

TEACHING NOTES FOR “HEDGEBURNERS: AN A~Z PI MYSTERY”

Book 1 of a series that involves crimes committed and solved by children.

A~Z PIs

STUDENT DETECTIVE AGENCY

ANNA SIMPSON

ZACH SANTISI

M

Who is setting fire to the old cypress hedges in Anna’s suburb?

When someone starts setting neighbourhood hedges on fire Anna Simpson is determined to find the culprits, and insists that her best friend Zach Santisi help her investigate. However, Zach has enough problems trying to complete mountains of overdue homework, and is an unwilling participant. Added complications include Zach having to care for his numerous pets (including M, the third arm of the A~Z PIs); Anna’s dislike of Zach’s other best friend Ruby; and Zach’s dad’s threats to sell his budgies if his next report isn’t better.

The police pick up rookie journalist Brett Chapman while he’s covering the story for *The Grevillea Times*, and charge him with attempted arson. Because the A~Z PIs don’t believe Brett is guilty, they decide to clear him by tracking down the real culprits. The only way they can do this, though, is by sneaking out late at night to follow each suspect, often with very unpleasant results. Just about everyone the A~Z PIs come across seems to have a motive for setting fire to those hedges and there are too many clues and red-herrings.

As time goes on there are more fires, more unpleasant confrontations, and many scary nightmares for Zach. More complications occur when Brett disappears. Now it is up to Anna and Zach to find Brett and protect elderly Mrs Barnet’s property. Only when their lives are in serious danger do these young detectives solve the crime.

Themes and Issues:

The main theme of this story is how youngsters can use their own intelligence and determination to solve mysteries and prevent crimes. Other themes that can be found in the story are friendship, loyalty and the struggle to overcome problems at home and at school.

The Inspiration for this Story:

This story was inspired by a real-life radio report:

“Last night the Neal family were woken up by a fire in a cyprus hedge at the front of their home. This was the second fire in their 80-year-old hedge in just five weeks. This fire was just one of five lit last night, part of an ongoing phenomenon known in Victoria as ‘hedge burning’.

Police Inspector George Cooney says, ‘Twenty-four highly flammable Cyprus hedges have been set alight since the start of the year. They’re a stand-out target and they burn so easily. It’s likely that the bulk of the fires have been lit by one group or individual. Back in 1985 young persons from good backgrounds were charged with those fires. Until now, it’s only been hedges burnt. But they could lead to a house fire. As a lot of elderly people live in these homes just the shock of finding their hedges on fire may cause a serious situation.’”

Comprehension Questions:

1. In your own words describe Zach, Anna and three other people who appear in this story.
2. How are the cyprus hedges different from ordinary hedges? Why are they so valuable?
3. Zach sees everyone he meets as resembling some kind of animal. Do the illustrations help you picture the people in this story? If so, how?
4. Why is Anna so keen to solve this crime?
5. Why is Zach reluctant to help her? Why doesn’t this work?
6. How does M, Zach’s tame rat, help solve the crime?
7. List some of Anna and Zach’s suspects. What motive does each suspect have for firing hedges?
8. The PIs often get into trouble with the adults they are following. How does this make it extra hard for them to solve the crime?
9. Why don’t Ruby and Anna get along? What can you do to help matters along if your two best friends don’t like each other?

10. Some of the people in this story have unusual passions and hobbies. Can you list them?
11. Would the story have been different if it was told in the third person (using 'he' and 'she' instead of 'I')? What if Anna was telling it? How might she describe Zach?

Research Activities:

1. Draw a map of your own neighbourhood. Show built-up areas, parks, reserves, shopping centres, farms and/or uncultivated bush. Are any of these areas susceptible to fire and firebugs?
2. Research arsonists and the damage they inflict. Write a short report on your findings.
3. Survey crime and crime rates in your suburb or area. How many crimes are committed by young people? What sort of crimes are usually committed by young people? How would you teach these people to care more for other people's property?
4. The middle of the book consists of clues, dead ends and false trails. Draw a graph tracking what Anna and Zach do, the clues they find and the false trails they follow. (The high points on your graph should represent the more exciting scenes, and the low points should represent the more everyday scenes.) Label each point on your graph.
5. Research three different types of animal that Zach keeps as a pet. (One of these should be a rat, like M.) What are some unusual animals people keep as pets? What happens to the animals when people get tired of looking after them? Put together a short powerpoint presentation to share your findings with the class.
6. Research the kind of punishments that young people who commit crimes are given. Do you think these punishments are appropriate? If you were the judge, what would you do?

Creative Response:

1. Imagine that you have discovered a crime (not a murder). For this crime create a list of suspects and their motives. Write down the steps you would have to take to investigate these suspects. Decide what punishment you think is most appropriate for this crime.
2. Zach often describes people in a humorous way. Look at Marjory Gardner's illustrations. Do you think they capture this humour? Some of the characters in the story haven't been illustrated (for example, Zach's teachers, Anna's little sister and Ruby's family). Pick a character who hasn't been illustrated and sketch or draw a picture of them, trying to make the picture humorous.

3. The front cover shows a scene where Zach and Anna are running away from a burning hedge. Why do you think the illustrator has chosen this picture? Do you think it helps to make the story look exciting? Design an alternative cover for the book, thinking about how you will make it look exciting, so that people will want to read the book.

Writing Activities:

1. Pretend you are Anna or Zach and write a letter to the police arguing that you have as much right as they have to solve crimes.
2. Imagine yourself as a detective. List some of the types of crimes you would like to solve and the equipment you would use to help in your investigations. Draw up a table and write down the positives and negatives of being a detective.
3. Think of an area in your neighbourhood that could easily be set alight. Imagine that you are walking past this place when the fire starts. Describe the fire, and what you would do to put it out or to get help.

Topics to Debate:

1. That heritage buildings and hedges don't need to be preserved.
2. That detective work is far too dangerous for children, and should be left to the police.

HOW TO WRITE A MYSTERY

A mystery has at least two major characters: a detective and a villain. In a mystery order is disturbed, and to restore order a detective or amateur sleuth must decide to investigate the crime. Often someone tells him/her to back off because the job is too dangerous. In a mystery, the middle of the book consists of clues, dead ends and false trails, and many characters will have secrets that they're trying to hide from the detective. The book will often end with a confrontation between the detective and the villain.

Difference between children's and adult mysteries: This lies mostly in the age of the detectives, though in children's mysteries the crimes are rarely as gruesome as they sometimes are in adult mysteries.

Characterisation: The most important rule is 'show, don't tell'. In terms of characterisation, this can mean that instead of writing a paragraph of description, it's better to distribute key phrases and relate them to the action (for example, "Ruby gives her volcanic laugh", or "The overhead light glinted off Dad's head"). There's nothing wrong with writing a paragraph of description, but using smaller pieces of description can work better because it's less obvious. To think of ways to describe your characters, ask yourself: how does this character's appearance affect his/her life, and the way other people react to him/her?

How to invent a character: A good idea is to model a character on someone you've met once or twice. Imagine what made them the way they are. Or put the character in a situation where he/she will feel like a fish out of water: what does he/she do and how does he/she feel? Use this not as part of the plot, but to understand the character better. Ask yourself: what was the most important event in this character's childhood? What made the villain bad? What kind of person is he or she?

Character tags: Use character tags (very short descriptions of a character) for walk-on parts. Give two distinctive pieces of description using two different senses – for example, next door neighbour Diana is a 'sexy stick-insect'. Then use the same character tag later on, when the character reappears, to remind the reader of who he/she is. For walk-ons parts, you don't need character development.

Dialogue: Does it sound realistic? Does the reader always know who's talking? Characters' voices should be distinctive – characters should speak differently from each other, and you should be able to imagine their voices in your head.

Scenes: In a scene, there must be interaction between two or more characters. Often one person wants something from the other(s), and it may work best to use that person's point of view (POV) if the story is written in third person. There must be an outcome and the person from whose POV the scene unfolds must react to the outcome. In a mystery the detective interviews various suspect and chases lots of clues. With an amateur detective, witnesses may easily refuse to talk, so there's more conflict. When the detectives are children there's the added problem that grown-ups can present lots of obstacles.

Point of View: Stories with amateur detectives are frequently written in the **first person**. The advantage of using first person is immediacy: the reader sees everything the main character sees, and knows what he/she is thinking and feeling. It's important that very early in the book you give the reader a chance to identify with and like the protagonist, and writing in first person makes this quite easy. One issue to be aware of if you are using first person, though, is how much information you let the reader know. In a mystery, you want the reader to be a step behind the detective; you don't want readers to be completely baffled, but you also don't want them to figure out who the culprit is by the end of the first chapter. So sometimes, to make sure that the reader doesn't realise too much, you can only hint at the narrator's thoughts. When you're writing in first person you can also use letters and diaries to inject another POV into the story.

Writing in **third person** can give you a lot more choice than writing in first person. You can describe a scene from any character's POV, or even have an omniscient (god-like) narrator who sees everything. If you're telling a story in the third person from one particular character's POV, you can pull back occasionally and view that character with some detachment. If you're using third person, theoretically you can write from the POV of every character you introduce, but you need to be selective. If you go into the head of a suspect, you have to be careful what situation you do it in, so that you don't give away too much information. If you go into the head of the villain, he can't be thinking about how he committed the crime, or else readers will realise that he is the culprit. In third person you want the reader to identify with one particular character. It's usually best to use just one POV per scene; make it clear early in a scene from whose POV the events will be described.

Plot: In the classic mystery, you have a small circle of suspects. In “Hedgeburners: An A~Z PI Mystery” the suspects all live in one small suburb. In any case, you need a way to narrow the number of suspects. There must be connections between the suspects through the past or through the victim. The basic point of the mystery is the use of logic by the detective(s) and the reader, who wants to match wits with the detective(s). The detective shouldn’t just stumble on the villain – they must actually use their intelligence to work out who the culprit is.

Most Important Rule: The criminal must be mentioned or seen early on, normally within the first three chapters. The detective can be fooled by false clues. The plot goes back and forth: “I think I know what’s happening,” then, “Whoops, I’m wrong.” There’s a lot of thinking and running around in a whodunit, sometimes in the detective’s head, sometimes in dialogue, sometimes as action. It’s hard to keep that interesting. To maintain a sense of tension, split up the information; give one vital piece of information early on and keep the reader in the dark by holding the rest until later.

Pacing: Pacing is important. Things should take as much time as they need to take – for example, in some cases they should appear to take as much time as they would in real life. However, you need to keep things interesting. Subplots are useful here. In a confrontation between the detective and villain, the good guy should seem to be winning, then the bad guy should gain the upper hand, the way it’s done in the movies. Keep the writing short and snappy. Humour helps!