it, though — a lot harder. But Pip perseveres; and gradually, as the weeks go by, his skill increases. He learns to juggle first two, then three, then four mandarins. And he learns other things.

Sneaking into the new sport stadium two days before the official opening, Pip stumbles across the indoor climbing wall. In the twilight of the deserted stadium, he takes his courage in his hands and begins to climb ... and discovers a gift he never dreamed he had. Guided by his friend and mentor Rob, Pip pursues his new passion in secret, determined it will remain one area of his life his dad can't touch.

Pip also learns to deal with his secret feelings for Katie Wood, the girl next door, who suddenly changes from a scabby-kneed tomboy into a young woman who awakens emotions he finds both wonderful and frightening.

And at last, Pip finds the courage to confront his father and express his anger and resentment — to publicly claim the right to be his own person, and live life on his own terms. It seems the damage to their relationship is irrevocable. But then, with the insight gained from his new confidence and maturity, Pip finds a way to bridge the gap between them in a reconciliation that coincides with the climactic final of the Regional Climbing Championships.

Ultimately, as he learns to juggle the fifth and final ball, Pip comes to the realisation that he will never change his father, any more than his father will change him ... nor should they try. The best they can do is love each other for who they are, hang on tight to the times they connect — and juggle the moments in between.

Juggling with Mandarins is a novel about growing up. It asserts the importance of living life on your own terms, and of competing for enjoyment rather than reward. It explores the complex love-hate relationship between a father and son, and the sometimes painful process of realising that parents are people too.

Writing style: Sample Paragraphs My heart was lurching heavily in my chest, like a stone rolling over and over. 'I think she's smart not to walk,' I said. 'Why go to all the trouble of learning to walk when you're the world's best crawler? I reckon Madeline's got it right. I bet she'll still be crawling when she goes to high school. Heck, she'll probably win the Crawling Olympics!' I meant to make them laugh, and most of all, to deflect Dad. But to my horror I saw were tears in Mum's eyes. She turned quickly away and started to iron.

I took a shallow, shuddering breath and moved on up, gripping first one hold on the underside of the overhang . . . then another, with rubbery fingers. My body felt rigid and heavy; my hips wouldn't flex the right way. I felt my bum swing out into space . . . my hands slipped off the holds as if they were made of ice. I dropped from the wall like an overripe plum, and fell for what seemed like forever before the rope finally pulled me up with a sickening jerk and I swung there helplessly.

Author Inspiration

The main theme of *Juggling with Mandarins* – the conflict between Pip and Dad – came into my mind one Saturday morning at my son's soccer game, when I witnessed a real-life incident of a sideline dad, and imagined how his son must be feeling.

My two boys were into climbing at that stage, which is partly why I chose climbing as Pip's special talent. I knew a bit about climbing from discussions round the family dinner table, and found out the rest from the Internet – the author's friend! (I've never climbed myself — in fact I'm scared of heights — and I can't juggle either, no matter how hard my older son tries to teach me!)

I've always had strong feelings about the importance of encouraging kids in the direction they choose, rather than pushing them in the direction that suits you as a parent. *Mandarins* turned out to be the ideal vehicle for exploring and expanding on this theme.

I tried to make Dad a real person who at times we love, and at other times almost hate, just like Pip. At first I didn't get the balance for Dad's character quite right — one of the editors who read the manuscript commented: 'I don't see why Mum didn't divorce him years ago!' Hopefully that's now been fixed! In the same way that parents often have unrealistic or unfair expectations of their kids, kids sometimes expect their parents to be perfect ... and discovering they're not can be tough. But tough or not, it's part of growing up.

Editorial comment

Juggling with Mandarins tells the story of a pivotal time in the life of a young boy — a second son, who is very different from his older brother and father. Pip struggles with his father's aggressive, competitive attitude, and feels as if he is being called on to fulfil sporting ambitions his father can no longer achieve. Pip is also struggling with his changing feelings for the girl next door — who has been his closest friend, but who is

moving on and in a direction Pip finds hard to accept. In a beautifully crafted story that works on a number of levels, Pip learns new skills, both physically and metaphorically.

As well as learning how to juggle mandarins, he learns how to juggle new feelings, emotions and relationships, helping him to make sense of his feelings about his family, and his place within it. It's about coming of age, without being preachy, about learning when it's important to hold on to something, no matter how hard, and when it's much wiser to let go. And all about timing.

Study notes

Educational applicability:

English applications

Discussion points

- · What is the significance of Pip changing his name to Phil, and suggesting that Trixie also change her name? What is really happening here?
- · Pip's father sees his attitude as a benefit to his son, and thinks Pip is lucky to have such a supportive father. Do you agree?
- · What other way might Pip have handled the situation at the last soccer game?
- · During the story, Pip's relationships with members of his family change. What are the main changes in his relationship with Nick?
- · How important is personal privacy and respect for other people's feelings within a family? Do you think Pip was right in making a big deal about Nick not calling him Pipsqueak? Does Nick show any respect for Pip at the beginning of the book? How does this change? What do you think Nick's feelings are about his younger brother by the end of the book?
- · Katie and Beattie are very different or are they more similar than you'd think? How does Katie change in the course of the novel, and why? Do you think Katie and Pip would ever get together again?
- The novel is narrated in the 'first person'. What do we mean by this? Why do you think the author wrote it in this way? Would it have been as effective if it had been written in the third person? Why/why not?
- · How is Dad's character developed? What incidents or devices are used to make him into a complex, believable person, rather than a stereotype? Try to identify incidents which make us like Dad ... and dislike him.
- · There are a number of occasions in the course of the novel where Pip misreads important signs and signals. Often, his 'brain' warns him that he may be on the wrong track. What is Pip's 'brain'? Do we all have one and should we listen to it more?
- · Why is climbing so important to Pip? Why does Pip leave the climbing competition before the end ... and is this important to the central theme of the novel?
- · What are the most significant ways in which Pip changes during the course of the novel? Are these changes always positive? Does Pip make any mistakes, and if so, what are they?

Health applications Discussion points

- \cdot What effect does the physical changes that happen to boys and girls at puberty have to do with the story? Do boys and girls change at the same time?
- · Why might there be physical reasons why Pip feels threatened by Katie's new relationship with Jordan? What issues can you see ahead for Katie to deal with?
- · Mum and Dad both deal with Nick's condom joke in different ways. Which one was the most effective in making Nick think about his behaviour?
- · What are the physical milestones for babies and toddlers? Why is Mr McLeod concerned about Madeline not walking? Why did Mrs McLeod get so angry when he raised the issue? How hard is it for babies to learn to walk? Do you think Pip helped Madeline to learn, or would she have eventually walked anyway?

Physical education applications Discussion points

- · When it comes to sport, what are the fundamental differences in attitude between Pip and his father?
- · Whose attitude to sport is healthier Pip's or Mr McLeod's?
- · Why do some parents get so aggressive about their kid's sport? What are some of the ways kids can deal with it? Should some parents be banned from watching sports? What might be some parent guidelines you could suggest for behaving at kid's sports games?
- Different sports require different qualities and motivation. What are the qualities that make a good soccer player, and how are they different from the qualities that make a good climber? What other sports might Pip be better suited to?
- · How important is a player's relationship with their coach? Why is Rob able to get the best out of Pip, whereas his father and his soccer coach can't seem to do the same for his soccer?

Author Bio

V M Jones has spent much of her life in Southern Africa, and now lives in Christchurch with her husband and two sons. Her first novel, *Buddy*, won the Junior Fiction and Best First Book Awards in the 2003 New Zealand Post Children's Book Awards. *Juggling with Mandarins* is her second novel.