

A Fine Mess

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ISBN: 9 781920 731021
PUBLICATION DATE: 2004

Synopsis

Michael Hardy and Woody Decker have a talent for creating disaster. While testing a replica Roman catapult they accidentally fire a brick through the church window, and so a month of mayhem is unleashed. The school library burns down, the principal is knocked unconscious, a huge dog runs amok, a wedding is totally wrecked and a regiment of garden gnomes is massacred. Could anything else go wrong? Uproariously funny and witheringly witty, *A Fine Mess!* will have you laughing out loud and begging for mercy.

Well suited to reluctant readers, this light-hearted story is funny, entertaining and fast-paced, with plenty of comical situations and quirky characters.

The suggested activities in these teaching notes cover all the strands in English lower school courses. The activities are designed to be accessible and draw on a variety of learning styles. Some are open-ended so that stronger students have the opportunity to respond in more complex ways.

Pre-reading activities

By examining the cover make some predictions about what the story might be about. This could be done in groups, taking into account character, settings, complications and possible resolutions.

During Your Reading Exposition

Read the prologue. In groups make a chart of the reasons why the boys are in court on one side and the possible reasons for each offence on the other.

Plot and complications

- Re-read several of the newspaper reports included in the story and discuss the way in which each one presents only some of the facts. List what is missing. Rewrite one of the articles with a different tone sympathetic to another person or view.
- Draw a picture of the shipwrecked *The Pride of Trafalgar* including details of The Ship Shop and what it might have looked like or a map from bird's eye view of the coast line



where the ship ran aground with a legend to explain where and what the important landmarks were.

- Describe the events that lead to Michael being taken away in the police paddy wagon.
- Imagine you were a witness to what happened outside Oliver Hardy's bookshop between Mrs Treasure and Ms Mopp. Write the witness statement you might have made to the police.
- Make a list of events at the school when the video recorder caught fire and the way the situation became increasingly absurd or draw a detailed storyboard of the unfolding calamity.
- Discuss the description of the school play. We know it is absurd and comical. Why might it be positioned at this point in the story? Create a graph of the action in the story using the main conflicts and complications and showing the rising tensions as they occur.
- The end of the story brings to a close many of the threads developed throughout the narrative.
- Students could go back to the prologue and read it then generate a list of those aspects brought to a close in the end.

Characters

- How had the Hardy curse affected three generations of Hardy men?
- Describe the members of the Hardy family. You could either write sentence answers or create a picture gallery consisting of pictures of each one of them.
- Who are Gollum and Frodo in another text? Why might Michael and Woody refer to each other in this way?
- Discuss why Michael acts the way that he does when Gerri talks to him in the library.
- Write about your first crush and what some of the problems are for teenagers when they want to ask someone out. This could become a guide to the ten best and worst things to do when you like someone and want to ask them out. This could possibly be developed as an article for a teen magazine.
- What makes a story humorous? Write a list of possible reasons and create a table for characters and situations which readers of this story would find funny.

Reading Extension

For students who may be confident in their English skills there are a number of possible approaches to the text as a whole. Here is a list of more challenging activities you might like your students to try:

- Research some famous comedic partnerships in literature and film. Choose one and present an oral report on your findings.
- Research some of the weapons used in Ancient Rome and design a decorative version of one accompanied by some researched background on the way it was used in ancient times.
- Examine the way the names of the characters are a source of humour in the story. Students could produce comic characterisations of the characters and create a storyboard of one of the slapstick scenes.
- View a film, which uses visual humour and farce. Compare the two texts in relation to how the humour escalates and why we laugh.