



BENNY AND BABE

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Teaching Guide

By Irene Barber

RATIONALE AND THEMES

Reading 'Benny and Babe' with your class should be a worthwhile team-building experience, which will sustain established readers and encourage less enthusiastic and less fluent readers. The guided activities meet curricular needs in a fresh, interesting and varied manner. They are designed to stimulate reading, comprehension, analysis, evaluation, summarisation, imagination and empathy, and to hone oral and written expression. These activities will also develop research skills and encourage individual expression. This novel has been selected for use in the senior cycle of primary schools and in the junior cycle of second-level schools because it deals in a humorous and thought-provoking manner with the following themes:

- Family relationships
- Fledgling feelings for the opposite sex
- Independence and the resulting responsibility
- Loneliness and the desire to belong
- Bullying
- Transition from child to adult
- Conflict

SUMMARY

Benny, a thirteen-year-old hurling-mad Wexford boy, is on holidays by the coast. He treats the locals with absolute disdain and this disdain is reciprocated. But gradually he builds up a friendship with Babe, a forceful young local girl. They form a partnership in bait-hunting and selling, a business which interferes with that of Furty, a slightly older beach-comber with a criminal background. When he becomes dangerously antagonistic, they must find a new place to search for bait. In

desperation they attempt to retrieve the baits from the Black Chan – a notoriously treacherous spot and the one place declared out of bounds by Granda. They get into serious difficulties but, thanks to Furty and others, are rescued. Benny recovers in hospital, an older and wiser teenager.

APPROACH

For the purposes of this exploration, the novel is divided into five units, covering four or five chapters at a time. However, the pace at which the novel is read is entirely up to the teacher. Possible discussion points and activities, many language-based, are listed at the end of each unit.

UNIT 1 PRIDE AND PREJUDICE

SUMMARY

Hurling-mad Benny Shaw is on holidays in Duncade, a small fishing village in south County Wexford. As a townie, Benny feels superior to the locals, especially the 'weird tomboy creature' Babe and her dog Conger. Benny's chief advisor is his Granda, the local story-telling Captain. In secret, Benny plays with a much-loved childhood toy Special Forces Action Figure, but when he loses it in an encounter with Conger he is absolutely mortified to learn that Babe now knows that he plays with a kid's toy. He covers his embarrassment by hurling abuse at Babe and both end up in the sea. However a small glimmer of a potential friendship sparks between them.

Read pp.1–37.

DISCUSSION POINTS

- Do you like the inclusion of a prologue, which indicates what the story is going to be about? Why?
- Would you like Benny as a friend? Give reasons for your answer.
- What do you think Babe initially thought of Benny?
- When Granda and Benny discuss women, Benny discovers, to his surprise, that he wouldn't be happier having a mother who ironed his shorts with 'no life of her own' (p.20). Discuss Granda's assessment of Jessica on p.19 and say if you agree.
- The locals in Duncade seem at times slightly contemptuous toward Dubliners. This prejudice is expressed by both Benny and Granda and could be summed up in the phrase 'it's a them and us thing' (p.20). On what might this attitude be based? Is it affectionate or intolerant? Discuss Granda's advice to Benny as he tells him not to try and understand city-dwellers and to 'avoid taking a cheque from one if at all possible' (p.20).

ACTIVITIES

1. LOCATION, LOCATION

Benny spent his holidays in 'the best place in the world' (p.8). The website www.southeastireland.com tells more about Ireland's 'sunny south-east'. Would you like to spend a holiday here? Write a paragraph telling how you might spend a week/a fortnight here, or write an advertising brochure highlighting the main attractions of the area.

2. SIMILES

Help Benny out. Complete the simile 'Stiff as a ...' (p.22). Be as creative as you can.

Now write imaginative similes. Perhaps you might copy the humorous style of the author.

3. DEBATE

Arrange a class debate with the motion 'It is more fun to grow up in a city/town than in the country.'

4. DICTIONARY WORK

Arrange these words alphabetically and write out their dictionary explanation and then, in your own words, write a definition for each: obsession, nonchalantly, semblance, belligerent, antagonism, minuscule, quasi, pungent, morgue.

5. GRANDA: TRUE OR FALSE?

Write **ten** sentences about Paddy Shaw, supported by information from the book. In pairs, decide which statements best describe his character as it has been portrayed to this point. Discuss the findings with the rest of the group or class.

6. WORD PORTRAIT

Draw a picture of Benny as you imagine him (or as he appears on the cover) and around your picture list adjectives that describe him. Do a brainstorm first – each adjective chosen must be supported by evidence from the book! Check www.obrien.ie/covergallery for other interpretations of Benny.

UNIT 2 FRIENDS AND ENEMIES

SUMMARY

Benny and Babe form a business partnership finding lost baits and selling them back to the anglers. No opportunity for verbal sparring is missed but a kind of love/hate relationship develops. All goes well until they cut adrift a bait trap which belongs to Furty Howlin, a local delinquent recently released from reform school. Furty, who needs the money from the sale of baits and doesn't want competition, decides that 'those two blow-ins' are going to be 'taught a lesson'.

Read **pp.38–94**.

DISCUSSION POINTS

- Knowing what you do about his history, do you agree that Furty Howlin should teach Benny and Babe a lesson?

- 'Benny was trapped ... In between generations' (p.41). Discuss his feelings as he considers his predicament – his interests of the previous year 'consigned to the mental heap marked "kids' stuff"' and his contemporaries working for the summer. Is his 'bout of self-pity' in any way justified?
- 'Benny had little faith in culchie ideologies, but in the matter of fraternisation with the opposite sex, he had to admit that their system was infinitely superior to the townie one' (p.59). Re-read Benny's theories on pp.59–60 and discuss. Say if you think the author's humorous style is effective here and give reasons for your answer.
- Jessica tells Benny that she believes he'd be quite happy to take his place 'in the pantheon of Stone Age men that pass for cultured here on the tail-end of Europe' (p.63). Is her opinion justified?

ACTIVITIES

1. CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT

Re-read pp.91–93. Summarise each paragraph showing how Furty's personality changed during his stay in St Julian's. Imagine that Furty is telling his life-story to a sympathetic social worker or probation officer. Consider the events which shaped his life and which led to his eventual arrest. Write your account in the first person.

2. ORAL TRADITION

References are made to various local stories such as the legends of Babby's Pool and the Chicken in Black Chan (pp.45 and 57). Re-tell these legends in your own words. If you know of any legends associated with your area, you might prefer to tell one of these. You could tell your story in the style of the *seanchai* or traditional storyteller, or you might adopt a more modern approach. *The O'Brien Book of Irish Fairy Tales and Legends* (978-0-86278-482-9) will give you more ideas.

3. FRIENDS

On at least three occasions in the chapter entitled 'Pax', we see a glimmer of friendship between Benny and Babe.

Can you find one occasion and write about it from either Benny's or Babe's point of view? Think of a good title for your

paragraph.

4. TRADING INSULTS

In the chapter entitled 'Pax', find and record three ways in which Benny insulted Babe and three ways in which Babe insulted Benny.

Do you think they were really trading insults? What else might they have been doing?

5. WHO SAID IT?

- (i) 'Women are not objects, Bernard.' (J)
- (ii) 'So now we're enemies...' (F)
- (iii) 'Would you like to tag along?' (Babe)
- (iv) 'I met a girl.'
- (v) 'He who shouts/is a lout.' (G)
- (vi) 'Butterflies.' (J)
- (vii) 'A tiger shark took a nip outta me.' (G)
- (viii) 'We used to hang out on the salt house, remember.' (Be)

In pairs, the students could make up similar quizzes.

6. BROTHERLY LOVE!

Read from 'Ma! I'm starving!' (p.60) to 'Sorry, Mam' (p.61). Having read through the text a few times, try to act the scene in class, without using the book.

UNIT 3 BEFORE AND AFTER

SUMMARY

A competition develops to see whether Furty or Benny and Babe will get to the baits first each morning. Benny cycles to his first disco, stopping at the church pump and later at the chip shop. After a head banging session with a recently transformed girly Babe, they begin to cycle home but Furty terrorises the pair, swinging at them with a dead cat. They hide and eventually he goes away. Wet and disgusted, they agree that something must be done about Furty.

Read **pp.95–141**.

DISCUSSION POINTS

- Furty left St Julian's feeling very positive about his future. What changed him after his release?
- Are Benny and his father alike temperamentally? If so, in what ways? Would they accept these similarities?

- Why was Benny so nervous when asking Babe to dance?
- In *Real Books for Primary Schools* (The O'Brien Press, ISBN 978-0-86278-609-0) you will find an extract from a radio interview in which critic and academic Robert Dunbar describes that 'sequence...of about twenty pages...set at a disco at which Benny and Babe really discover themselves....' In his opinion, it is 'one of the most sustained pieces of comic-writing...in an adult or children's book. It's brilliant.' Do you agree with Rober Dunbar's assessment? Give reasons for your answer.
- Despite Jessica's comments on the quality of food available in Badger's Burgers, Benny agreed to an order of burgers and chips 'though his stomach begged him to refuse' (p.123). Do you agree that it was 'almost like a rite of passage'? Discuss what might have been said had he ordered the vegetarian burger or had he simply refused to order any food from Badger's 'establishment'.

ACTIVITIES

1. FRIENDS

It is now clear that a friendly relationship is developing between Benny and Babe. Make a list of what you think Benny likes about Babe.

2. DISCO DISCUSSION

Divide into pairs, one a parent, the other a 13-year-old pleading to go to his/her first disco. Write the script together and act it out. Try to see the problem from the point of view of your character.

3. PROVERBS

To what proverb was Benny referring on p.110? What does it mean? Why did Benny think it applied to Babe? Did it apply to himself?

Write the proverb in full and draw a funny illustration. Make a list of other proverbs or old sayings and write a note saying when each might be used. You might also list some well-known Irish proverbs or *sean-fhocail*. Some of these are listed on the bil-leoga saothair or activity sheets on www.obrien.ie/schools. List all the proverbs you can find on these SOS sheets, and try to find out what each means.

4. BEFORE AND AFTER

Draw a line down the centre of the page. On one side write adjectives describing Babe in her ordinary clothes. On the other side list those which describe her disco gear. Which gear do you prefer on Babe? Why?

5. BAITS

Write down the names of all the baits mentioned in Bait Wars. You might also choose to illustrate your list. Arrange an exhibition of artificial baits for sea fishing. Resources might include catalogues and reference books on sea fishing, videos, visit to bait shops and a talk by local angler. You might also design and construct your own bait in Design and Technology or Visual Arts class.

UNIT 4 SQUARE PEGS

SUMMARY

On Granda's advice Benny and Babe adapt to the competition by diving for bait in the pool and leaving the rocks to Furty. Furty has his own problems. His alcoholic father has sold his box of baits from which he hoped to earn his deposit for a new flat in Dublin. Meanwhile in an attempt to inject some culture into Benny and Babe, Jessica involves them in a drama production for the locals and visitors. While the show is in progress, Furty steals their store of baits. Under cover of darkness, Benny goes to recover their baits but when he sees the poverty and misery of Furty's existence, he leaves the baits with him.

Read pp.142–196.

DISCUSSION POINTS

- Was Granda a good source of advice for Benny?
- Is Benny becoming more mature?
- Why didn't Benny take the baits from Furty's house?
- 'It's a small village. Someone sees everything' (p.148). Discuss the advantages and disadvantages associated with life in a small village. Try to establish a consensus on both positive and negative aspects.
- Re-read the description of Furty's home on pp.191–194. Explore the many possible factors such as bereavement, addiction and poverty which might have contributed to the

situation in which Furty and his father find themselves. Discuss your reactions to these pages: is your immediate reaction one of sympathy or do you feel that the situation was largely of their own making? What constructive advice might you give to the family if they asked for your help?

ACTIVITIES

1. CHARACTER SKETCH

From what you now know about Furty, draw a picture of what you imagine him to look like.

Around your picture, write adjectives that describe him, including those that hint at the more sensitive side of his character.

2. GIVE IT A CHANCE

At first Benny was very reluctant to take part in the play. Later, he quite enjoyed it. Have you been in a similar situation when something you didn't want to do turned out to be good fun?

Write about this or some imaginary event, describing your reservations and fears.

3. AT THE MOVIES

Granda was something of a film buff and liked quoting from his favourites. To which films was Granda referring in the following quotes?

(i) 'She sends one of our team to the hospital, you send one of hers to the morgue' (p.19).

The Untouchables

(ii) 'That's when they get you, just when you think it's safe to go back in the water' (p.78).

Jaws

(iii) 'There is, inside us all, a power. A Force. Use the Force, Luke' (p.149).

Star Wars

4. THE VAMPIRE KING

In threes, act out the final scene of the play. Begin with the scene on p.172 and end with The Kiss.

5. LIGHTHOUSES

A lighthouse on the Hook peninsula which is located in the south-west corner of County Wexford is a unique example of an almost intact medieval lighthouse, dating from the early thirteenth century. Find out more on www.thehook-wexford.com

Write a short paragraph, fictional or

factual, on the life of a lighthouse-keeper awaiting the electrification of his home and the resulting loss of his job.

UNIT 5 HELL AND BACK

SUMMARY

In order to get a quick supply of bait, Benny and Babe throw caution to the wind and go to Black Chan, 'a deep horseshoe chasm with shadowy caves disappearing into the rock face.' The pickings are rich but the incoming tide traps them. Luckily, Furty has been keeping an eye on them and he rescues Babe. Benny throws Conger to the safety of the boat but instead of saving himself, tries to rescue their baits. He breaks his leg and is almost drowned before being rescued by a local boat. Air-lifted to hospital, he has four months to reflect on his foolishness. Babe doesn't visit once. Life goes on. Furty gets a job on a local boat. Benny goes back to school, but can't play hurling for another few months. Eventually, with a nudge from Granda, Babe does visit and Benny realises just how foolish it was to get on the wrong side of Babe Meara.

Read pp.197–238.

DISCUSSION POINTS

- Why did Benny and Babe go to such a dangerous place to look for bait?
- Why did Benny insist on trying to get bait when he was being rescued?
- 'Even in the face of mortal danger, it was important to maintain coolness. Especially with members of the opposite sex' (p.217). Do you think that the author manages to convey the fears of Benny and Babe through their continued bantering conversations? How else might he have described their terror and would this have been as effective and/or realistic?

ACTIVITIES

1. REGRET

As Benny recovered from his injury, what did he regret about his actions on the day of the accident? Write a short paragraph in which Benny gives a truthful assessment of the consequences of his actions.

2. REVIEW

Write a book review which includes the following:: title, author, publisher, ISBN, plot outline, character development, narrative style, your opinion of the story, rating out of 10.

3. INTO THE FUTURE

Project the main characters ten years in the future. What changes do see ahead for Granda, Jessica, Pat, Benny, Babe, George and Furty?

4. WHAT IF?

'A wave crashed in, snapping his head back' (p.227). Taking this as your first line, write the story that follows. You may write a completely different story, or you might choose to base it, however loosely, on the text of the novel. Read your version aloud to the class and discuss which is most satisfactory, that of the author or yours.

5. FAVOURITE CHARACTER

Who is your favourite character and why? Write a short story in which your favourite character is the main character. Choose a completely different setting for this book.

6. THE AUTHOR SPEAKS

Eoin Colfer has written about the development of Benny Shaw as a character, and he also answers questions from Co Wexford primary school children on www.obrien.ie/schools, in 'The Author Speaks'. Read his answers, and then write the questions you would most like Eoin to answer.

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 Omar*

In *Benny and Omar*, our hurling-mad hero, Benny Shaw, is suddenly transplanted to Tunisia where he meets and befriends a local boy, Omar. The pair then get themselves into a variety of hilarious – and sometimes dangerous – scrapes, but manage to maintain a friendship against all the odds.

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Reviews for *Benny and Babe*

'The best thing about Benny, this time and last time [in *Benny and Omar*], is his thinking pattern – if you don't recognise yourself and a dozen friends somewhere in here, you're probably an alien.'
Radio Telefís Éireann (RTÉ) Guide

'A wonderful gallery of characters is created ... With great humour and insight, the author traces the events of Benny's thirteenth summer as he steps away from childhood towards self-appraisal and self-knowledge.'
Children's Books in Ireland.

'... there is a sequence ... of about twenty pages which is set at a disco at which Benny and Babe really discover themselves, and I have to say that, seriously, it is one of the most sustained pieces of comic writing that I have come across in an adult or children's book. It's brilliant.'
Robert Dunbar on Pat Kenny radio show