

The Bad Beginning Study Guide

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Plot Summary

The Bad Beginning is the first book in *A Series of Unfortunate Events*. In this book, the reader is introduced to four central characters, Violet, Klaus and Sunny Baudelaire as well as Count Olaf.

The book begins with, of course, a very bad beginning. As the Baudelaire children are enjoying a gloomy day at the beach, they are informed that both their mother and father have perished in a fire that destroyed their home. The three children stay at the home of Mr. Poe, who is a friend of the family and the executor of the Baudelaire fortune. It is his responsibility to place the children with a guardian and to take care of their money until Violet turns eighteen. Mr. Poe's first choice for the children's guardian is Count Olaf, a distant relative. It is immediately obvious that he is not fit to take care of the children, but Mr. Poe seems to be oblivious to this fact and leaves the children in his care.

During the children's stay with Count Olaf, they are forced to put up with less than satisfactory living conditions, a very dirty home and a myriad of chores. Justice Strauss, a neighbor of Count Olaf, provides the one bright spot in the orphans' lives. She lets them use her library and help her with her garden, and she becomes quite close to the children.

The reader soon realizes that Count Olaf has plans to take the Baudelaire fortune and will stop at nothing to get it. He becomes increasingly more violent, and his chore demands increase. Things come to a head at a dinner party where the children meet the unsavory characters that make up Count Olaf's acting troupe.

Count Olaf develops a plan to steal the Baudelaire's fortune, and he begins to implement it immediately. He has decided to put on a play called *The Marvelous Marriage*, in which he will play the bridegroom and Violet Baudelaire will play the bride. However, the marriage is to be legal, so that Count Olaf can control the children's money. When the orphans discover Count Olaf's true motives, they refuse to take part in the production. Count Olaf strikes back by taking Sunny prisoner and tying her up in a birdcage in his tower. Violet and Klaus have no choice but to go along with his plan. The children find out that Justice Strauss will also be performing in the play and attempt to enlist her help. Unfortunately, she is too star-struck at the prospect of performing on the stage to be of any assistance.

The Baudelaire children must concoct a solution that will get them out of this predicament and save Sunny at the same time. Violet and Klaus team up, using their unique skills to think up a solution as the curtain goes up on *The Marvelous Marriage*. Just as Count Olaf thinks he has succeeded, Violet drops a bombshell that reveals the one weakness in his plan. Sunny is rescued, and Count Olaf's true designs are revealed.



Chapter 1

Chapter 1 Summary

The Bad Beginning starts off with a very bad beginning. The Baudelaire children, Violet, Klaus and Sunny, are enjoying a cloudy day at their favorite beach. They prefer cloudy days, since no one else comes to Briny Beach then and the children are free to do as they please. Violet Baudelaire, the oldest of the siblings, is fourteen years old. She is an inventor and a very bright child. Whenever she is thinking about inventing something, she ties her hair up with a ribbon, to keep it from getting in her eyes and distracting her. She is busy skipping rocks right-handed and thinking of a machine that will allow the rock to return. Klaus Baudelaire is twelve years old and extremely intelligent. He loves to read books and study things. While Violet is skipping rocks, Klaus is studying spiny crabs in a shallow pool. Sunny Baudelaire is an infant, but she has four very sharp teeth. Her favorite pastime is biting things and trying very hard to speak. Since she is an infant, the majority of her words are unintelligible.

As the children are busy with their various tasks, they notice a strange figure moving towards them in the fog. The figure, which looks misshapen at first, turns out to be a friend of their parents, Mr. Poe. Mr. Poe is a banker who always has a cough, and the children first met him at a dinner party. The children are curious as to why Mr. Poe has come to meet them at Briny Beach, but they soon learn he is there to deliver some horrible news. Their parents have just been killed in a fire that destroyed their house and all of their belongings.

Mr. Poe is the executor of the Baudelaire's parent's estate. He is charged with taking care of them and their massive fortune until Violet reaches the age of eighteen. As the horrible news begins to sink in, the children follow Mr. Poe to his home, where they will be staying until he finds them a place to live.

Chapter 1 Analysis

The first chapter holds true to the title of the book, *The Bad Beginning*. Finding out that their parents have just been killed in a fire is an awful thing for children to experience. The Baudelaire children, who are extremely intelligent, seem at a loss when confronted with this news, which is entirely understandable.

This chapter also introduces a vocabulary-building device that will remain prevalent throughout this book and the entire collection of *A Series of Unfortunate Events*. The narrator uses uncommon or difficult words, and then either the character speaking them or the narrator provides a definition. The Baudelaire children normally know what the words mean, especially Klaus, but it is helpful for readers who may not be accustomed to these words.



Chapter 2

Chapter 2 Summary

Mr. Poe takes the children to their ruined mansion, and they find that everything they owned has been destroyed. The children are then taken to Mr. Poe's home and introduced to his two children, Edgar and Albert. Mr. Poe's children do not like the Baudelaires and resent having to share their room.

For the first few days, the horrible events begin to sink in for the Baudelaires. They become more aware of their surroundings and realize that they do not like the Poe household at all. Mrs. Poe has provided them with itchy clothing. The house smells funny, and Edgar and Albert are extremely obnoxious. The food isn't much better and seems to consist of three boiled or blanched dishes with nearly every meal. Over a bland dinner, Mr. Poe tells the children that he has found them a place to live. His two sons react with delight, since they do not like sharing their room with the Baudelaires, and the Baudelaire children react cautiously.

Mr. Poe has found the orphans a relative within the city who has agreed to act as their guardian. His name is Count Olaf. The children have never heard of him, and Mr. Poe reveals that he is either a third cousin four times removed or a fourth cousin three times removed. Count Olaf is an actor, and Mr. Poe states that he is a frequent traveler. He sends the Baudelaire children off to pack, and the next day he takes them to their new guardian.

The orphans arrive on a street in front of a beautiful house. Just as they think things are starting to look up, they find out that the owner of the house is Justice Strauss, a local judge. The house where the children will be staying is next door and is in terrible disrepair. The children begin to worry.

Count Olaf's front door is decorated with a carving of an eye, which disturbs the Baudelaire children greatly. They become even more disturbed after the door opens, when they meet Count Olaf for the first time. He is a tall, scrawny man with one eyebrow and shiny eyes.

Count Olaf is also a terrible housekeeper. The house is absolutely filthy. When Mr. Poe remarks on this, Olaf responds that some of the Baudelaire money would help fix up the house. Mr. Poe states that the money will not be used until Violet comes of age, and Olaf reacts very curiously. He smothers his anger, but not before Violet notices it.

Chapter 2 Analysis

The emotional roller coaster ride the Baudelaire children have been on is continuing. Just when they think they're about to live in a very nice house, they find out that their new residence is falling down and absolutely filthy. Their guardian, Count Olaf, is a

strange man who seems to have designs for their future that will shock them. Count Olaf's reaction when Mr. Poe tells him that he will not have access to the Baudelaire fortune foreshadows events that will continue throughout the book.



Chapter 3

Chapter 3 Summary

The Baudelaires' life with Count Olaf gets off to a bad start. The three children are forced to live in one room, with only one bed, and there is no crib for Sunny. Violet and Klaus take turns sleeping in the bed, and Sunny is forced to sleep on a lump of dirty curtains. The children rarely see Olaf, who seems to prefer leaving them with a pan of oatmeal in the morning and a long list of chores. He spends his time either away from the house or up in his tower, which they are forbidden to enter.

One day, however, Count Olaf leaves the children a note that he expects them to cook dinner for his entire theater troupe, which will be visiting that evening. Since the Baudelaire children do not know how to cook, they go over to Justice Strauss' house to borrow a cookbook. She allows them into the library, and they are amazed at the wealth of books. Feeling sorry for the children, Strauss allows them to come visit her library any time they would like, and she offers to let them help her with her gardening as well. The Baudelaires settle on a recipe for Puttanesca sauce. Their visit with Strauss and discovering her wonderful library give the orphans some hope that their troubles, while not over, will surely become more bearable.

Chapter 3 Analysis

Count Olaf is, beyond a doubt, a horrible guardian and someone that should not be in charge of children. His motives are not quite clear as of yet, but he seems to have found three able-bodied slaves in the Baudelaire orphans. The kindness of Justice Strauss is contrasted with the wickedness of Olaf. However, it is odd that she does not seem to be overly concerned about the care the Baudelaires are receiving.



Chapter 4

Chapter 4 Summary

After settling on a main course for Olaf's dinner, the Baudelaire siblings travel to the market with Strauss to buy the necessary ingredients. Returning home, the children make the dish, enjoying the moment and wishing that they were back home with their parents. The moment is shattered when Olaf returns and declares that he was expecting roast beef. He leans menacingly over them and states, "I am not someone to be trifled with." The orphans' fear increases when Olaf picks Sunny up and dangles her in the air, out of reach of her worried siblings. However, he is interrupted as his theater troupe begins to arrive.

The troupe is a conglomeration of unsavory characters that seem to be just as bad as Olaf. They include a hook-handed man, two women wearing white make-up, a bald man with a very long nose and a character who looks like neither a man nor a woman. They applaud Olaf's treatment of the orphans.

The Baudelaires serve the troupe their dinner and miserably try to eat their own dinner in the kitchen. Violet wishes that she had purchased poison at the market so she could get rid of Olaf. The night wears on as Olaf continues serving wine, and the troupe gets very drunk. He demands that the children clean up after them and smacks Klaus across the face when the children resist. Instead of being shocked at Olaf's behavior, the troupe once again applauds him. Before they leave with Olaf, the hook-handed man says, "If I know you, Olaf, you'll find a way to get at the Baudelaire money." The children clean up and spend the rest of the night crying.

Chapter 4 Analysis

Olaf's plans are starting to become apparent, especially with the comment made by the hook-handed man. Olaf wants the children's fortune, but he can't get at it until Violet is of age. Violet's wish to poison Olaf is a serious one, but it is merely mentioned in passing and is not brought up again in this book. It seems uncharacteristic of Violet, and this wish is used to illustrate just how frustrated Violet feels with this situation.



Chapter 5

Chapter 5 Summary

The children spend their morning working through their assigned chores, which include chopping enough firewood for a dozen homes. They try to come up with a plan to escape Olaf's clutches and finally decide to visit Mr. Poe. They finish chopping wood and go on a search through the city to find Mr. Poe's bank.

After stopping at every bank in town, the orphans finally find Mr. Poe. However, he is extremely busy and doesn't seem to very concerned with their treatment. Klaus displays his bruise as proof of Olaf's ill treatment. Mr. Poe informs Klaus that Olaf is acting "in loco parentis," which means acting as a parent. This gives Olaf the right to treat the Baudelaires in this manner. Mr. Poe hustles the children out of his office without offering the least bit of assistance. The children return home and stop at Justice Strauss' house to visit her library. They escape into their books and wish that they could literally escape from Count Olaf.

Chapter 5 Analysis

Readers may note that the Baudelaire children finish chopping wood before leaving to find Mr. Poe. Instead of immediately going for help, they elect to responsibly finish their work, even though the task is quite unreasonable. This characterizes the children as hard working and obedient. While the children always try their best, adults aren't as conscientious. Mr. Poe's inaction is shocking, but unfortunately, this foreshadows continued behavior from the Baudelaire estate executor. A continuing theme in this series is that inaction and incapability in adults gets the Baudelaires into a great deal of trouble. The responsibility of the children contrasts sharply with the inaction of the adults.



Chapter 6

Chapter 6 Summary

The next morning, instead of bowls of oatmeal and a list of chores, the Baudelaires find Count Olaf in the kitchen. He has made them their usual breakfast, but he has supplied fresh raspberries as a treat. Unsure, the children wonder if he is trying to poison them, but he eats the raspberries to prove that they are safe. As the children marvel at this apparent turn-around, Olaf reveals that he had a talk with Mr. Poe. He blames his behavior on his nervousness about his upcoming role in a play called *The Marvelous Marriage* by Al Funcoot.

Olaf informs the children that they will be taking part in the play. Klaus and Sunny will be portraying two midgets who are in the crowd. Violet will play Count Olaf's fiancy and will be required to marry him on stage. Olaf reveals that Justice Strauss will also be in the play and will be acting as the officiator of the marriage.

The children do their best to get out of acting in the play, but Olaf reminds them that he is acting "in loco parentis." They begrudgingly agree to perform. Olaf heads up to his secret room in the tower, and the children discuss this new development. They are sure that Olaf is up to something, but they do not know exactly what he has planned. Klaus decides to visit Justice Strauss' library to do some reading on inheritance law. He only has a few days to figure out Olaf's plan before the play debuts.

Chapter 6 Analysis

Olaf's sudden change of behavior is strange, but the narrator hints that there is more to his nice behavior than meets the eye. Something is definitely in the works, but neither the children nor the reader are aware of the exact nature of Olaf's plans. The inclusion of Justice Strauss in the play is the key to solving this mystery, as readers will soon find out.



Chapter 7

Chapter 7 Summary

The children visit Justice Strauss, who is all a-twitter over her upcoming performance in *The Marvelous Marriage*. She does not seem to think that there is anything strange going on at all. The children ask if they can borrow some law books from her, and she agrees, thinking it odd that children would be interested in the law. Violet and Klaus go to the library, and Sunny goes with Strauss to help her with her gardening. As the day goes on, Klaus is unable to find anything useful, and time is running out. Bored, Violet leaves to join Sunny and Strauss in the garden.

Suddenly, the hook-handed man appears in the doorway. He asks Klaus why he is reading about inheritance law, and he decides that Klaus should no longer be allowed in the library, at least until after Friday's performance. He leaves to go get Sunny and Violet, and Klaus quickly grabs another book. The children leave, but Klaus hides the book in his shirt, hoping he won't be discovered.

Chapter 7 Analysis

Once again, an adult who is in the position to help the Baudelaire children turns out to be absolutely useless to them. Justice Strauss is too excited about being in a play to pay attention to the concerns of the orphans. The hook-handed man's arrival in the library does not bode well for Klaus, especially since he sees what Klaus is reading. The Baudelaires' last hope lies in the book that Klaus manages to sneak out of the library.



Chapter 8

Chapter 8 Summary

Klaus spends the entire night reading the smuggled book, with great difficulty. Finally, he goes downstairs and waits for Olaf to appear. When Olaf comes into the kitchen, Klaus puts the book, entitled *Nuptial Law*, on the table and begins to tell Olaf that he has figured out his plan.

Since Olaf is the legal guardian of the children, he has the ability to allow Violet to marry before she comes of age. The play, *The Marvelous Marriage*, is a front for an actual ceremony that will take place, with Justice Strauss officiating. All Violet has to do is sign the document with her own hand. With the way Olaf has concocted his scheme, he will legally be married to Violet when the play is over and in control of the Baudelaire fortune.

Klaus tells Olaf that he is going to Mr. Poe with the information and that Olaf will surely be arrested. Surprisingly, Olaf doesn't react. He tells Klaus to go wake up his sisters so that Klaus can gloat about discovering his plan. Klaus goes to the children's room and begins to tell Violet what Olaf has planned. They go to wake up Sunny, only to find that she is not in her makeshift bed. After Violet and Klaus realize that Sunny is missing, they become aware that Count Olaf is standing in the doorway behind them.

Chapter 8 Analysis

Olaf's plan is finally revealed, and it is very disturbing. Violet is only fourteen and much too young to marry, but this doesn't stop Olaf's scheming. His reaction to Klaus's discovery is interesting and points to the fact that he figured that this might be a problem. The lengths that Olaf will go to get his hands on the Baudelaire fortune are extreme, and the disappearance of Sunny indicates that he intends to do all in his power to make this scheme work.



Chapter 9

Chapter 9 Summary

Count Olaf takes Violet and Klaus into the backyard so that they can find Sunny. They don't see her on the ground, and Olaf indicates that they should look up. Finally, they spot Sunny, who is tied up in a birdcage, dangling off of Olaf's forbidden tower. Olaf informs the children that Sunny will be dropped to her death if they try to reveal his plan. Violet promises to do anything to avoid Sunny being hurt, and Olaf gets her to agree to marry him.

After Violet agrees, Olaf tries to convince her that it won't be so terrible. After all, she will get to live, instead of being disposed of like her brother and sister. Olaf demands that Klaus return the law book, which he does begrudgingly. While Klaus does this, Violet ties her hair up with her ribbon and gazes up at the tower.

Chapter 9 Analysis

Count Olaf's deceitfulness seems to know no bounds. He has no problem threatening the life of an infant to get his way and to get the Baudelaires' money. His secondary plan to get rid of Sunny and Klaus is the icing on the cake of his treachery. However, Violet may just be able to stop him. Whenever she ties up her hair, she is thinking of an invention, and she may be imagining the means to rescue her sister.



Chapter 10

Chapter 10 Summary

This night, Violet is the one that stays awake. She tries to get Olaf's assistant, the one who looks like neither a man nor a woman, to let her into the tower so that she can "case it," but the assistant doesn't budge. Frustrated, Violet will have to do her best to invent something that will allow her access to the room.

Violet returns to her room and begins constructing a grappling hook out of curtain rods. The rope for the hook is made up of shreds from the itchy clothing given to them by the Poes. Violet sneaks outside to try her invention. As Violet attempts to throw the grappling hook up to the tower, it falls on her shoulder, drawing blood. This does not deter Violet in the least, and finally she manages to get the hook to land on something solid. She climbs all the way up her rope to the top of the tower. Unfortunately, the grappling hook has landed on something solid, but not the wall of the tower. Violet comes face to face with the hook-handed man.

Chapter 10 Analysis

Violet's invention skills come to her rescue, but unfortunately, Count Olaf seems to be one step ahead. His assistant, the hook-handed man, is probably the worst of them all. He seems to be enamored with Violet, and his designs are not good. Count Olaf continues to remain one step ahead of the children throughout this series, creating a cat-and-mouse game that continually heightens the suspense. Olaf will stop at nothing to get their fortune.



Chapter 11

Chapter 11 Summary

Violet is now just as trapped as Sunny. The hook-handed man reports to Count Olaf, and Klaus is brought up to join them in the filthy tower room. The fateful day of the play has arrived, and the weight of their situation sinks in. Klaus and Violet spend the rest of the night searching through the tower room, hoping to find something that will help them. Unfortunately, they come up empty.

Count Olaf arrives, and Violet and Klaus are taken down the stairs. Sunny remains behind, tied in her cage and doomed to be dropped from the tower if her siblings do one wrong thing. As Violet stumbles on the stairs, she braces herself with her right hand. This action causes her to realize something - something that may stop Olaf's plan completely.

Chapter 11 Analysis

Now that the day of the play has arrived, Count Olaf's plan is almost complete. Since the orphans' efforts have failed, the Baudelaires' fate seems to be solely in Olaf's hands. However, it is more accurate to say that their fate will rest in Violet's hands, as she discovers on the way down the stairs. This hint foreshadows the climax of the novel. Violet's realization will be revealed in the following two chapters and is referenced in Chapter 1 of this book.



Chapter 12

Chapter 12 Summary

Violet and Klaus are taken to the theater and wait backstage for their part in the play. The constant worry about Sunny being dropped out of the tower weighs heavily on them. Knowing that the ceremony will be real, both Baudelaire children do their best to convince Justice Strauss to change the words, just a little. However, Strauss is so excited about her upcoming performance that she won't agree to help the children. She is called to get ready for her scene and runs off, positively agog that she gets to wear makeup.

The two white-faced women take Violet and Klaus to the dressing room and put their costumes on them. Violet is, of course, dressed as a bride, and Klaus ends up wearing a sailor suit that does not fit. Violet and Klaus run into Mr. Poe, and they do their best to reveal Olaf's plans. Just as they are about to speak, though, Olaf appears and shows the children his walkie-talkie. He has given one of his assistants back at the tower the other walkie-talkie, and Sunny's life hangs in the balance.

The Baudelaires realize that revealing Olaf's plan is fruitless, and the fateful scene begins. The audience members, sick of the boring play, shift in their seats as Justice Strauss reads the ceremony. Violet struggles, but she acquiesces and says, "I do." A paper is brought out for her to sign, and she signs it with her left hand.

Chapter 12 Analysis

The inaction of Mr. Poe and Justice Strauss is now expected. No matter what the children try to do, they cannot get an adult to assist them. However, Violet has found a way to stop Count Olaf, and her simple plan is about to come to fruition. Even though she has declared, "I do" in the presence of a judge and signed the document, she has found a way to make sure that the marriage isn't legal.



Chapter 13

Chapter 13 Summary

Olaf announces to the stunned crowd that the play was a farce and that he is now legally married to Violet Baudelaire. Mr. Poe reacts with shock and declares that it cannot be. Everyone turns to Justice Strauss, who tearfully acknowledges that the ceremony was legally binding, even though she feels terrible that she was duped.

Violet asks Count Olaf to let Sunny go, and he radios his assistant in the tower. Mr. Poe declares that he will not let Count Olaf have the Baudelaire fortune, but since the marriage is legal, he will not have a choice. Once Violet knows that Sunny is safe, she drops a bombshell. She reveals that the marriage is not legal, since she did not sign the document in her own hand. To prove it, she provides a signature with her right hand and one in her left, which she used during the play. Since she is right-handed, her left-handed signature is not valid.

Justice Strauss confirms that Violet is right. The marriage is not valid, and the crowd cheers. Count Olaf threatens to harm Sunny, but he is too late. The tot has just arrived at the theater with his accomplice and makes it safely to her sister. Mr. Poe informs Count Olaf that he is no longer the guardian of the children, and the crowd demands his arrest. Mr. Poe grabs Olaf and declares that he is under arrest. One of Olaf's accomplices makes his way to the light controls, and the theater goes dark.

Chapter 13 Analysis

In the melee, Count Olaf escapes with his troupe. Violet remembers where the light switch is and makes her way over to it. Suddenly, she feels Count Olaf's hand on her shoulder. He whispers to Violet, "I'll get my hands on your fortune if it's the last thing I do. And when I have it, I'll kill you and your siblings with my own two hands."

Violet turns the lights back on, but it is too late. Olaf and his accomplices have disappeared. Mr. Poe goes to call the police, but his efforts are in vain. Justice Strauss offers to adopt the children, and they see a chance at a good life finally appear. However, Mr. Poe returns and tells the children that their parents' will states that only a relative may adopt the children. Saddened, the children leave with Mr. Poe and face a cold, dark night filled with uncertainty.



Characters

Violet Baudelaire

Violet Baudelaire is the eldest of the three Baudelaire children. She is fourteen years old and extremely bright. Her genius lies in the ability to invent things, and she spends a great deal of her time coming up with new inventions. Violet has a particular idiosyncrasy of tying up her hair when she is trying to think. The feeling of her hair on her face distracts her and prevents her from concentrating on her inventions.

Since Violet is the oldest Baudelaire, she feels responsible for her two younger siblings, Klaus and Sunny. Violet made a promise to her mother that she would always protect them from harm and do her best to keep them safe, and she has taken this promise very seriously. Unlike many siblings, Violet and Klaus seem to get along very well. Due to their circumstances, they do not get into the type of fights that are common among siblings. Violet is very close with both her brother and younger sister and does her best to set a good example for them.

Violet's inventing talents come in handy several times throughout this book and throughout the remainder of the series. Her skills complement the skills of her siblings and allow the three of them to work well together as a team.

Klaus Baudelaire

Klaus is the middle child of the three Baudelaire siblings. He is twelve years old, and he is also exceptionally bright, but in a different way from Violet. Klaus is a reader and has read a great many books for a twelve-year-old. Klaus' idiosyncrasy is his ability to research problems thoroughly and pour through complicated books with ease. His vocabulary is quite large, and he is often more well read than the adults in the story.

Klaus is very close with his two sisters, even though he did not like Sunny at first. Once he got to know her, however, they became as thick as thieves. He does his best to watch out for his sister and keep her safe. Klaus' talent for researching comes into play when the Baudelaires have to figure out a way to get out of their predicament with Count Olaf. He works together with his sister, and their two talents compliment one another and save the day.

Sunny Baudelaire

Sunny is the youngest of the Baudelaire children, and she is described as an infant. She is compared several times to small objects, such as shoes and salamis. Unlike many infants, however, Sunny has four teeth that are very well developed and quite sharp. Sunny's favorite pastime is biting things, and she prefers to find objects that are very hard. She also bites people that she likes, but she bites them much softer than she



normally bites things. In *The Bad Beginning*, Sunny takes Justice Strauss' hand and bites it gently. Violet tells Strauss that this means Sunny likes her.

Sunny's talents with her teeth are very useful at various times throughout the story. They also mesh well with the talents of her siblings, making them a very good team. Sunny's particular idiosyncrasy is her method of speech. Since she is only an infant, she has not yet learned to talk. This doesn't mean she doesn't try, and her siblings usually understand her. Her words range from nonsense to actual words, such as "cake."

Mr. Poe

Mr. Poe is a family friend of the Baudelaires and is the banker who is in charge of finding the children a proper home and looking after their monetary affairs. He is normally seen with a handkerchief due to his persistent cough. Mr. Poe does not seem to be an adult who focuses well on what children try to tell him. He underestimates the intelligence of the Baudelaires and tends to write them off as hysterical children, even when they are right. Poe is pretty much an ineffectual executor, and he seems to be endangering the three children through his inaction. While he does not mean to cause them harm, invariably, his actions do just that.

Mrs. Poe

Mrs. Poe's first name is not given in this book, just as Mr. Poe's first name is not. She looks after the three Baudelaires after the fire claims their parents and their home. The children's chief complaint about Mrs. Poe is the fact that she purchases itchy clothing for them and insists on preparing the blandest food imaginable. Although Mrs. Poe is nice enough, the Baudelaires are not comfortable in her home. Her style differs greatly from their parents' and serves as a reminder of all that the children have lost.

Albert Poe

Albert is one of Mr. Poe's sons. The Baudelaires are forced to share a room with Albert and his brother after the fire. Albert is generally rude and does not care for the Baudelaires at all.

Edgar Poe

Edgar is the second son of Mr. Poe. He is nearly identical in character to his brother, Albert, and dislikes the Baudelaires as well.



Justice Strauss

Justice Strauss is Count Olaf's next-door neighbor. Her first name is not really Justice. This is her title, since she is a judge. Justice Strauss's home serves as a haven for the children after they move in with Count Olaf. She allows them to use her library and help her in the garden, which the children enjoy very much. Her library serves as their sanctuary and their one means to figure out Count Olaf's plans. Like most of the adults in this series, Justice Strauss does not pay attention to what the children are saying. She does her best, but she falls short by not realizing what a terrible guardian Count Olaf really is.

Count Olaf

Count Olaf is a tall, thin man, with shiny eyes and a unibrow. He is described as being predatory in nature, similar to a bird of prey. On his left ankle is the tattoo of an eye, and this motif is carried over to his house, which is filled with paintings of eyes. Olaf is a terrible housekeeper and prefers to live in filth. As a guardian for the children, he is absolute terrible, and he terrorizes the Baudelaires. He abuses them in many different ways, mentally, emotionally and physically. Count Olaf's one goal is to get his hands on the Baudelaire fortune, and he will go as far as he must go in order to accomplish it.

The Hook-Handed Man

The hook-handed man is a member of Count Olaf's theater troupe. His proper name is not given, just a description of him that states he has two hooks where his hands should be. The reason behind this is not revealed either. He has a terrible disposition and scares the three children immensely.

The Bald Man

The proper name of the bald man is never revealed. He is another one of Count Olaf's associates. His one defined characteristic is a very long nose.

The Pasty Faced Women

The pasty-faced women are members of Count Olaf's troupe. They have very white faces, due to the amount of powder makeup that they wear. Not much is revealed about these two women in this book, but they are involved in helping Count Olaf steal the children's fortune.

The Creature

The creature looks like neither a man nor a woman and is very fat. Since it is impossible to tell the creature's gender, the children simply refer to the creature as the thing that looks like neither a man nor a woman. This person is also a member of Count Olaf's troupe.



Objects/Places

Briny Beach

Briny Beach is one of Baudelaire children's favorite places to hang out, but only when it is cloudy. On cloudy days, they have the beach to themselves. This is where the children learn about the tragedy that has changed their lives.

Baudelaire Mansion

The Baudelaire mansion is briefly described as being quite grand. The children visit it after the fire, and everything has been destroyed.

Mr. Poe's House

The Baudelaire children briefly stay at Mr. Poe's house until Mr. Poe finds them a guardian. It is described as having a strange odor, and the Baudelaire children are not fond of it.

Justice Strauss' House

Justice Strauss lives in a very nice house that is located next door to Count Olaf's house. The children mistakenly think that this is their new home before they are introduced to Count Olaf. The home is very beautiful and contains a garden and a large library.

Count Olaf's House

The Baudelaire children are forced to stay in Count Olaf's house once Olaf has been declared their legal guardian. It is a filthy place that is falling down, both outside and in. Decorations of eyes hang all over the house, and the front door has a large eye carved on the outside.

The Banking District

The fictional town where this story takes place has several districts. All of the different types of businesses are categorized and placed in the same location. The banking district is an example, a district or area where all the banks are located. The banks mentioned include Trustworthy Bank, Faithful Savings and Loan, Subservient Financial Services and Mulctuary Money Management. In the center of the district is the Fountain of Victorious Finance.



Mulctuary Money Management

Mulctuary Money Management is Mr. Poe's bank, which the children find after much trial and error.

Count Olaf's Tower

Olaf's tower is attached to the main residence of Count Olaf's house. The children are not allowed to go up into this room, which is even filthier than the rest of the house. Sunny Baudelaire is held captive in the tower as part of Count Olaf's plan.

Count Olaf's Theater

The performance of *The Marvelous Marriage* and the ensuing chaos take place in Count Olaf's theater.



Themes

Reverse Psychology

Reverse psychology appears throughout the book, from the synopsis on the back cover to the very end. All throughout, the narrator encourages the reader not to read the book, to put it down immediately and go do something much more fun. Of course, since this is reverse psychology, the majority of readers do the opposite, which is in part why this series of books is so successful. The characters within the book, however, do not use reverse psychology in this volume. It appears within the narrator's asides and commentary.

Inaction

Many of the book's characters, and the adults in particular, are guilty of inaction at one time or another. The reasons for this inaction are not the same for each character. For example, Mr. Poe ignores what the children have to say simply because they are children, and he is far too busy to be bothered with helping them. He does not listen well to what they have to say, and he misses the point. Justice Strauss lets her love of the theater and performing get in the way of helping the Baudelaire children. She is blinded into inaction simply because she is stage-struck and cannot imagine that Count Olaf means the children any harm. If not for the children's quick thinking, the consequences of this inaction would have been the death of at least two of the children and the loss of the Baudelaire fortune through Count Olaf's planned marriage to Violet.

Conversely, since the adults in the story are inactive in their roles as guardians, the children have to step up to the plate and take action to circumvent these horrible events from happening. While in reality, the inaction of adults may be less severe, children typically perceive adults as not listening to them or paying attention to what they need. This book highlights these feelings and uses them as a central theme throughout the story and the remainder of the series.

Responsibility

The theme of responsibility is presented in two extremely different ways. On the one hand, the Baudelaire children behave responsibly, which is amazing given their age and their circumstances. On the other hand, the adults in the story are irresponsible, either through inaction as mentioned above, or deliberately, as exemplified in Count Olaf.

The children are very responsible and carry out the chores that Count Olaf leaves for them each day. Even though these chores are beyond the normal range of capability for children their age, the Baudelaires find a way to accomplish their assigned tasks. The theme of responsibility is evidenced most strongly after the disastrous dinner party for



Count Olaf's theater troupe. Even though the children are in desperate need of help from Mr. Poe, they finish their assigned chores before going to find him.

Count Olaf is extremely irresponsible, and this is highlighted in several ways. First, his house and accommodations for the children are filthy and inadequate. The children are given only one small bed, which they must take turns sleeping on, and Sunny, an infant, is relegated to a pile of curtains on the floor. Instead of performing tasks normally given to adults, such as preparing dinner for a large number of guests, Count Olaf has the children do these tasks for him. This gives the reader insight into Count Olaf's character and nature, showing him to be a very despicable human being.

Cooperation

In order to figure out Count Olaf's scheme and escape from his clutches, the Baudelaires have to work together. Each child has a different talent, but it is necessary for them to use these talents together to make them stronger. As a whole, the Baudelaires are very strong, but taken individually they may not have been able to successfully defeat Count Olaf.

Just as the children are working together, Count Olaf and his theater troupe band together to perform their wicked deeds. Count Olaf would not have been able to concoct his scheme and put it into action if he had not had the cooperation of his theater troupe. It is necessary for one of them to stay behind to keep Sunny captive and for another member of the troupe to turn out the lights at the theater to throw everyone into confusion. Each person had a definite role to play that contributes to the plan.

Love of Reading

The love of reading is a theme that is showcased in *The Bad Beginning* and throughout the rest of A Series of Unfortunate Events. Both Violet and Klaus Baudelaire love to read and feel happiest when they are surrounded by books. The children's destroyed home had a library, and Justice Strauss' home has one, although it is not as nice. Typically, the villains in these stories do not like books and therefore do not have libraries. The children's love of reading allows them to figure out Count Olaf's plan and put a stop to it.

Style

Point of View

The Bad Beginning is told by a third person omniscient narrator. The narrator frequently makes asides to the reader, to integrate readers into the story. Insight is given ahead of time in many instances, as to what each particular character is thinking or planning.

In addition to asides, the narrator frequently encourages the reader to stop reading throughout the book. This first appears in the synopsis, at the very beginning of the book, and continues throughout the rest of the story. The narrator also brings in another story line, which begins to reveal more about the narrator and his involvement with the story of the Baudelaires. This story will become more frequent as the series progresses.

Setting

The book is set in a fictional city, one much like many cities throughout the United States and Europe. However, there are many aspects of the city that are not consistent with our particular time period. For example, carriages are mentioned frequently, as though the place where the story takes place may not be in our present time. Although the children have lived in this city their entire lives, they have not met Count Olaf or seen his house before, giving the impression that the city is very large.

This city is not named, but it is obviously close to a large body of water, as evidenced by the Briny Beach, and contains many different districts. One district mentioned in this book is the Financial District. It contains all of the city's banking institutions, as well as the Fountain of Victorious Finance. In future segments of this series, other districts will be mentioned, and the reader gets the feeling that this city is almost a themed city, neatly organized into several different districts.

Language and Meaning

Many difficult words are defined throughout this book. The narrator does not speak down to children, and in fact, this series can go a long way towards improving the vocabulary of many readers. These definitions appear in the narrative of the story, as well as in dialogue between characters. Each time a difficult word is presented, the phrase, "which means" is used. Instead of using stagnant definitions, the narrator frequently uses comparative definitions in an effort to make them more fun to read. A few Latin phrases appear, such as "in loco parentis," but the majority of the book is written in plain but descriptive English.

Structure

The book is divided into thirteen chapters and is not remarkably different from most juvenile works of fiction in its structure. The chapters are shorter than most novels, most likely due to the genre of this book. The narrator switches between his narration of the story and relating conversations and events throughout the book. Interspersed asides to the reader are also found throughout the length of the book.

The first book begins the tradition in the series of leaving the fate of the Baudelaire children up in the air. This is one of the reasons the books have been so successful, since a reader must wait for the next book to find out how it turns out. Although cliffhangers are sometimes used at the ends of the chapters, the narrator frequently gives away many plot twists to the reader in several chapters. This may be a device to keep children interested in what is going to happen. Although in some instances, this seems somewhat strange, it does not detract from the work itself.



Quotes

"'Goodness me no,' Justice Strauss said. 'I don't actually know him that well. He is my next-door neighbor.'" Chapter 2, page 20.

"'You're right,' Klaus said. 'But it is very difficult to keep one's chin up when Count Olaf keeps shoving it down.'" Chapter 3, page 32.

"'I can't really discuss it,' Justice Strauss said, 'because it's official business. But I can tell you it concerns a poisonous plant and illegal use of someone's credit card.'" Chapter 3, page 35.

"'Yes,' Count Olaf said. 'They are so awful I can scarcely stand to touch them.'" Chapter 4, page 48.

"'If I know you, Olaf,' said the man with the hook-hands, 'you'll find a way to get at the Baudelaire money.'" Chapter 4, page 54.

"'But why would making us be in *The Marvelous Marriage* prove we were insane?'" Chapter 7, page 87.

"'Yes,' Count Olaf continued. 'It certainly is strange to find a child missing. And one so small and helpless.'" Chapter 9, page 103.

"'You're a terrible man,' Klaus spat out, but Count Olaf merely smiled again.'" Chapter 9, page 110.

"'And his other hook, Violet saw, was glinting in the moonlight as it reached right toward her.'" Chapter 10, page 122.

"'She's all tied up at the moment,' Count Olaf said, 'if you will pardon a little joke.'" Chapter 13, page 148.

"'Send him to jail!' 'He's an evil man!' 'And give us our money back! It was a lousy play.'" Chapter 13, page 155.

"'I'll get my hands on your fortune if it's the last thing I do,' the voice hissed. 'And when I have it, I'll kill you and your siblings with my own two hands.'" Chapter 13, page 158.



Topics for Discussion

How do the Baudelaire children each react differently to the deaths of their parents?

Why do you think the adults in the story are portrayed as being incompetent?

Why is Count Olaf is an unsuitable guardian?

Are the actions of the adults in this book realistic?

Would children perceive the actions of adults in this book as being realistic?

What could Justice Strauss have done differently to help the children?

How do Violet's idiosyncrasies help solve the orphans' problems?

How do Klaus' idiosyncrasies help solve the orphans' problems?