

MAX UNDERSTOOD SYNOPSIS

Max lives in a medium-sized apartment complex in a medium-sized American city with his mother and his father, a TV, a mini-trampoline, and some toys representative of his obsessions. He has a talking “Presidents of the U.S.A.” toy, a Pegasus doll, an Albert Einstein figurine, and a mermaid. Max is autistic.

We meet 7 year-old Max on an ordinary morning as a cacophony of household sounds overwhelms him. We meet his parents, and discover the reality of parenting an autistic child. Max’s parents wish for things to be “normal”, but are prepared for a life of care taking. Because Max requires their supreme focus, their relationship with each other has suffered. Their last ounces of patience and love are for Max.

In a rare moment of his parents’ inattention, Max sneaks outside and is confronted by the “normal” children of the complex: Peg, Albert and their bossy leader, Fin. They try to communicate with Max but soon discover he is different. Their insistent questions drive him into the nearby street and he finds himself in the path of an oncoming car. At this moment, a man with a leaf blower appears and saves him in a simple yet astounding way.

This “leaf blowing” philosopher, Homunculus “Munc” Jones, guides him on a surreal adventure through the neighborhood. Max, with his innate ability to just “be,” gleefully embarks upon this trek. Max again encounters the “normal” children who accosted him, but now they are re-imagined as charismatic, mythic beings who serve as dreamlike tutors. Each is a manifestation of their respective obsession, and Max willingly learns from Peg as Pegasus, Albert as Einstein, and Fin as a mermaid, because they represent characters of his own fixations. Max gradually blossoms into a more “normal” child by strengthening his abilities to command motor skills, language, and friendship.

Although his parents continually call for him, Max’s condition doesn’t allow him to respond to his name even when they are nearby. The very real situation of Max’s parents searching for him (and for each other as husband and wife) is interwoven with Max’s magical journey.

Munc teaches Max the magic of metaphor, the value of poetry as a great calmer and communicator and an effective way to structure the abstract. Emboldened, Max sings poetry to the mermaid at the drainage ditch, and even risks jumping into the water to get to her as she calls his name. Her calling morphs into his Mother calling, and for the first time we see Max respond.

In the final scene, we find Max in his bed. His parents hover over him. Peg, Albert, and Fin are there. Max exhibits the same autistic behaviors he did at the beginning, but now they, and we, see him through new eyes. Their cries of “Why can’t we be normal?” have been happily replaced by, “This is normal”. Munc, who may simply be the “little man”, or “homunculus” inside Max all along, has confirmed a respect for simply being. “You are?” asks Munc. “I am,” replies Max. “We are.”