



BENNY AND OMAR

ISBN 978-0-86278-567-3 pb

EOIN COLFER

Teaching Guide

By Irene Barber

RATIONALE AND THEMES

This contemporary novel, the first by international bestseller Eoin Colfer, has been chosen for use in the senior classes of primary schools and in the junior cycle of second-level schools, as it deals in an extremely humorous, fresh, unsentimental and engaging manner with the following themes:

- Tolerance
- Racial equality
- Cultural differences
- Childhood memories
- Experiences of death and loss
- Friendship and loyalty
- Family relationships, sibling rivalry
- Social inequalities

Young Benny Shaw learns, through his developing friendship with young Tunisian orphan Omar, to understand and appreciate the importance of loyalty and cultural differences.

SUMMARY

Benny, a young boy from south-east Ireland, moves with his family to Tunisia. The move is very traumatic for this awkward, gauche, hurling-mad youngster. He doesn't get on especially well with his brother and he cannot come to terms with the enlightened culture of his school. He forms a friendship with a resourceful street urchin, Omar, and becomes ever more involved in his life. They communicate in telly-speak and gradually Benny discovers the tragedy that has ripped Omar's family apart.

APPROACH

For the purposes of this exploration, the

novel has been divided into six units. The pace at which the novel is read is entirely up to the teacher. Discussion points and activities, mostly based on language, are listed at the end of each unit.

UNIT 1 UPROOTED

SUMMARY

Benny Shaw's life is thrown into confusion when his father tells the family that he has a year's contract to work in Tunisia – it's either that or take unemployment benefit. Benny's main concern, besides his sibling rivalry, is that he will be missing the All-Ireland Hurling Final in which his county, Wexford, will be playing. They arrive in Africa, to an 'air heavy and sweet with hints of spice and sweat' and the chaos of customs and lost baggage and hectic traffic. Benny feels outclassed by the tanned, expensively dressed young people at the pool. He gets into trouble for playing hurling on the carefully tended soccer pitch. The family gets a crash survival-course from Talal Khayssi, the village manager, which does little to calm their fears and remove their doubts about their new environment.

Read pp.1–37.

DISCUSSION POINTS

- How much do you know about the game of hurling? Read *All About Hurling* 978-0-86278-808-7 and check out www.cul4kidz.com, the official website of the Gaelic Athletic Association. You could also ring the GAA Museum at Croke Park, Dublin on +353 1 8558176.

- What does the family's first impression of Tunisia tell you about each character?
- 'Dole? That was for other dads. For people on the news' (p.13). What does this reaction tell us about Benny?
- Use the phrase 'Every silver lining has a cloud' (p.16) as a motion for a debate.

ACTIVITIES

1. FACTUAL WRITING

The book opens with a very descriptive account of a hurling match. Write an account of a match (or part of a match) you have played in, or attended, or watched on television. Try to include descriptions of the opposition, the pressure on players, the spectators' reactions, the manager's advice from the sidelines and so on.

2. WORD PORTRAITS

'Jessica Shaw wore a lot of masks' (p.9). Create a word-portrait of Jessica which you might then illustrate and display.

3. 'WONDERFUL NEWS'

If your parents asked you to sit down and listen because they had some wonderful news for you, what might you expect to hear? Make a display of class responses.

4. ROLE PLAY

Act out the conversation between Benny and the guard (pp.30–31). You might later add your own details to this dialogue.

5. INFORMATION HANDOUT

Draft a handout that Talal Khayssi might have left with the Shaws. Arrange the information under various headings eg scorpions, snakes, HIV and road accidents.

UNIT 2 BONDY STUFF

SUMMARY

School is something of a culture shock to Benny, consisting as it does of twelve caring, co-operative pupils taught by two ageing hippy-type teachers, called Harmony and Bob. At first Benny reacts by being negative and sulky and he quickly uses up their initial good will. He meets up with Omar, a Tunisian boy who speaks English learned from television, speeds around on an ancient mobyette, and lives in a fully equipped shack. Benny and Omar get off to a bad start but, through games of football and hurling, they start to become friends.

Read pp.38–84.

DISCUSSION POINTS

- How would you best describe the educational policies of Harmony and Bob? Would you enjoy this school?
- What do you think the other children thought of Benny?
- Why did Benny prefer Omar to his classmates? Identify the interests shared by the two (eg sport, television) and say how these common interests led to their developing friendship.

ACTIVITIES

1. HARMONY'S REPORT

Write the formal report that Harmony might have sent to the school governors detailing Benny's behaviour at school.

2. MATCH COMMENTARY

Script a humorous TV commentary on the match between Gummy's team and Omar's team (pp.79–82). Perform for the class.

3. DIARY WRITING

Write Grace Taft's diary entry after her party, describing what happened, how she felt and what she plans to do in the future.

4. OMAR-SPEAK

Write the words Omar used to convey the following pieces of information:

- (i) My parents were killed in an explosion. My sister is injured in hospital.
- (ii) Now it is bright enough to play a game of soccer.

(iii) Let's rest for a while and then we will have a game of soccer.

(iv) Smoking cigarettes is bad for your health.

Using one of your own favourite TV programmes, make up your own 'Omar-speak' phrases. Can your friends guess what you mean and which programme you are using?

5. CREATIVE DIALOGUES

'...The little motorcycle was being driven by a sheep! The sheep looked as surprised as he was' (p.56). 'Ma welcomed her make-up bag like a lost relative' (p.61). Write the dialogue as Ma greets her make-up bag and as Benny greets the 'sheep' on the motorcycle.

6. MAP

Draw/trace a map showing Europe and North Africa. Shade in Ireland, England or UK and Tunisia. Plot the Shaws' route by car/jeep and by air:

Flight: Dublin–London–Tunis
Jeep: Tunis–Sfax

Mark in the countries Morocco, Libya, Algeria and Egypt.

On an atlas, find the cities with the following co-ordinates:

- (i) 34.49 degrees N
10.48 degrees E
 - (ii) 36.50 degrees N
10.11 degrees E
- (Answers: (i) Sfax (ii) Tunis)

For information, contact the Embassy of Tunisia in London on +207 584 8117.

UNIT 3 EDUCATIONAL TRIPS

SUMMARY

Guard Mohamed Gama cuts the cable to Omar's pirated system but, with remarkable ingenuity, Omar and Benny reinstate the supply. Their friendship deepens despite the difficulties in communicating. Benny's very educational school tour is to the Psychotic Farm, a hospital for disabled children. Benny's suspicions are aroused and he feels something is seriously amiss. Omar eventually meets Benny's parents when he manages, to the great delight of the Shaws, to get a video of Sky 3's transmission of the All-Ireland Hurling Final.

Read pp.85–121.

DISCUSSION POINTS

- How did Benny and Omar reinstate the cable?
- What aroused Benny's suspicions at the Psychotic Farm?
- What impression did Omar make on Benny's parents?
- 'Every parent's nightmare. Puberty' (p.102). Discuss how successfully Benny plays on his father's embarrassment.

ACTIVITIES

1. MORE OMAR-SPEAK

What did Omar mean by the following telly-speak?

- (i) Binny, Omar, Bee Gees.
 - (ii) Ali Homer Tunis, Homer Skee Tree. Ali Dulles International. Die Hard, Homer Ali All Eye-er-land.
 - (iii) Night, John-Boy.
 - (iv) I love it when a plan comes together.
- For (ii), (iii) and (iv), name the TV series.

2. 'WE CAME HOME TIRED, BUT HAPPY'

Benny's school tour was to the Psychotic Farm. Write the essay/poem Benny had to write in school the next day entitled 'Yesterday' or write a descriptive piece about your own school tour.

3. DICTIONARY WORK

Put these words in alphabetical order and write their dictionary explanation beside them:

aquamarine, sheepish, slalom, vigilant, silhouette, fugitive, puberty, abject, oxtter, taboo.

4. RESEARCH – MALARIA

Find out all you can about the disease malaria. What is it? What causes it? What are the symptoms? How widespread is it? Which countries are most affected? Can it be prevented? How? Can it be cured?

5. CAMEL MOTIF

Each chapter opens with a camel motif. Enlarge this on to squared paper, making sure to keep the design symmetrical. Then design your own chapter-motif.

UNIT 4 CORZUBLICKED

SUMMARY

The friendship between the boys deepens. Omar invites Benny for a meal at his shack and later takes him to visit his little sister Kaheena at, of all places, the Psychotic Farm. Benny learns that Omar belongs to a Bedouin family and that both his parents were killed in a road accident three years ago. His sister was chronically disturbed by the accident and has been hospitalised since. Omar is very upset about his sister. On the way home, the boys are spotted by Benny's father. Benny is grounded as he was supposed to be at home babysitting George.

Read pp.122–166.

DISCUSSION POINTS

- '...people in families think about each other the odd time' (p.150). What does this tell you about Benny's relationship with his dad?
- What had happened to Omar's family?
- Why did Benny get such a harsh punishment?
- What is the worst punishment you ever received? Why were you punished? What effect did it have on you? Was it fair? Discuss.

ACTIVITIES

1. CHARACTER ANALYSIS

What evidence is there in this unit that Omar liked and trusted Benny?

2. AS OTHERS SEE US

Write a short description of Benny as seen through the eyes of his younger brother George. (Refer to pp.146–147).

3. CLASS DEBATE

With the class divided into groups of three or four, each group appoints a chairperson and a secretary. Each chair is asked to discuss the following questions with their group:

- (i) What did Benny do that was wrong?
- (ii) How could that endanger himself or George?
- (iii) Should he be punished? Why?
- (iv) Should Benny have told the full story?

(v) Do you agree with Benny's father's punishment? Why?

The secretary of each group reports back to the main group and the chairperson or teacher summarises the findings.

4. KAHEENA

Write a detailed picture of Kaheena in the hospital bed using words and/or other medium (p.136).

UNIT 5 ESCAPE

SUMMARY

Benny's parents implement a punitive regime but relent and let him go on a school trip to the desert. Things look up when Grace calls and invites him for a swim. Omar kidnaps Kaheena and both go into hiding. As Benny is about to leave for the desert trip, Samir from the Psychotic Farm comes looking for Omar and Kaheena. They make a run for it, assisted by Benny and Grace. By the skin of their teeth, Omar, Benny and Kaheena escape on the mobylette.

Read pp.167–205.

DISCUSSION POINTS

- Why did Benny's father relent and let him go on the trip?
- What was the effect on Benny of Grace's visit?
- Why did Omar kidnap Kaheena?

ACTIVITIES

1. WORD-PORTRAIT

Write a word-picture of what you think Grace looked like. Around your picture, write as many adjectives as you can about her (read pp.173–178). You may choose to illustrate the word-picture.

2. CONCLUSIONS

List four reasons why Benny should help Omar, and four reasons why he should not help Omar to escape. Write a paragraph summing up your conclusions.

3. BADDIES IN THE MEDIA

What names did Omar call Benny when he discovered that Benny had told Samir where Omar lived (p.189)? Can you explain the references? Add five 'baddies' of your own, eg, five 'baddies' from films,

comic books, history, computer games.

4. DESCRIPTIVE WRITING

Draw a detailed sketch of the action which takes place on p.203. Include Benny, Omar, Kaheena, Samir, Mohamed and Mohamed's men.

Using the present tense, write a descriptive paragraph explaining your sketch.

5. ROLE PLAY

Act out the scene as the group prepares for the desert trip. You might begin with Bob 'Okay, you guys ... (p.191). (Benny's thoughts could be delivered as asides to the audience, in a loud whisper.)

UNIT 6 LOOSE ENDS

SUMMARY

Benny, Omar and Kaheena camp out on a building site. Without her drugs, Kaheena is experiencing withdrawal symptoms. Torrents of rain, rats and hunger add to their discomfort. Eventually cornered, they head cross-country and are swept away in a deluge of water and debris. Benny's father and Mohamed Gama arrive in the nick of time and rescue Benny and Kaheena. Omar is swept away. When the drama dies down, Mohamed Gama adopts Kaheena who begins to respond to a normal environment. Omar doesn't reappear but there is evidence to suggest that he is still around.

Read pp.206–237.

DISCUSSION POINTS

- How did his adventure with Omar change Benny?
- Did you like the ending? Why?
- What do you think will happen next?
- The European workers were provided with air-conditioning, the use of a swimming pool and a sports-field. Compare and contrast the houses for Europeans in Marhaba village (pp.24–26) with local housing (pp.207–8, 212–3).
- 'It was like people here didn't have childhoods. They hadn't the luxury of playing, or making mistakes, or sulking' (p.209). Compare and contrast childhoods in the developing and developed worlds.

ACTIVITIES

1. 'IT'S THE WAY HE TELLS 'EM!'

Eoin Colfer writes very descriptively and humorously. Consider how he describes in one sentence:

Benny's fear of the city at night (p.209).

How wet Benny felt next morning (p.214).

How hard Omar hit the goat (p.219).

How straight Mohamed was standing (p.237).

List other examples of the author's humorous writing.

2. CRACKED?

Benny's grandfather said to Benny before he left Ireland:

'Africa is going to crack open your skull like an old dog with a legless crab' (p.209). What did he mean? Did that happen?

3. IT'S THE THOUGHT THAT COUNTS

At first Benny thought Grace's present was pretty dopey. What was the most disappointing present you ever received? What did you do with it? Write a short account.

4. DIALOGUE

Write the conversation that took place when Benny's father told Benny that Omar was lost in the flood.

5. COVERS

Six different covers of *Benny and Omar* are on www.obrien.ie/covergallery. Have a look at each and say which you prefer and why. What, if anything, do the covers tell us about visual arts in different countries? What aspect of the story would you choose to illustrate?

6. BOOK REVIEW

Write a review of the novel considering

- Title and author
- Publishing details, including ISBN
- Cover illustrator
- Summary
- Setting
- Main characters
- What you thought about it
- To whom you might recommend it?
- What kind of person do you think the author is?

Sample reviews for Benny and Omar which may be studied by pupils prior to writing their own reviews:

'I thought this book was brilliant. It is definitely a 'One to read'... I would give this book 9 out of 10. If you want to improve your vocabulary read this book. It is one of the best books I've ever read.'

Sixth-class student reviewer, Wicklow People

'...Eoin Colfer has conjured up some very real images, thought-provoking incidents, and in Benny and Omar two wonderfully charismatic characters with lots of lively dialogue that keeps the plot hurtling along.'

Books Ireland

'Benny is a fairly average Irish teenager. He has a passionate love of hurling and of Ireland itself.'

The Examiner

7 FURTHER DEVELOPMENT

You might like to read *All About Hurling* (978-0-86278-808-7) and do a mini-project Benny's favourite game. Write in what ways hurling resembles your favourite game, and in which ways it differs.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR, EOIN COLFER



EOIN COLFER is a worldwide bestselling author whose works include the *Artemis Fowl* books, *The Supernaturalist* and *The Wish List*. He lives in Wexford with his wife and two young sons. He spent several years living and working abroad, in Tunisia, Saudi Arabia and Italy before he became an international superstar!

You can find out more about Eoin on his website www.eoincolfer.com.

Also by Eoin Colfer:

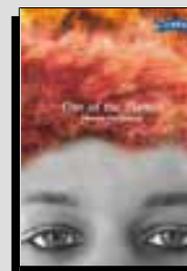
Benny and Babe (ISBN 978-0-86278-603-8)

Another story featuring the much-loved Benny Shaw, *Benny and Babe* features the hilarious holiday adventures of Benny and his new friend Babe Meara, who introduces him to the world of bait-collecting, 'real hurling' and discos.



Other novels from The O'Brien Press which feature multi-cultural themes include:

Out of the Flames by Vincent McDonnell (ISBN 978-0-86278-764-6)



The Love Bean by Siobhán Parkinson (ISBN 978-0-86278-772-1)

