

Edgar and Ellen

by Charles Ogden

Teachers' Notes

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HODDER

Introduction

Edgar and Ellen is a series of books aimed at eight- to twelve-year-old readers. Edgar and Ellen could really be termed ‘antiheroes’ in lots of ways: they are a set of twins, living parent-less in an old mansion, who spend their days plotting mischievous pranks and schemes directed at the inhabitants of Nod’s Limb.

The four books *Rare Beasts*, *Tourist Trap*, *Under Town* and *Pet’s Revenge* do not need to be read in any particular order. It is expected that the teacher may use one for close classroom study and the others would be available for students to read in small literature circles or independently. Suggestions are provided below for the novels generally and then each is briefly discussed separately. However the process is designed, it’s important to remember Nadia Wheatley’s plea that when a book is used for close study it is never ‘done to death’! These books are written to poke fun at lots of traditional adult behaviour, so above all they are to be enjoyed.

To date the books have been very popular with children. The website, **www.edgarandellen.com**, has many interesting features students will enjoy. Stories or reviews from readers are invited. In addition, an action movie is planned and a game based on the characters is being developed by Mattel.

Recurring images are present throughout all four texts and a number of very important themes are common. These include:

- antiheroes
- family and relationships
- good vs evil
- ‘right’ behaviour
- irony
- carrying grudges.

Students could choose one of the themes to follow through one of the stories to work out what they think Charles Ogden is *really* suggesting.

The author and illustrator: Brief Biographical Notes

Charles Ogden has not written fiction for children prior to this series. He has travelled extensively including to the North and South Poles in pursuit of rare insects. He also loves fishing and camping. Look at his dedications at the beginning of each book in the series. Students could think about what kind of person might write in this way.

Rick Carton has a Chicago studio and has been drawing all his life. He is currently working on the cartoons for a related Edgar and Ellen movie. There are photographs of Rick’s visit to a US school’s computer club on the website and his responses to some of their questions.

Before reading the novels

Examine all four covers of the books and compare them.

- What does the dominance of black background create for the reader/viewer?
- What does the illustrator's use of caricature suggest right from the start?
- What could the creature at the top of the drawing be? What does the symbol of the 'eye' suggest?

Each front endpaper contains a suggestion: *If ever in your life you are faced with a choice, a difficult decision, a quandary, Ask yourself, "What would Edgar and Ellen do?" And do exactly the contrary.* Why do you think the books begin in this way? Students could return to this after reading one of the books and discuss.

The setting

Nod's Limb is an interesting town, first described in *Rare Beasts* (p. 3-8). It would be good to try to sketch or model it as it is explained with its unusual covered bridges. Students could develop a history of their own local area using the example in *Tourist Trap* (p. 5-6).

Most graphic is Edgar and Ellen's home, Schadenfreude (p. 6-8, *Rare Beasts*). The description of the once elegant mansion could be read out loud for the students to visualise and then draw. The meaning of Schadenfreude could be discussed and examples of pleasures gained from others' unhappiness explored. What is the significance of Edgar and Ellen's home being placed next to the cemetery and the junk yard?

The characters

Right from the beginning of *Rare Beasts* Edgar and Ellen are described as *shadowy*. They *slink* and *skulk*. In pairs, students could sculpt¹ Edgar and Ellen using the descriptions in *Rare Beasts* (p. 9-11) or *Undertown* (p. 7-8). They could then move in role as their character. Similarly, the Mayor, Stephanie (p. 1, *Tourist Trap*), and Heimertz could be sculpted and then brought to life in a role walk. These sculptures could be recorded using a digital camera. Edgar and Ellen's love-hate sibling behaviour could be used as a trigger to discuss sibling relationships and rivalry.

Are the characters believable? Why/Why not? The concept of caricature could be discussed and students could sketch each other as caricatures. Students could find other examples of caricatures in newspapers, etc. Conversations between Edgar and Ellen or Mayor Knightleigh and Stephanie could be scripted for readers' theatre (eg. p. 73, *Pet's Revenge*).

Style

Many children find writing descriptions very challenging. As already shown, the books are rich in description and could be used as a basis for developing students' skill in using word images in their own writing.

Students could keep a log to record the different stylistic devices and the feelings/reactions evoked with relevant page references. These could be linked to the themes.

For example:

Simile

Rare Beasts begins with *The warm night air had a weight to it and hung over the town like a dirty wet dishcloth*. As they read the books, students could look for similes that particularly appeal to them. They could keep a record of these with page numbers and illustrate.

Metaphor

Threatening thunderclouds rolled across the sky, but the impending storm could not compare to the raging tempest that was Edgar, and the kitchen was the eye of his hurricane (p. 103, *Pet's Revenge*). Metaphor creates even stronger comparisons than simile. Students could find metaphors to describe their own moods.

Poetry

Edgar and Ellen often burst into a poem/song to annotate what is happening. Why do you think the author uses this device? How do the students feel about this use of verse? Students could examine one of the poems and look at the rhyming scheme.

Different text types within a story

Charles Ogden uses a range of devices to introduce information—from newspaper excerpts to maps to journal reflections. Students could examine the different uses of fonts and text types to inform and experiment in their own writing.

Symbols

There are many powerful symbols in the books. Who could Pet, Stephanie, Berenice and Heimertz symbolise? What could the huge jug of syrup in *Tourist Trap* suggest? Students could make a list of those used in one of the stories and think about the purpose of the various symbols.

Students could think about the important symbols in their own lives and discuss their relationship with their vision for the world.

Activities specific to each book

Rare Beasts

Desperate for funds, Edgar and Ellen steal best loved pets and dress them up to appear as exotic animals with high prices.

This text could be used in conjunction with a unit on pets. Students could create their own rare beast using combinations drawn from a range of different animals. They could give their creation a name, make a model of their rare beast and write an accompanying description. The website also has a 'create your own rare beast' activity that students can explore.

Of course all along the twins had the rarest beast of all at home, Pet. Use this to discuss irony with the students. They can then find other examples of irony in the other novels in the series.

Students could research reptiles, particularly pythons or what it takes to become a zoologist.

Tourist Trap

In this book, Edgar and Ellen work hard in an effort to save the junkyard and their precious Berenice to dissuade a high profile group that Nod's Limb should become a sought after tourist destination.

Students can look at their own community to identify famous landmarks and how these could be variously promoted or ridiculed. They could also write their own V.I.P. profile. This could lead to the development of a tourist brochure.

Is there a local landmark that progress threatens? Students could trace the arguments on both sides.

Under Town

Edgar and Ellen find that many of their schemes are being copied by the mysterious 'Mason'. In their search to find out the Mason's identity they find a whole series of tunnels, mazes and an underground laboratory beneath the Nod's Limb township.

Students could predict who the Mason may be and what the mysterious substance referred to in the discovered journals could be. This could be a starting point for a whole unit on experiments.

Ellen genuinely grieves for Berenice. This could be a way in which to discuss grief and the loss of loved ones.

Edgar takes on the role of a sleuth in trying to solve the identity of the Mason. Students could develop their own theories and collect 'evidence' as they read the story.

Eugenia's plight could also provide a trigger for examining a topical issue in the local community. How does the local council ensure that there is equity when important decisions are made?

Pet's Revenge

The Mayor's wife, Judith Stainsbury-Knightleigh decides to makeover Schadenfreude. Suddenly Ellen seems to be cooperating and Pet is also behaving strangely. Students could suggest reasons for Pet's and Ellen's transformations.

The ongoing feud between Ellen and Stephanie takes a new turn in this story. The novel could be a starting point to examine friendship, cliques and bullying, and the power of peer pressure.

Related house renovation and gardening programs could also be explored in conjunction with this story.

Questions for Reflection

- Are Edgar and Ellen the heroes of these stories, or the villains? Do you find yourself on the side of Edgar and Ellen in their schemes? Why/Why not? What do we mean by 'antihero'?
- Who could Heimertz and Pet be?
- What do you think Charles Ogden is trying to do with this series? Is he sending up adults rather than children? Why? Is he successful? How does he achieve his purposes?

Other activities: exploring the gaps in the texts

- It may be interesting for students to write their own story about the disappearance of Edgar and Ellen's parents—what do they think happened to them? They could share their stories in small groups and choose either one or a combination of some to construct three still images depicting these. The teacher could 'tap in' to the thoughts of the characters in the scene. Each of the frozen images could be unfrozen and improvised.
- In small groups students could create another scenario for the twins.
- Students could develop a dialogue between Pet or Heimertz and the twins.
- Students could choose one of the many ironies in the series and unpack for someone who doesn't understand what irony means.
- Hotseat members of Nod's Limbs about their feelings towards Edgar and Ellen.
- At various times Edgar invents clever devices from junk. Students could design and create their own invention.

Related Reading

Lemony Snicket: A Series of Unfortunate Events

Roald Dahl's novels.

Related Viewing

Depending on the age and maturity of the students, the following films/TV sitcoms may be relevant:

Lemony Snicket: A series of Unfortunate Events

The Addams family

The Munsters

(Footnotes)

¹ For more detail about the drama techniques mentioned, refer to Ewing, R & Simons, J.2004. *Beyond the Script, Take 2. Drama in the classroom.*2nd edition. Sydney: Primary English Teaching Association.



- 0733617913 Rare Beasts: Edgar & Ellen 1 17.95
- 0733618626 Tourist Trap: Edgar & Ellen 2 17.95
- 073361891X Under Town: Edgar & Ellen 3 17.95
- 0733619274 Pet's Revenge: Edgar & Ellen 4 17.95
- 0733619339 High Wire: Edgar & Ellen 5 17.95
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