



OPERATION WEASEL BALL

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Teachers' Notes

Rather than using a purely thematic approach, these teachers' notes incorporate many of the story's themes with questions and tasks relating to comprehension, the characters, locations, and points of interest. They are designed to encourage students to use a variety of activities to fulfill an appreciation and understanding of the text.



Synopsis

Antonia Cutlass feels rejected. She has lost the use of her bedroom; she no longer hangs out with her two best friends, Jennie and Kat; her mother is strangely quiet about her connections to the unwelcome (in Ant's eyes at least) carnival guests who have taken over her bedroom and her mother's attentions. At school Kat's defection to the Socks, their bullying of Ant and calling her Carnie Girl, and Kat's ridicule of the article Ant chooses to write for the school newspaper does not make school a nice place to be. Meanwhile the unwelcome guests continue to annoy Ant, although her curiosity is aroused, especially when there is a fire at the carnival: Why are they even staying at her house (actually a theatre restaurant owned by her mother)? Who are they anyway? Why has her mother let them into their home? Things begin to get interesting when Ant teams up with Jem for the class science project. Assigned the topic 'How does it work?' Ant and Jem set out to study the workings of a weasel ball, the popular toy prize given out at the visiting carnival. This sets in motion Ant's adventure with the carnival people – some good and some bad. By the time her adventure comes to an end Ant has learned quite a few lessons, about people, relationships and journalism, and life takes on a happier note.

Characters

Antonia Cutlass – the central character. Also known as Ant.

Tamsin – the theatre restaurant's leading mermaid and scriptwriter.

Walter – a Showie; owns the clown booth.

Big Tim – a Showie; operates the ferris wheel.

Mag Cutlass – Ant's Mum; owner of Clams & Cutlasses, a theatre restaurant.

Barry – Mag's boyfriend.

Jennie – one of Ant's best friends.

Kat – once was Ant's other best friend, now part of the Socks.

Cassie Craig, Melissa Raymond and Jessica Mills – the Socks, the school 'in-group'.

Jem Forest – a classroom friend of Ant's and the cute and popular guy at school.

Roxy – the world's crankiest waitress.

Eduardo – the restaurant chef.

Michaela Glass and Tony Costa – the school paper's editorial staff.

Ms Marcelle – one of Ant's teachers.

Marlon White – the carnival owner. Also referred to as Pig man.

Kev – operator of the dogem cars. Also referred to as Dogem man.



Activities, Tasks & Questions

JOURNALISM

- * From the very beginning Ant makes it known that she wants to become a journalist. Magazines and newspapers often include book reviews written by journalists. Write a review of this book. As well an outline of the story, include opinions about the effectiveness of using the first person as the narrator, whether the writer holds your interest throughout the story, the use of suspense, the topics covered, etc., and whether or not you recommend the story, and for which age group you think it is suitable.
- * At the end of the story Ant decides that, for The Magpie, she will write an article about the old days of the carnivals. Imagine you are Ant and write this article.
- * Get a copy of your favourite magazine. Refer to the page, usually at the beginning of the magazine, which lists the staff that work on the magazine. Pick five different positions and find out their job descriptions. Use the library, the Internet, or write to the magazine, to research this activity.
- * Organise a group of classmates to produce a special edition of a class magazine. Assign various responsibilities to different classmates – refer to a magazine for the list of staff and their positions to give you an idea of how to sort this out.
- * Scattered throughout the book are drawings that illustrate various scenes in the story. Using these and adding some of your own (you do not have to be artistic), produce a comic strip version of this story. Remember to use quotation bubbles coming out of people's mouths for conversations, and put your narratives under the boxes of illustrations.

FRIENDS & RELATIONSHIPS

- * Who are Ant's friends, young and old, past and present? How important are they to her?
- * How would you describe Ant's relationship with her mother? How does this compare with your relationship to your mother?
- * How would you describe Mag Cutlass? What sort of a person is she? What sort of a mother is she? What does she look like?



* Ant struggles with her belief in her mother. At times she believes her mother is just as bad as she believes the Showies to be, while at the same time wants to think this is not possible of her mother. Point out and discuss the times this happens in the story.

* How do the people who surround (the ones that live with her) Ant influence her life? You should include those who are part of her extended family, as well as the 'newcomers'.

* Who are Ant's true and loyal friends? How do they show their loyalty?

SELF-ESTEEM & REJECTION

* What is the meaning of 'self-esteem'? How would you describe Ant's self-esteem? Throughout the book there are many references about how Ant feels about herself – at school, at home, etc. Use these to support your descriptions.

* How important is self-esteem to you? How can one be critical without lowering a person's self-esteem? Give examples of how you would do this.

* The story deals with the feeling of rejection. Who are the people in the story who feel rejected? Why are they rejected? How do they cope with it? How would you cope with feeling this way?

* Have you ever felt rejected? Write about your experiences with rejection. If you have had none, then imagine what you would do if you were to be rejected in the future.

* You do not only have to be rejected by people to feel rejection. Having your ideas rejected, for example, can also bring on feelings of rejection. List other ways one can feel rejected.

BULLYING

* Examples of bullying arise in the story. Who are the bullies, which characters are being bullied, and what form do these acts of bullying take? Most schools have introduced a policy to stop bullying. What guidelines have been set by your school to stop bullying?

* Have you ever been bullied? Describe your experiences. How do you think bullying in your school days affects you later in life? How would you plan a bully-free environment?



THE CARNIVAL

- * Describe the carnival as depicted in the story. Include how it used to be and how it is now, noting the changes that have taken place and why they have taken place; the different kind of attractions and entertainments found at the carnival; the food available; etc.
- * Ant has preconceived ideas about the character (good name) of Showies. What does she believe? Is she justified in her beliefs? Do they apply to the Showies in this story? Give evidence of how these characteristics are depicted in the story?
- * Using a variety of research materials – library, Internet, etc.- find out what you can about the history of carnivals and circuses, both in Australia and other parts of the world. How do their members live? What types of people join them? Who supports them?
- * Imagine you were to join a carnival, or a circus troupe. What would you like to do there and why?

ANIMALS

- * The author seems to have lots of references to animals. They figure prominently, especially in similes. Find out what a simile is. Then list all the animal similes used in the story. Think of some of your own animal similes.
- * Nicki Greenberg seems to like animals. Make a list of all the animals mentioned in the story and give a short description of each.

GUILT, HONESTY, CONSCIENCE & CONSIDERATION FOR OTHERS

- * Would you say that Ant has conscience? How does she show this?
- * Describe the occasions where Ant shows she feels guilty and ashamed.
- * How does Ant feel about honesty? How does she rate half-truths?
- * Is Ant a forgiving person? Does she show a considerate side of herself? When? Why?



SKELETONS IN THE CUPBOARD

- * What is the meaning of the term 'skeletons in the cupboard'? How did it originate?
- * What are the skeletons in Ant's mother's cupboard? Why do you think she kept this information from Ant? Was she justified?
- * Do you believe the saying 'the truth always comes out in the end'? Why and how does this apply to Mag's life?
- * Have you got any interesting skeletons in your family's cupboard? Describe them. If not, make up some interesting ones anyway.

THE WEASEL BALL

- * What is a weasel ball? Describe it?
- * Ant and Jem complete a project on how a weasel ball works. It appears on pages 90 and 91. You be the teacher and assess the project. Give it a mark out of 20, and make comments about it, just like a teacher does.

THE PIRATE SHOW

- * Ant's mother runs a theatre restaurant. What is a theatre restaurant? Have you ever been to one?
- * Write a theatre restaurant performance piece, on any theme, and enlist your classmates to help you put on the show. In theatre restaurants the cast often include member of the audience, so write in opportunities for such an activity.

