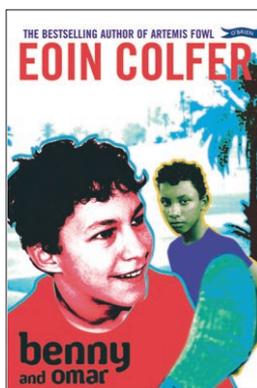


BENNY AND OMAR

by Eoin Colfer

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Life is good for Benny Shaw when he scores the winning goal in the Primary Schools' County Hurling Final, but his world is turned upside-down when his parents inform him that his father's work necessitates a move to Tunisia. Benny isn't really sure where Tunisia is, but he knows that they don't play hurling there. Worse still, Wexford has reached the All-Ireland Final and he'll miss the great day in Croke Park! Familiar with the discipline of his old school, he has problems adjusting to his new one in Tunisia, run by Harmony and Bob, who prefer to be thought of as the students' 'buddies' rather than as 'fuddy-duddy grown-ups'. Not until he meets Omar, a local homeless orphan with a shared passion for ball games, does he begin to settle in to his new life. Omar has learned some English by watching satellite TV, and the two form a close friendship which survives adult disapproval and ultimately leads them into difficult and dangerous circumstances.

LANGUAGE – ENGLISH

- ◆ Vocabulary extension: Trajectory, derision, enunciated, fundamentalist, belligerent, gregarious.
- ◆ Descriptive writing: E.g., 'Irish cynicism hacked through the mist like an ice-pick' (p.39), 'kicked-piglet laugh' (p.49), 'like goldfish in a sea of sharks' (p.74), 'no hippy worth her tie-dye' (p.111).
- ◆ Discussion: The author humorously describes the 'advantages and disadvantages of being a nineties parent' (p.32), Jessica and Pat Shaw must use all the 'parental tools' at their disposal to correct Benny's behaviour. Examine pp.18, 102, 167, 180 and discuss the effectiveness of their parenting.
- ◆ Discussion: 'It was the teacher's job to coerce him into learning reams of useless information ... It was his duty ... to avoid ingesting these worthless facts with every breath in his body' (p.44). In teams, discuss Benny's theory on education, above, and argue the case from the opposing viewpoint.
- ◆ Discussion: Compare Jessica's preconceptions about Tunisia (p.17) with Samir's criticism of Europeans (p.142). On what have they based their assertions? Is either of them justified in their criticisms? Discuss the dangers of making assumptions based on rumour and lack of information.
- ◆ Discussion: Read carefully the humorous passages describing the international school (pp.40–49, 61–63, 190–194) and compare with the Irish primary school system, citing differences and similarities. Imagine that Harmony and Bob arrive in your classroom as visiting teachers, describe the first day.
- ◆ Creative: 'Omar didn't speak English, only TV' (p.70). Describe an ordinary day in school or at home but imagine you are speaking to a stranger abroad, how might you make yourself understood? Remember to 'go for gist rather than accuracy' (p.69), then attempt the same conversation in Irish.
- ◆ Creative: 'The little motorcycle was being driven by a sheep! The sheep looked as surprised as he was' (p.56). Write the sheep's account of the meeting with Benny.
- ◆ Creative: 'Pity he hadn't one of those Milk Tray man-in-black cards' (p.56). Recount the adventures experienced on the way to leave the calling-card.

SESE – HISTORY

- ◆ Early peoples and ancient societies: African peoples, e.g., the Bedouin. Becoming familiar with some aspects of the lives of these peoples: Origins; homelands and migrations; food and farming; clothes; work and technologies; cultural and artistic achievements; languages, myths and stories; faiths, beliefs and religious practices and long-term contribution of these people. For information, contact the Embassy of Tunisia in London, Tel: 0044171 5848117.

SESE – GEOGRAPHY

- ◆ Human environments: People and other lands. Studying some of the aspects of the environments and lives of people in Tunisia, developing an increasing awareness of the interdependence of people there and in Ireland, learning to value and respect the diversity of these people and their lifestyles, developing a sense of belonging to national, European and international communities. Benny regarded the time spent with Omar 'as a time of great learning' (p.122). He learned much about local foods (pp.128–129, 218), about poverty and lifestyle, homes and settlements in the shanty towns (pp.54–55, 184, 186, 206). For information on Tunisia, contact the Embassy of Tunisia in London, Tel: 0044171 5848117.
- ◆ Human environments: Trade and development issues. Exploring trade issues through the study of some major world commodities: Where and how the commodities are produced; environment where they are produced; work of people; sale and distribution in Ireland; terms of trade, fair or unfair trade conditions. Coming to appreciate the inequalities between the developed and the developing world. Benny experienced a feeling of shame as he sat in the shanty town, he realised 'that all the stuff he used to worry about was so stupid' (p.210). Read the description of Benny's first sight of Africa (p.20) and of the living conditions in the town (pp.206–220) and discuss his growing social awareness.

SESE – SCIENCE

- ◆ Plant and animal life: Variety and characteristics of living things. Exploring ways in which plant and animal behaviour is influenced by or adapts to environmental conditions; recognising that there is a great diversity of

plants and animals in different regions and environments. Khayssi warned the Shaws to be wary of scorpions and snakes (pp.34–35), identify plant and animal life indigenous to Africa and say how each species has adapted to prevailing conditions.

SPHE

- ◆ Myself: Self-Identity. Recognising and appreciating that each person is a unique individual and that this is expressed in many ways. Omar's personal attitudes, lifestyle, clothing and interests mark him out from the rest of his community (pp.69, 126, 150). List some of the ways in which Omar expresses his individuality and explore some of the factors which have contributed to his independence and maturity.
- ◆ Myself: Taking care of my body. Examine the effects on community health of dangerous toxins and chemicals, such as those found in Omar's shack (p.51) and on the 'chemical heap' (p.74). Examine the after-effects of some disasters, e.g., Bhopal, Chernobyl.
- ◆ Myself: Growing and changing. Identifying and discussing the changes that are experienced in growing from child to adult: Increasing personal independence and the need for individual space and privacy. Discuss Benny's growing independence and his desire to choose his own friends.
- ◆ Myself: Safety and protection. Discuss the various risks taken by Benny (e.g., drinking unclean water, the trips on the mobylette, leaving home without informing anyone, breaking and entering) and assess the implications of each.
- ◆ Myself: Making decisions. When Benny chose to warn Omar (p.196), he made a decision which had far-reaching effects on his life and on the lives of others. He believed that he had made 'the right decision' (p.213). Discuss the choice he made and analyse his reasons.
- ◆ Myself and others: Myself and my family. Pat Shaw said that 'people in families think about each other the odd time' (p.150). Discuss Benny's relationship with Georgie and his eventual realisation of his love for his brother (p.229).