



Conor's Caveman

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by Alan Nolan

Teaching Guide

By Peter Heaney

RATIONALE & THEMES

Conor Corcoran is the quietest boy in school. He manages to slip through most days without creating much of a ripple. However, his best (and only) friend, Charlotte 'Charlie' Finch, protects both of them from the attentions of the class bully, Damian Deegan, and his sidekick, Gulliver.

Conor's Caveman is a hilarious account of how Conor and Charlie develop the resources to hide and civilise a real-life caveman, whom they accidentally excavate during a scout weekend in the Wicklow Mountains. The pair must save him from unscrupulous scientists and help him to integrate into their South Dublin suburb – and the 21st Century.

Some of the themes explored are:

- Courage
- Self-esteem
- Bullying
- Friendship
- Loyalty
- Responsibility
- Marital breakdown

SUMMARY

Conor and his friend Charlie are on a very wet and miserable scouting trip to Wicklow. While trying to negotiate the treacherous descent down a mountain after a flag-planting activity, they tumble into a hidden cave.

They discover what looks like a frozen glacier, and Conor accidentally dislodges the huge hunk of ice from the cave wall. He and Charlie must cling to the top as the glacier gathers momentum, bursts out of the cave and careers down the hill. Sweeping everything in its path, it crashes into an oak tree and splinters, revealing Ogg the caveman, who had been frozen into it thousands of years before. Ogg sits, dazed and smiling, on the grass as Conor and

Charlie try to make sense of the situation.

The two young friends decide to transport him back to Conor's house, where he will live in an oversized kennel in the garden. (Conor's dad moved out a few years ago, leaving him but taking the dog.)

Feeding, clothing and keeping Ogg's existence a secret lead to some hilarious situations. When Bring Your Parent to School Day comes around and Conor's mum is busy at work, Conor decides to pretend that Ogg is his uncle and bring him in to talk to the class. When Charlie reminds Conor that Ogg can't talk, he invents a sudden bout of laryngitis for his 'uncle' and tells the class that he's a handyman who is great at fixing things.

Just then, the roof of the school hall is torn off by a raging storm. Ogg springs to the rescue in a display of strength and agility that impresses the principal, Ms. Hennigan. Charmed, she offers Ogg the vacant post of school caretaker.

Ogg adapts well to his new job and picks up lots of new words. Conor and Charlie continue to teach him about life in the 21st Century.

Accompanying their class to the Natural History Museum, Ogg becomes nostalgic over a Neanderthal village exhibit. He draws the attention of some anthropologists, who are determined to capture him for research.

On a scouting trip to the Phoenix Park, Ogg gets to show his survivalist skills, building a shelter, foraging for food and crafting a dug-out canoe. The anthropologists hire a helicopter to chase the canoe along the Liffey, determined to capture Ogg.

Discovering Ogg's identity, Conor's mum, Clarissa, and her Garda boyfriend, Frank, rush to the rescue, plucking Ogg and the scout troop from under O'Connell Bridge as the helicopter crashes and the scientists are arrested.

The story finishes with Frank proposing to Clarissa, and with Ogg and Ms. Hennigan settling down together in the house next door to Conor's.

APPROACH

This is a lively and entertaining fantasy, bubbling with infectious humour. The plot is fast-paced and examines issues including divorce, bullying and friendships.

This teaching guide has been divided into two sections to accommodate the development of the story.

Section 1 Ogg Arrives Pages 5–72

SUMMARY

Conor is timid and allows everyone to exploit him. Charlie, his best friend, is the opposite, radiating her self-assertion like a shield for them both, scolding the scout master for his treatment of Conor, and warning the class bully to leave him alone.

Their scout trip to Wicklow is miserable, the poor weather and cramped conditions making it a challenge for everyone.

Grumpy scout leader Dennis Deegan organises a race to plant a flag on a nearby summit. He puts his son Damian in charge of Team D, which also includes Damian's friend Gulliver, Conor and Charlie. Damian has inherited his father's manner, and while Conor and Charlie struggle up the mountain, he and Gulliver enjoy a picnic down below.

The flag duly planted, Conor and Charlie stumble into a hidden cave as the fog closes around them.

Uninjured, they explore the cave and find a block of ice frozen to the wall, with what appears to be a creature peering from it. Convinced that they have found a frozen

caveman, Conor climbs onto the ice block to try and break him out.

A sharp tap with his scout hammer releases the glacier from the wall, and the momentum propels it across the cave floor, threatening to crush Charlie. Conor manages to grab her just in time, and they both cling on as the monolith crashes out of the cave and careers down the hill, sweeping everything in its path. It flies past the scout camp before cannoning into an oak tree in an explosion of ice fragments, revealing a smiling but startled caveman sitting on the grass.

The young friends' initial surprise at their discovery is overtaken by the practical consideration of how to take him home unobserved. Conor uses a trail of crisps to entice Ogg to the car park, and Charlie distracts his mum while he bundles Ogg into her car, hiding him under a blanket.

Conor's mum, Clarissa, is a single parent who has to work three jobs, so he thinks it will be easy to keep Ogg a secret from her, especially as the caveman favours the empty kennel in the back garden as his shelter.

Ogg is left at home watching TV and eating cereal when Conor leaves for school the next day. Charlie texts him and then saves him from being run over by a bus while he is typing the reply.

After school, Conor and Charlie frantically search the house for Ogg, only to discover him sitting cozily beside a fire he has built in the kennel. Ogg shocks them by speaking some words in English, which he has learned from television programmes. Conor and Charlie give him a crash course in modern technological appliances; he is fascinated by the flame on the gas fire.

The next day, Conor decides to take Ogg along to Bring Your Parent to School Day. He raids his mum's wardrobe for some of her boyfriend Frank's old clothes and tries to make the caveman look more presentable.

Conor tells the principal, Ms. Hennigan, and the class that Ogg is his uncle Jim. He is pleased with his plan until Charlie points out that each of the parents must give a short speech about what they do for a living. Conor pretends that 'Uncle Jim' has laryngitis to explain why he can't speak and says he is a handyman.

Suddenly the storm rips off the school hall roof. While everyone else is in a flurry of confusion, the strong and agile Ogg swings onto the roof and repairs it using only brute strength and his caveman club.

The principal, Ms. Hennigan, immediately offers him the post of caretaker at the school.



DISCUSSION POINTS

- **Read p10:** Class bully Damian says that some people are born to follow and some are born to lead. Do you agree with this? How would you recognise a leader or a follower? Do you think there is a third independent type that he has ignored? What type do you think Charlie is?
- **Read pp41–42:** Conor's mum is a single parent, and she has to work several jobs to maintain their financial security. This is very tiring and frequently makes her cross. Is a martial split easier for a man or a woman? What kind of help could Conor offer his mother?
- **Read pp52–53:** Conor and Charlie are close friends who support each other. Is it a good thing to have mixed-gender friendships? Why do you think Damian mocks them for being friends? What are the benefits of friendships between boys and girls? Do you have good friends of the opposite gender?
- **Read p50:** Conor lets Ogg watch TV all day, believing that it will be educational. Do you agree? What are the advantages and disadvantages of watching TV for prolonged periods of time? Can it contribute to your education or your personal development?
- **Read pp63–64:** Conor dresses Ogg in Frank's clothes to make him look more presentable. He knows that in order to be 'accepted', Ogg must look 'acceptable'. Is this a fair way to treat people – to form opinions about them from how they look? Can you give an example of a situation in which this happens?

ACTIVITIES

1. The Tent (Read p8)

Pitching a tent in the pouring rain requires skill, in order to avoid being soaked more than necessary. It also requires close teamwork and preparation.

Working in small groups, design a flowchart with illustrations to help Conor's team put up their tent. Decide which instructions are for preparation and which are for construction, and ensure that they are in the correct sequence.

2. The Jacket (Read pp14–15)

Damian has an expensive jacket with lots of fancy features. If you could design an outdoor survival coat, what materials would you use? What features would you include?

Create the sales brochure for the coat, listing its features and showing it modelled in different weather conditions.

3. The Rucksack (Read p25)

Conor takes the scout motto, 'Be Prepared', very seriously, and he thinks carefully about what he packs in his rucksack. Each item in his bag has at least three different uses.

Can you decide on the five most versatile items he would pack and give three possible uses for each?

4. Which is Which? (Read p27)

Neither Conor nor Charlie is sure of the difference between a stalactite and a stalagmite. The author of *Conor's Caveman* thought he might include a page from a

geography book, with illustrations and examples, but he ran out of space.

Could you create one for him, using your own words and the proper scientific terms? Include any tips you have for remembering which is which.

5. Freed (Read pp26–30)

Before any book is published, the editor will read it and make suggestions on how to improve it.

The O'Brien Press editor thinks that it would be a good idea to include a short paragraph giving Ogg's personal account of being found by Conor and Charlie and being freed from the ice block.

Could you write a 100-word paragraph, imagining Ogg's thoughts and feelings as he hurtles down the hill towards freedom?

6. Words (Read p43)

Conor and Charlie realise that Ogg needs to learn English if he is to adjust to life in Dublin in the 21st Century.

Separately, they make a list of twenty essential words and phrases for him to learn.

Can you create the lists? What words will be common to both Conor and Charlie's lists? In what way might Charlie's list be different?

7. Don't Txt (Read p52)

Conor is almost knocked down by a bus as he is texting Charlie. She decides to create a poster as a reminder to him.

Titled 'DON'T TEXT WHEN', it shows ten situations when texting is either unwise or dangerous. Some of the situations are humorous, and all have comic illustrations.

Can you create her poster?

8. Looks (Read pp53 & 70)

Charlie is a very assertive girl who won't tolerate anyone annoying her. She rarely has to resort to physical violence; a steely look is usually enough to prevent anyone from bullying her.

Charlie has a whole range of looks that she uses on Damian and Gulliver. Could you draw some of the looks/faces that you think she might use?

9. Charlie (Read pp53–54)

Conor is in awe of Charlie after she deals with the bullies. Meanwhile, Damian scowls at her. When Conor and Damian look at Charlie, each sees a completely different person.

Their teacher asks the class to write an

anonymous description of a person they know well. Conor and Damian both choose to write about Charlie.

Can you write their 100-word descriptions?

10. My Parent (Read pp68 & 70)

The students are proud of their mums and dads on Bring Your Parent to School Day.

Could you compose a haiku/cinquain poem to express your feelings about your parent or guardian and why you are proud of them?

www.poetry4kids.com/blog/lessons/how-to-write-a-haiku/

www.poetry4kids.com/blog/lessons/how-to-write-a-cinquain-poem/

Section 2 Ogg Adjusts Pages 73–141

SUMMARY

Conor and Ogg arrive home to find Clarissa already there, her head swathed in a towel over a bowl of hot water, trying to relieve the symptoms of a nasty cold. Ogg gathers some herbs from the garden and brews a remedy for her. He persuades Conor to give his mum this 'soup'.

Clarissa immediately passes out but wakes up in the morning feeling great. She leaves for work before Conor gets up to prepare Ogg for his first day as the school caretaker.

Ms. Hennigan fusses around Ogg, praising him as he works. Suddenly they hear a startled cry of distress. Charlie has attracted the unwelcome attention of a bull in the field next to the school.

Vaulting the fence, Ogg wrestles the bull to a standstill and whispers ancient words in his ear to subdue him to a deep sleep. Ms. Hennigan is overcome with admiration for the burly caveman.

When one of the teachers gets sick, Ogg is brought along on the class trip to the Natural History Museum to help with supervision. He is petrified of the bus, but Ms. Hennigan soothes his anxiety by holding his hand for the whole journey.

At the museum, Ogg becomes nostalgic when he sees the 'caveman village' that is part of the Neanderthal exhibit. He misunderstands some horseplay and believes that a stuffed elk is attacking one of the pupils, so he dashes to her rescue, clubbing the elk to the ground. This encounter draws the attentions of a group of visiting anthropologists, whose leader guesses that he is a caveman.

When Conor gets home, Clarissa's boyfriend

Frank, a Garda sergeant, is there. He almost discovers Ogg, but Conor deflects his suspicions by telling him that there is a tramp staying in the kennel.

The following Saturday the scouts go on a survival trip to the Phoenix Park. Ogg comes along and scout leader Dennis Deegan assigns him as group leader to Damian and Gulliver, Conor and Charlie. The group must build their own overnight shelter and forage for wild food, then make their way to O'Connell Bridge the following morning without using modern transport.

Appearing to remember Phoenix Park, Ogg leads the scouts to an isolated clearing, where he builds them a fabulous shelter for the night.

Meanwhile, back at Conor's house, Frank is still suspicious and decides to investigate the kennel where Ogg has been staying. He finds small tools and stone carvings, and there are drawings on the walls. Believing that the artifacts may have been stolen, he rings the Natural History Museum and alerts the anthropologists.

Next morning in the Phoenix Park, Ogg has prepared a banquet of foraged nuts, berries and roasted rabbit. He shows Conor and Charlie a hidden cave that was once his home. They see paintings of his wife, his two children and their pet wolf on the walls.

The anthropologists visit Conor's house. Clarissa accidentally alerts them to Ogg and Conor's whereabouts, and they set off to capture him as a specimen. Realising what has happened, Frank and Clarissa follow and attempt to foil the plan.

Ogg fashions a canoe to bring the scouts to their meeting point on O'Connell Bridge. As they amble down the Liffey, the drone of rotors overhead alerts them to the helicopter following. They recognise the anthropologists and guess their intentions.

A mad and dangerous chase ensues. Eventually the helicopter crashes into O'Connell Bridge and the anthropologists are arrested by the gardaí. Ogg and the group of scouts are left dangling from the parapet of the bridge, but they are pulled to safety. Conor explains everything to Clarissa and Frank, who are overwhelmed with gratitude and welcome Ogg into their family.

We learn that Ms. Hennigan has encouraged Ogg to keep a diary of all the exciting happenings in his life. After the events on the bridge, Frank proposes to Clarissa, and Ogg succumbs to the charms of Ms. Hennigan. Ogg settles into family life in the house next door to Conor and his expanded family.

DISCUSSION POINTS

- **Read p76:** Conor is certain that Ms. Hennigan is wearing perfume when she meets Ogg. Why do you think that both men and women choose to wear perfume? What are they trying to say? Is it a habit, or is there a hidden message? Do you like perfume? How do you react when you meet someone who is wearing perfume?
- **Read p79:** Ogg intervenes when the bull tries to attack Charlie. Rather than bash the animal with his club, he restrains him gently and soothes him with his words. Why do you think the author chose this way for Ogg to react? What is his message? Do you think this is the right way to treat an animal?
- **Read p84:** Ogg is frightened on the bus, and Ms. Hennigan holds his hand to soothe him. Why is human touch comforting when we are distressed? How can holding someone's hand comfort him or her? What message do we get when someone holds our hand? Would you ever hold someone's hand to comfort them?
- **Read p129:** Professor Griffin wants to capture Ogg so he can become rich and famous. Why do you think that fame and success are such powerful motives for our behaviour? How would you recognise someone whose most important motivation is fame or success? What other motives do people have for trying hard?
- **Read p137:** Frank gets down on one knee to propose to Clarissa. This is chivalrous and romantic. But why do we expect the man to propose? Is it equally acceptable for the woman to propose? Or should it be a joint decision they make together, as equals?

ACTIVITIES

1. Facts! I said (Read pp90–93)

Professor Jasper Ponsonby-Squibb has been tasked with writing a field journal and instructed to write only facts. When Professor Griffin sees his work, he screams at him and tells him to rewrite it, sticking to facts only.

Can you help Jasper to edit his journal? You should end up with ten simple, factual statements that cover everything that happened from the scientists' arrival in Dublin to their arrest on O'Connell Bridge.

2. TV English (Read p100)

Ogg decides to chat to Charlie's dad as they

drive to the Phoenix Park. He uses language, expressions and mannerisms that he picked up from watching daytime television.

Could you recreate the brief comic dialogue between them, showing Ogg's responses to Mr. Finch's views on politics, water charges, phone charges and TV talent shows?

3. The Shelter (Read p104)

Ogg has constructed a fantastic shelter that keeps them all cozy and dry. Even today, people are forced to live in emergency shelters because of natural disasters or war. Sometimes the shelters are in tropical countries and sometimes they are in very cold countries.

Could you design a shelter that would suit a range of conditions and would be easy to transport and build?

Use the sites below for further information.

weburbanist.com/2008/11/12/lifesaving-temporary-emergency-shelters-buildings
www.outdoorlife.com/photos/gallery/hunting/2013/05/survival-shelters-15-best-designs-wilderness-shelters

4. Us (Read p112)

Ogg looks with nostalgia at the paintings around the walls of the cave, which show typical scenes from life in Neanderthal times.

If you were to draw a similar mural to represent Ireland in the 21st Century, what images would you include?

Can you create a mural of images from modern Ireland that might show humans from the year 3015AD how we lived?

5. The Badge (Read p125)

In recognition of the outstanding achievements of the four scouts – Damian, Gulliver, Conor and Charlie – and the way they helped Ogg to escape the scientists, the Scouting Association of Ireland commissions a new badge to present to them. It will be called the Neanderthal Badge.

Could you design a suitable badge for the Association and include a brief explanation of each element in the design?

6. Liffey Chase (Read pp126–132)

Lana Nalon, a reporter for the *Dublin City Post* newspaper, is cycling along the Quays when she spots the chase.

Realising that this will be a big story, she follows the canoe and does a quick interview with some of the characters on the O'Connell Bridge before rushing home to type up her copy.

The piece is printed in the morning edition under a banner headline.

Can you recreate the 200-word story she submitted? Don't forget to give it an exciting headline to grab the reader's attention.

7. Charged (Read p134)

The gardaí arrest Professor Griffin and charge him at the station. They also write a formal letter of complaint to his employers, the Snetterton Museum of Natural History, about his behaviour.

Could you create a copy of the Garda charge sheet, detailing all the charges Professor Griffin faces, and a comic version of the letter they send to the museum?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Alan Nolan lives and works in Bray, County Wicklow. He is the co-creator (with Ian Whelan) of *Sancho* comic, which was shortlisted for two Eagle awards, and is the author and illustrator of *The Big Break Detectives Casebook*, the *Murder Can Be Fatal* series, and *Fintan's Fifteen*.

Find out more at www.conorscaveman.com and www.obrien.ie.

