

Educating Esme: Diary of a Teacher's First Year Study Guide

Educating Esme: Diary of a Teacher's First Year by Esmé Raji Codell

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Plot Summary

Educating Esme reproduces the journal of Esme Raji Codell, a first-year teacher at an urban Chicago elementary school. Codell describes her day-to-day feelings and impressions, dealing with difficult children as well as a difficult principal and administration.

At age twenty-four, Codell is invited to work at a new public school by principal Mr. Turner. After a period of administrative work, she will teach the fifth-grade. Even at this early stage, Codell butts heads with Mr. Turner, who is a pompous, demanding, and shortsighted man.

Codell is very ambitious, and an initial proposal for an elaborate Fairy Tale Festival is rejected by a school committee. The first day of school begins. Most of Codell's students are black. She institutes several innovative teaching methods, such as calling Math "Puzzling" to allow students to view the subject with a fresh perspective.

Undeterred by her failure with the Fairy Tale Festival, Codell successfully arranges for a famous author, Connie Porter, to visit the school for an assembly. She is also successful in staging a "Cajun Christmas" for the Christmas assembly.

As the second semester begins, Codell continues to teach in creative ways. She makes a "time machine" from a refrigerator box to teach about history, and has an outdoor lesson to teach about trees. She also must deal with some problematic students, again in creative ways. To teach troublesome student Billy Williams a lesson, she makes him "Teacher for a Day." She also stresses the Golden Rule when a student stabs a substitute teacher with a pencil. Codell continues to fight with Mr. Turner. Codell insists on the title "Madame Esme," which irks conservative Turner, and Codell nearly quits over the issue before talked out of it by a fellow teacher. Things continue to sour between the two, with Codell referring to the teachers' union, but eventually Mr. Turner tells Codell she is an impressive teacher, and that she will be retained for the next school year.

Codell continues to have a love-hate (usually hate) relationship with the bureaucracy. She resents the conformity preached by administrators, and scoffs at the idea of conforming to "Jordan Rules," a set of teaching principles developed by basketball star Michael Jordan's foundation.

The second semester features more problems with discipline. Student B. B. is a particular problem, Ozzie overeats at lunch, and Asha brings her two-year-old brother to class. Through it all, Codell scores a success by creating the Storyteller Festival, a schoolwide event. At the end of the year, Codell learns her students scored very well on the standardized test.



She has a teary goodbye on the last day, and is given a signed gold scarf by her students. In a brief epilogue, Codell attends the graduation of some of her students from middle school three years later, and remarks that little has changed.



Part I: Pages 1 through 20

Part I: Pages 1 through 20 Summary and Analysis

June 21: Author Codell states that a teacher-mentor named Ismene Siteles is the reason she got into teaching. Ismene recently died, and Codell attended the funeral.

Codell, twenty-four at the time of the writing, has been hired by Mr. Turner to help open a new public school. Mr. Turner conducts the briefest of interviews to hire her. Codell also has an interview session in front of a panel of educators. She replies in a sarcastic, arrogant manner, and on the way home she figures she has blown her opportunity. However, according to Mr. Turner, the panel loved her.

She is not given the opportunity to teach a classroom yet, but is merely doing administrative duties for Mr. Turner, including typing and copying.

June 6: Codell asks Mr. Turner if he could call her Ms. Esme instead of Mrs. Codell. He thinks it's highly unorthodox and he resists, muttering that Codell is a "women's libber." In the end, though, he calls her Ms. Esme.

Codell writes a proposal for a schoolwide event called the Fairy Tale Festival. She must go through a gauntlet of administrators and teachers for approval, which frustrates her, but she figures she must exercise determination and persistence.

July 8: The Friends of the School Library Committee that is formed to judge Codell's Fairy Tale Festival proposal rules that the proposal is too unrealistic to actually pull off. They treat Codell condescendingly, considering her lack of experience. In the end, the vice-principal, Ms. Coil, says no to putting the festival on. Codell shares some of her favorite proposed activities, including a "Fairy Tale Fashion Show," some carnival games with fairy tale themes, and a fantasy-themed bake sale ("Frog Prince cupcakes" being one of the food items).

At the Committee meeting, a teacher from Italy, Lillia, mispronounces "conspicuous" and Ms. Coil stops to correct her, saying the word for her. Codell finds this audacious and rude.

July 15: Mr. Turner calls Codell as late as 11:30 PM some nights, asking about his itinerary or asking her to provide some key points for a meeting, etc. He never expresses any gratitude to her. One night, Codell lets Mr. Turner's 11:30 PM call go through to voicemail, and then she calls him at 3:00 AM, stating that she was returning his call because it must be urgent, being left at 11:30 PM. Mr. Turner does not call that late again.

Mr. Turner also abuses his position with a young lady he has type huge reports at the last minute. The woman complains about the long hours and asks to be compensated. Mr. Turner complains to Codell about the woman's behavior, believing she should be



grateful for all he has done for her. Mr. Turner rages on about the woman to Codell until 7:30 in the evening

July 23: Codell talks about her mentor Ismene. Prior to getting her certification as a teacher, Codell had to sit in Ismene's classroom and observe her for one hundred hours. On the second day, Ismene puts Codell immediately to work in front of the class, teaching, reading, and answering questions.

Ismene is a harsh critic, but also supportive. Ismene inspires excitement in Codell, and teaches her the basics. One unforgettable teaching moment occurs when a troublesome boy answers any question with, in not so many words, an invitation for Ismene to perform fellatio on him. One day Ismene drags the boy to the bathroom and calls his bluff, asking him to drop his pants. The boy never uses the phrase in class again.



Part I: Pages 20 through 45

Part I: Pages 20 through 45 Summary and Analysis

August 5: Codell is happy when the architect takes her around the school building under construction. When the building is finished, she will be teaching the fifth grade. She is taken to what will be her classroom. She is annoyed to see bullet holes in one window pane (which will be replaced), and is also annoyed that it doesn't "smell" like a classroom. She loves the unique smell of a school.

August 16: The thirty-five new teachers are introduced in front of the community, including Codell. All assembled, it's clear there is a disproportionate amount of twenty-something, slender white girls. Mr. Turner insists that teachers have something to offer beyond what's stated in their resumes, and Codell suspects that that "something" is being white, young, and attractive.

September 18: Codell has been busy readying her classroom for the first day of school. She has made several themed bulletin boards, one a welcome poster, one that states conflict resolution techniques, one with King Kong on which she will put good papers from the students, and one with a multiethnic set of students stating "Welcome to Cool School." She has also made a dedicated spelling center (where kids can practice spelling words), and an art center with markers and arts and crafts materials and related books. Some teachers comment that the environment is too overstimulating, but Codell believes they are jealous.

The first day of school arrives. She has thirty kids. All are black except for five Mexican kids, a girl from Pakistan, and a girl from the Philippines. She gives the children a tough speech, stating they will have to work harder than they've ever had to work. She introduces them to her Golden Rule of conduct: treat others the way you would like to be treated. Codell then has her kids write about their old school and what they like about their new school. She posts the replies to a bulletin board.

September 20: Codell makes audio recordings of each student's reading ability. Most are struggling with basic reading skills. So, she has the kids make an "alphabet museum" in which students bring in items that start with assigned letters of the alphabet, which they then pronounce and talk about. She says the museum is being created to be given to kindergartners. This way, the fifth-graders won't feel ashamed about having such basic reading skills.

September 26: Codell introduces several innovative methods. She doesn't make children read out of a textbook, but instead uses real books. She calls the usual subjects unusual things (Math is "Puzzling" while Science is "Mad Scientist Time") so kids don't have preconceived notions about what they're good at. She collects troubles in a "Trouble Basket" so kids can forget about home worries to concentrate on school. And she has a memorized speech at the end of the day that the students help to



complete by yelling out words. She also has her first conflict resolution session, with students named Ozzie and Ashworth.

September 27: Codell reads aloud *The Hundred Dresses* by Eleanor Estes about a girl who is so poor she wears the same dress to school everyday. The story inspires a student, Ashworth, to reveal to the class that one-half of one of his fingers is missing. The class rallies around Ashworth.

September 29: A new student, Esther, who is from Haiti, joins the class. Codell introduces an arts-and-crafts creation, The Thinking Cap, to help students think about good answers to give.

September 30: There's a fight between Shira and Twanette. Twanette has stolen Shira's pink pen. Twanette is a troublemaker. She picked Shira's menstrual pad out of the trash in the bathroom and showed it to other kids. She also stuck chewed gum to a desk. Codell calls Twanette's mother for a conference and explains the situation. Twanette's mother assures Codell that Twanette will get a good belt-whipping and her attitude will change. Codell gets physically ill at the idea that she will cause Twanette to get beaten.

October 5: A Columbus comic book is stolen from the personally-bought library Codell has provided to the kids. She responds by locking up all her own books and giving the kids the reading textbooks. The kids become sad. One student, Valerie, has her mother come in to ask for the books to be brought back, but Codell is angry and will not consent to leaving her other books out to be stolen.

October 8: The Columbus comic book is returned, and Codell is relieved.

October 9: There is news that author Connie Porter, who writes the "Addy" series of books for American Girls historical fiction series, has agreed to come to the school for an assembly.

October 13: Codell organizes a field trip to the university for a kids' day, in which her class will display an invention they came up with, a burglar alarm for backpacks. On the bus ride there, rocks are thrown at the windows by gang members. Codell recognizes an eighth grader, Perry, as one of the gang members and confronts him the next day. Perry is initially angry and denying everything, and then he cries the rest of the day.



Part I: Pages 45 through 71

Part I: Pages 45 through 71 Summary and Analysis

October 21: Codell gets a complaint from a student named Asha's mother, about Codell's suggestion that all students should buy a dictionary. Asha's father is in prison and the family is very poor. Asha gets a new dictionary donated, and Codell sees that Asha is proud of her possession.

October 25: Esther is "putting voodoo spells on people." Codell calls a conference with her father (who needs a translator). The translator assures Codell Esther will no longer cast spells. Codell is pleased with Esther's progress, and admits Esther is her "secret favorite."

October 29: Codell has organized an after-school club focused on the "Addy" series of historical fiction books. Frankly, she's getting a little tired of Addy from all the related activity.

November 1: Codell describes recent Halloween-related activities. The class reads *The Bat-Poet* and studied bats. They have a scary story contest and a mummy wrapping race. Codell plays her own trick by handing out "candy" which is in fact rubber lizards and cockroaches wrapped in colored foil.

November 2: Codell dresses up in an outrageous outfit, including roller skates, to help teach about inventors. Each of her accessories has an inventor story behind it.

November 5: Connie Porter (author of the "Addy" series) arrives for an assembly. She reads from her book, and it all goes very well. Connie Porter thanks Codell for her hard work. There is a raffle for an American Girl Addy doll. A boy wins the raffle, and Mr. Turner is about to choose another name because he doesn't think it's proper to associate a boy with a doll. But Codell grabs the microphone from Mr. Turner and invites the boy up to receive the prize, thwarting Mr. Turner's conservatism.

November 10: Codell's children call her "Madame Esme," and this greatly irks Mr. Turner, who believes such an extravagant title distracts from the learning process. Codell discusses her title with the children one day, and the female children wonder aloud what title they will choose when they grow up.

Codell then plays off the notion of a "Madame" being a euphemism for a prostitute to relate an event in her childhood. Codell's wicked landlord, who causes problems for all her tenants, scolds Codell's father for having so many books. She confuses terms and calls the apartment a "whorehouse" rather than a "library." Codell remembers admiring the sass and bold fashion sense of prostitutes she saw as a child.



November 19: The children are having fun learning about the Greek myths and doing hands-on activities like outlining their bodies in crayon and filling in the shape based on their favorite Greek god.

November 22: Codell arrives at an innovative way to ensure her books are not stolen. The children trade in one of their shoes to borrow a book, and must return the book to get their shoe back.

December 13: A reserved student named Shira breaks out of her shell when "I Saw Mommy Kissing Santa Claus" is played in class. Shira dances wildly to the music.

December 14: Older kids break into Codell's classroom and steal her "Happy Box," an arts-and-crafts box in which Codell kept stickers and candy and other little rewards. Her students make her a new one.

December 17: The school has their Christmas assembly. Codell chose a "Cajun Christmas" theme, with boys dressed up like alligators from the Bayou and girls dressed in red dresses. They sing a French song. A girl named Vanessa announces the Cajun Christmas, and must be corrected from calling it an "Asian Christmas." The assembly goes well, though Codell receives no well wishes from the parents and very few Christmas cards from her students.



Part II: Pages 72 through 89

Part II: Pages 72 through 89 Summary and Analysis

January 6: Codell creates a "time machine" to help teach history and reading, made from a refrigerator box covered with aluminum foil and a flashing police car light. Inside, there is a shelf of books, the idea being that reading is like traveling through time. Student Maya helps to create it. Codell creates a lot of suspense about the time machine, and every student wants to try it. Student JoEllen is chosen to go first. Codell is afraid she will "ruin the illusion," but after JoEllen emerges she tells the other kids she traveled to the Middle Ages and saw a joust. Other children use the time machine, and no one says that it's just a box with books in it. They all "travel" through time.

January 7: Codell takes her students outside to look at trees to decide which are coniferous and which are deciduous. Mr. Turner sees them outside and immediately fears litigation. Later that day, Codell's Happy Box is returned, after a student claimed to have found it in the park. Additionally, a rap group called the Slick Boys arrived for a school assembly, as part of a "Just Say No" anti-drug campaign. Codell is invited on stage and she dances with the Slick Boys, to the children's delight.

January 8: Codell reads in Melanie's journal that the child's mother forgot it was her birthday. Codell decides to buy her a little purse for a gift and put a birthday candle in a cupcake for her. Melanie is moved and thankful. Otherwise, the children are studying Anne Frank and the Nazi concentration camps. Codell withholds most of the grisly details for the obvious reasons. She finds it most fruitful to compare the Nazis to the Ku Klux Klan, as this strikes a chord with her mostly black class.

Codell has established a twenty-minute reading time every day, but often it extends into forty minutes. The children are very quiet and all engrossed in their books. Codell considers this a big teaching victory.

January 10: The class reads a book called *King Matt the First*, about a boy king. A boy named Ruben has a crush on Codell. He always sits next to her during reading time, and sometimes he runs his hand across Codell's calf. Naturally Codell does not encourage this, but at the same time she feels it is fairly harmless.

January 11: Miss Clark is the special education teacher. She is very sweet—too sweet, in Codell's opinion, to the point where students can walk all over her. On this day, Miss Clark substitutes for Codell as Codell sits in the back of the class, silent. Soon, Codell's class is treating Miss Clark quite roughly, demanding a reward for learning something. This causes Codell to intervene, scolding the children for their behavior. Codell says that learning is reward enough, and she punishes them with extra homework for asking for treats. At lunch, Miss Clark cries in front of Codell and admits she just wants her students to like her. Codell has the attitude of not caring whether her students like her; she's there to teach, not to be liked.



January 12: This entry introduces Billy Williams, one of the biggest troublemakers in class. He constantly whines and challenges Codell about tests and homework and the like. Billy throws tantrums and tells Codell he hates her; Codell kills with kindness and replies that she loves him, which only makes him more mad. Today, Billy accuses Codell of not knowing what it's like to be a student. So Codell tells the class that tomorrow, Billy and her will switch places. She will be the student, and Billy will be the teacher.

Part II: Pages 89 through 112

Part II: Pages 89 through 112 Summary and Analysis

January 13: Today is the day that Codell and Billy Williams switch places: Billy will be the teacher, and Codell will be Billy. Vice Principal Ms. Coil is informed of the situation. Billy starts the day hiding in the boys' room and must be coaxed out. Billy must take attendance for the class. Meanwhile, Codell asks like Billy in an exaggerated manner, speaking in slang and talking back to Billy.

Codell has Billy pick a lesson plan (he chooses how to make paper airplanes), and Billy spends time copying pages from the paper airplane book and taking notes. Billy eventually embraces his role as teacher, mocking Codell with his behavior as much as Codell is mocking his behavior. Billy has the class take a test, and Codell participates as a student. At the end of the day, Codell takes over, and has the children write about the experience of the day. Both Codell and Billy (and the class) gain a greater appreciation for the difficulty in being a teacher and a student.

January 18: Ms. Coil wishes to provide suggestions for Codell to improve her room. Codell is offended, but Ms. Coil assures her other teachers have reacted much worse. Ms. Coil suggests a few cosmetic changes—setting the art center tray a different place, moving a poster—and Codell incorporates one of her three suggestions.

January 20: The class has a field trip to the library. Seven parents agree to chaperone, but none show up, forcing Ms. Coil to borrow parents from another classroom.

February 1: Codell is called away to Mr. Turner's office to troubleshoot a computing problem, and a substitute sits in for her for twenty minutes. When Codell returns, she is horrified to learn the substitute was stabbed in the back with a pencil by one of the students. No one confesses to the crime. The substitute is checked out by paramedics, and will be okay. She will not press charges.

When Codell presses the class for an explanation, a girl named Serena says that the substitute did not follow the Golden Rule. She called one student fat and another stupid, and so in retaliation a student stabbed her. Codell explains that one must follow the Golden Rule even when someone else is not following the rule.

February 7: Codell describes teaching about Native Americans. The class studies several tribes, and has a guest speaker from the Native American Education Service to speak about tribes and show them artifacts. They have a "powwow," dressing up and performing a rain dance. Asha's mother makes a vest for the occasion. The class then has a naming ceremony, where students are named according to one of their characteristics (JoEllen, for one example, is called "Girl of Many Questions"). Afterwards, Ms. Coil questions Codell's teaching method, accusing the fifth-graders of being too old for dress-up.



February 15: Codell types up a class newsletter, with articles written by her students. She gives one to Ms. Coil, but not Mr. Turner, whom she despises. Mr. Turner tells Codell he is disappointed he did not receive a newsletter, and Codell tells the white lie of putting the newsletter in the wrong mail box.

Mr. Turner turns the incident into a criticism of Codell doing too much for her own classroom and not enough for the school. Later, Mr. Turner calls Codell in about a school social committee letter Codell signed with "Madame Esme." Mr. Turner again objects to the "Madame" title and does not want it on any school communication. Codell gets angry and goes to leave, and Mr. Turner threatens to report her for defiance. Tired of fighting, and thinking of her children, she angrily crosses the "Madame" off of her signature and storms out. But after the incident, Codell becomes resolved to quit.

She packs her things, but a veteran teacher, Ms. Federman, stops her. They have a private meeting in which Codell cries and tells about the incident. Ms. Federman has "been around the block" and has a perspective Codell lacks. Federman reminds Codell about her value to her students and tells her to save her strength for bigger fights. In the end, Ms. Federman talks Codell out of quitting.



Part II: Pages 112 through 134

Part II: Pages 112 through 134 Summary and Analysis

February 21: Still fuming over her fight with Mr. Turner, Codell approaches the teachers' union representative, who is retiring in a year, and asks if she can become union representative after the retirement. The teacher takes this as a power grab and refuses, but the representative does empower Codell to flatly refuse to take on additional duties.

Soon after, Mr. Turner confronts Codell about talking to the union. Things are very sour between them. Other teachers believe Codell is a troublemaker who is bringing down morale.

February 28: Codell uses the "cha-cha" dance to help teach the children multiplication with double-digit numbers. Student Tobias writes her a thank-you note at the end, saying the lesson was fun.

March 3: Codell has become very disillusioned with the educational system and its stifling bureaucracy. Today, Mr. Turner announces that the school may be receiving funding from the Jordan Foundation (founded by Michael Jordan, the ex-basketball star), and that to show appreciation he advises teachers to follow so-called "Jordan Rules," teaching guidelines developed by the foundation. Codell scoffs at this, asking rhetorically how much a basketball player knows about teaching kids.

March 6: Children do reports on different vertebrates. Melanie does a report on rats, providing practical advice on how to deal with them, as in tucking one's sheets tightly at night so they can't crawl up into one's bed. It's clear Melanie's own home has a rat problem. Codell reads a short story called "The Pudding Like the Night on the Sea," and it is very popular and hilarious.

March 13: Codell describes her successful reading methodology. She breaks the class into different discussion groups and assigns roles. The "discussion director" makes questions up about the book, the "literary luminary" reads passages aloud, the "language lover" defines the difficult words in the book, the "practical predictor" gets to predict what happens next in the plot, and the "process checker" keeps track of everyone else and assigns number of pages to read. Codell feels it is essential for children to follow along in a read-along (and not just be read aloud to), and so she buys many copies of each assigned book with her own money.

March 22: To teach about the fifty states, Codell has the class work on a patchwork quilt, with each quilt representing a state flower. Ashworth in particular is a fantastic stitcher. Vanessa, Donna, Melanie, and Latoya compose a poem for the occasion.

March 24: Codell has student B.B. and his little sister stay at her apartment because their mother is dealing with an abusive boyfriend and fears violence. Codell knows such



an arrangement is improper for a teacher, but she feels the situation is a crisis and there is no alternative. The evening goes just fine.

March 28: Using Codell's method of conflict resolution, Zykrecia successfully resolves a conflict between herself and a boy named Kyle. Kyle said something lewd to Zykrecia, and she uses the conflict resolution system to get Kyle to agree never to talk to her again. Kyle is humiliated in front of the class, and Codell feels somewhat sorry for him; but on the other hand, Kyle did misbehave and he deserves such treatment.

March 29: Codell has a field trip to the Historical Society, and is impressed at seeing her students use their classroom knowledge in a real-world setting.

March 30: Codell has a strange encounter with Ms. Coil. Ms. Coil asks Codell (who is barely one hundred pounds) if she can meet with her after school to move furniture at her apartment. Codell tries to make up an excuse but eventually agrees. Ms. Coil spends the car ride to the apartment talking about her life and ambitions and children like Codell is a friend. Codell does not feel friendly to Ms. Coil in turn. They arrive at Ms. Coil's apartment, and Ms. Coil has Codell move a table back and forth many times to get just the right placement. Codell suspects the whole event is a pretext for something else. Indeed, in the car ride back to the school, Ms. Coil offers her support for Codell with respect to Mr. Turner getting angry about the "Madame Esme" signature, and tells Codell that it would be a shame to lose her as a teacher.

April 1: Trying to defuse the tension, Mr. Turner comes to chat with Codell after class is over. He asks her if she is planning to stay with the school the next year, and Codell replies that she is, although she is also applying to be a school librarian and would take that job over a teaching job if offered both. Mr. Turner tells Codell that she is an impressive teacher, and that she carries herself like a "third or fourth year" teacher rather than a rookie teacher. Mr. Turner assures Codell that she will be retained as a teacher at the school for next year, although there will be an upheaval and other teachers will be let go or otherwise shifted around. Codell ends the entry vowing to find some way to leave the school (and thus end her venomous relationship with Mr. Turner and the establishment) for a better work environment.



Part III: Pages 135 through 149

Part III: Pages 135 through 149 Summary and Analysis

April 5: Mr. Turner has a teachers' meeting in which an "educational chiropractor" comes to ensure the quality of teachers' curriculum. Codell believes the meeting devolves into a contest to see how similar every teacher's lesson plans can be. Conformity is the focus of the meeting, rather than originality. Always a nonconformist, Codell asks whether they can fudge their lesson plans to resemble accepted curriculum and then veer from those plans. In Codell's opinion, curriculum conformity can either lead to ingenuity on the part of good teachers who know when to adapt curriculum to their needs, and it can also lead to mediocrity when bad teachers too heavily rely on the curriculum. Codell ends with a poem she wrote on the subject, "How To Teach Learning."

April 7: Codell has won the Dr. Peggy Williams award for outstanding new Language Arts teacher. It will provide a small amount of money, which Codell will use to buy more books. She knows the award is something Mr. Turner, with all his criticism, cannot take away from her. In a humorous moment, Codell confesses that her dream growing up was not to be a teacher, but an opera star.

April 11: Codell has a bad day. Stickers are stolen from her desk, putting her in a bad mood. She tries not to take it out on her children—after all, most of them are not thieves—but she struggles. Codell moans about her children's constant complaining about homework and assignments, and how the only thing the kids respond to is toughness, not niceness.

In this entry, Codell also admits that she heavily depends on music to get her through her day. In her head, she associates many events, people, objects, with certain pieces of music. In essence, Codell has a running soundtrack in her head throughout the day. This includes modern pop music (Elvis Costello, Tina Turner), movie musicals ("On How to Be Lovely" performed in the Audrey Hepburn film *Funny Face*), and classical pieces of music.

April 15: Student Latoya comes to class a half-hour late for the fourth time in as many days. Codell feels like yelling at the girl in front of the class, but she knows it is against her principals to single out a child for such humiliation. Instead, she privately questions Latoya about the tardiness. Latoya reveals that her family is living out of a shelter and that she must take a train instead of walk. Codell is relieved that she did not resort to yelling, considering such an unfortunate reason.

May 2: Akila gives Codell a blue, pink, and gold sari as a gift. Codell immediately puts it on and wears it for the rest of the day. Akila's mother thanks Codell for making Akila feel more comfortable about her heritage. Mr. Turner sees another outrageous outfit on Codell and thinks the class is having a cultural festival.



Part III: Pages 149 through 165

Part III: Pages 149 through 165 Summary and Analysis

May 4: Student B.B. has been intolerable in class, picking on kids and threatening them. He seems to go "crazy" at around 1:20 every day, almost as if Codell could set her watch to his misbehavior. She realizes that this is due to the school day nearing its end, and B.B. not wanting to go home to his crippled, ailing father, who was shot in gang cross-fire.

When B.B. calls Codell a bad word, it's the last straw. Codell confronts Mr. Turner and insists he discipline B.B. She feels as a teacher that disciplining should only go so far; once a student gets to a certain point, it is up to the principal to handle that child so other kids can learn. Mr. Turner, who is black, maintains that behavior is problematic for blacks, because of all the gangs, poverty, and drug use they grow up in. Codell doesn't think this is an excuse for bad behavior, and that if she as a white woman said such things about blacks, she would be ostracized. In the end, B.B. is suspended, but Codell doesn't feel particularly victorious about it.

May 10: B.B.'s mother Rowisha comes in to explain that B.B.'s father is in declining health and the family is having a difficult time, and she would appreciate no further conferences about behavior. Codell stays firm and says that many children have problems, and that home issues do not excuse disrupting the learning process. Codell tells Rowisha what B.B. did to get suspended, and the mother responds by beating B.B. down to the ground. Codell is horrified, and she hugs and comforts B.B. after the beating, as he is hysterical and crying.

May 11: Ozzie's grades are plummeting. Ozzie's mother is called in, and she provides Codell with the tragic tale of the family: drug addict ex-boyfriend, periods of homelessness, abusive current boyfriend. At one point the boyfriend gets so bad that Ozzie puts a gun to his head and must be talked out of killing him by his mother. Codell wonders why so many of these broken families insist on having a gun in the home.

May 12: Based on a small grant she receives, Codell talks about putting on a "Storyteller's Workshop" in preparation for a festival, in which children will learn stories and then tell them on a stage to other children. She has been practicing with her storytellers by having them perform for younger classes. Codell talks about forcing a few shy kids to perform, including Maurissa and Rochelle. Both girls perform a good practice, and are beaming from ear to ear and brimming with confidence afterward.

May 13: The school takes the Iowa Standardized Test of Basic Skills, and Codell serves as proctor for a particularly ill-behaved fifth-grade class. Afterwards, Codell must console the teacher of that class, Mrs. Jones, who breaks down into tears after a student gives her the finger.



May 16: Asha brings her two-year-old brother to school. Codell doesn't know what to do. She doesn't want to tell the administration and cause a big panic, and so she teaches for most of the day with a baby in her arms. The mother does not show up. In retrospect, Codell feels bad for not alerting someone, but at the time she was worried about the consequences for Asha.

Codell admits to being worn down by the daily grind of teaching. She feels the strain of trying to guide thirty-one lives, of feeling the ups and downs of all these lives in her care. Nothing she was taught at the university level could have prepared her for the realities of teaching, its great highs and lows. Other teachers seem content to take on the role of not only teacher but mother, counselor, etc., but Codell thinks these kids need real mothers, and that teachers should be free to just teach.

May 21: On May 20, Codell has her Storytelling Festival. Overall, it goes quite well. She sets up two colorfully-decorated stages in the library, the "sun" stage and the "star" stage. She has two stages because she has one stage reserved for shorter stories for younger kids (with shorter attention spans) and one stage for longer stories for the older kids. Codell gets to use some of her ideas from her failed Fairy Tale Festival, including the Three Billy Goats Gruff Toss. The visiting kids get into it, and are quiet for a change as they absorb the storytelling. As usual, Mr. Turner tries to pour cold water on Codell's hard work, wondering if the Commons Area wasn't a better choice to hold the festival in. People representing the grant Codell received for the festival arrive, and they are very impressed with the presentation and the involvement of the students. Codell is very proud of herself, and she appreciates the festival as the rare moment in which one successfully pulls off an ambitious idea.



Part III: Pages 165 through 185

Part III: Pages 165 through 185 Summary and Analysis

May 22: Codell has to teach sex ed, and she is uncomfortable about it. She must show an old, corny filmstrip, a cartoon of goldfish mixing eggs and sperm. This cartoon results in more confusion than clarification, with one girl, JoEllen, asking if she is going to lay an egg.

Afterwards, Codell has a frank discussion about topics like birth control, homosexuality, and abortion. She makes sure to preface each of her answers with something like "From my point of view" so the children are clear it's her own opinion. Codell has a socially liberal point of view, and so she will not, for example, condemn homosexuality or preach strict abstinence before marriage.

May 23: B.B. acts up once again, grumbling and cursing. Codell tells him he is acting like a jerk, and she later apologizes for using the term. Codell sits down with B.B. and asks him if he's upset about his dad, if he's angry at the men who shot him, etc. B.B. reacts with anger, and will not discuss his true feelings. Instead, he stomps away from Codell, crying.

Codell feels sorry for B.B., and his life which has been a series of letdowns, but she will not let him ruin the learning process for the other students, and so she confronts the counselor. The counselor threatens to send a note home to B.B.'s (abusive) mother unless B.B. shapes up. B.B. won't talk, and so the counselor promises to send the note home, sending B.B. into a hysterical fit.

June 2: Melanie is a student with a penchant for stealing. She is caught red-handed stealing change from a teacher's desk and is sent to the principal's office. Codell meets her there and comforts her. Codell equates the temptation to steal to a funny feeling in the stomach. Whenever Melanie feels that funny feeling, Codell orders her to talk to Codell so she can give her something useful to do instead of stealing. Codell threatens Melanie with reform school unless she stops stealing.

June 4: Codell writes small notes about various students. Kyle performs math better if Codell lets him stand on his head beforehand. Ashworth has great artistic potential. Asha "deserves love."

June 8: Ozzie has been complaining of feeling bad for a week and a half, and today he vomits walking to gym. Codell attends to the boy.

June 9: Codell gets results back from the Iowa standardized test, and her class has performed "best in the school." Codell talks about some of her favorite activities she's done over the year: shadow-puppet shows to learn about light, making an architecturally-accurate castle out of marshmallows, sushi-making when learning about Asia, many others.



Codell admits that the very hard work she has poured into her class has come at the cost of personal relationships and her own nerves. She is "tired and lonely."

June 10: Codell discovers the source of Ozzie getting sick: he eats about a dozen hamburgers at lunch, because of a fear of going hungry the rest of the day. Codell yells at the lunch monitor who is allowing this poor behavior to continue.

June 15: Codell has another fight with Mr. Turner about the title "Madame." She vents her frustration in her journal. She wonders if it is a cause worth fighting for.

June 28: It's the last day of school. Codell has her kids write essays to the next class of fifth-graders. She reprints a couple letters, with kids telling future students what they will do and to behave for Madame Esme. It's an emotional day. Esther cries while writing her letter. A mother of one student makes a gold scarf signed by all the students. Codell is emotional and cries as well.



Epilogue and Afterword

Epilogue and Afterword Summary and Analysis

Epilogue: Codell writes three years after the events of the journal, attending the graduation of her former fifth-graders. She is "most surprised by how little has changed" (p. 189). She watches her former fifth-graders graduate from middle school and she thinks they look about the same. Mr. Turner is still the same, a blowhard, on stage giving a graduation speech. Speech after speech addresses the future, but not the present, and to Codell they begin to sound like pleas, begging the students not to turn to a life of crime.

Of her thirty-one fifth-graders, only sixteen are crossing the stage to graduate. Codell doesn't know if they moved, or failed, or something else. Then she wonders at her own progress in the three years. She worked at the school for two more years. In the second year, she got pregnant and received a lower teacher rating because she took up too many sick days. After that she moved to a new school in a much better area. Her new principal, contrasted with Mr. Turner, is a former school librarian and is wholly supportive of Codell and her creativity and innovative methods. The school environments are totally different. At her old school, she saw minority students struggle because of the urban environment and broken homes. At her new school, which is mostly white, students are little angels and parents throw a tantrum when students get C's.

Codell considers her old students a last time, and feels a warm euphoria thinking of them, being somehow comforted in the fact that she is a part of their lives.

Afterword: This small afterword is written by a man named Jim Trelease. He talks about "a certain western state" (it's unclear what that state is), and a new governor who promises to hold teachers in his state accountable for poor reading test scores. Trelease notes that the state is last in the nation in the funding of libraries, and Trelease believes this is the reason for poor reading scores, and not incompetent teachers.

Continuing the theme of disconnected administrators, Trelease talks about a chairman of the State Board of Education (of some other state) who acts more like a visiting dignitary than a public servant. Too often, people like these dominate the debate on public education, people who have probably never taught a class. Trelease wonders if people like the governor or chairman would be shocked to read *Educating Esme*, and its frank portrayal of being a teacher. Could the governor or chairman handle all the extraordinary challenges *Esme* writes about? And could the governor or chairman come up with the innovative teaching methods Codell created? Rhetorically, no.

Educating Esme is "terribly relevant" because it provides a snapshot of the reality of American education, and because Codell is not some wise and elderly academic—the past—but a young, rash, and exuberant teacher—the future. Plus, Codell was an unqualified success, and her students learned.



Characters

Esme Raji Codell

Codell begins her journal as a twenty-four-year-old rookie teacher at a new elementary school. She is young, idealistic, and very confident in her teaching methodology. She is also fiercely determined to "get her way" and fight through the bureaucracy at the school. As a progressive-minded teacher, she finds her conservative principal, Mr. Turner, intolerable, and she comes to resent his presence and meddling.

Codell initially has mixed success in her fight with the bureaucracy. An ambitious "Fairy Tale Festival" event she proposes is flatly rejected by the powers that be. But in her classroom, and despite Mr. Turner's hand wringing, Codell achieves an uncommon connection with her students. She exhibits "tough love" with her students, stern but caring. The students come to appreciate her eccentricities (she insists on being called "Madame Esme," and she becomes known for the unusual costumes she wears to school) and her unique approach to teaching. Codell institutes a wide variety of innovative teaching techniques, like making a "time machine" from a refrigerator box to teach about history.

Codell is also characterized by her quick temper. A continuing fight with Mr. Turner over her insistence on the "Madame Esme" title has her on the verge of quitting, and she is otherwise never afraid to speak her mind.

Mr. Turner

Mr. Turner is the principal of Codell's elementary school. In many ways, he is the polar opposite of Codell, and for that reason Codell resents him and fights with him. Mr. Turner seems more interested in maintaining a comfortable status quo than in providing students a quality education. He is more bureaucrat than educator. Mr. Turner is conservative, and prefers conformity in curriculum and behavior. Because of this conservatism, Mr. Turner does not appreciate Codell's innovation and eccentricity.

As Codell characterizes him, Mr. Turner is a pompous blowhard who has no appreciation for how ridiculous he appears to people. He is also somewhat of a sexist: Codell believes he chose his teachers (most of them young, slender white women) based on personal attraction more than qualifications. Mr. Turner, who is black, also differs with Codell as to discipline issues. He believes that the students of the school, who are mostly black, should be treated with leniency and understanding due to their difficult inner-city environment. Codell, on the other hand, believes extraneous issues should not be blamed for a lack of learning.

Despite their fights, Mr. Turner eventually commends Codell for her impressive progress, and he decides to retain her for the upcoming year.



Ms. Coil

Ms. Coil is the vice principal of the elementary school. While not quite as vexing as Mr. Turner, Ms. Coil is similarly a bureaucrat first and educator second, and she frustrates Codell with her meddling.

Ismene Siteles

Ismene is Codell's mentor, a veteran teacher whose class Codell observed as part of her teaching education. Ismene inspired Codell to pursue excellence in teaching, and Codell borrowed much of her teaching philosophy from Ismene.

Connie Porter

Connie Porter is the author of the American Girl "Addy" series of historical fiction novellas. Codell is thrilled when she is able to convince Porter to come to the school for an assembly.

Ms. Federman

Ms. Federman is a veteran teacher and friend to Codell, who convinces Codell to not quit after her heated fight with Mr. Turner over the "Madame Esme" title.

Billy Williams

Billy Williams is a student with major behavior issues. Codell decides to teach him a lesson by making him "Teacher for a Day." Billy has no more behavior issues after being teacher.

B.B.

B.B. is a student who constantly misbehaves, including swearing at the teacher. B.B. has a bad home life, including a father confined to a wheelchair because of gang violence. Codell tries to get him to share his angry feelings, but he has trouble opening up.

The Educational Chiropractor

The "educational chiropractor" is Codell's saucy term for an administrator who comes to the school to preach conformity of curriculum to the teachers. He wants all the teachers' lesson plans and subjects to "align."

Ozzie

Ozzie is an overweight student whose grades plummet because his mother's boyfriend is abusive to him. Later, Ozzie becomes sick at school because he is gorging on greasy hamburgers at lunch. It is revealed that this overeating is due to not enough food available at home.



Objects/Places

Chicago, Illinois

Codell teaches at a public elementary school in the heart of Chicago, Illinois. It is in a poor, crime-ridden area, and Codell must contend with all the challenges of the inner city.

Fairy Tale Festival

Early on, Codell proposes a Fairy Tale Festival, a schoolwide event complete with carnival games and a fashion show. Codell's proposal is rejected by administrators, who dismiss it as too ambitious.

Columbus Comic Book

Codell is dismayed when someone steals a Columbus comic book from her personal classroom library. She responds by denying access to her library. Days after, the comic book is anonymously returned.

The Time Machine

Codell fashions a "time machine" from a refrigerator cardboard box and some decorative ornaments. She has her students sit in the box. Inside are history books. Students then "travel back in time," reading the books to better understand history. The children buy into the illusion and the time machine is a big success.

Storyteller Festival

Codell organizes the Storyteller Festival in the library, in which her students memorize stories from books and then perform the stories onstage for other children. Unlike the Fairy Tale Festival, the Storyteller Festival is approved and is a big success.

The Hundred Dresses

The Hundred Dresses is a children's book by Eleanor Estes. Its plot involves a poor girl who is so poor she only wears one dress to school every day. The story, with its theme of tolerance and understanding, inspires student Ashworth to reveal to the class that one-half of one of his fingers is missing. The class rallies around Ashworth.



The Trouble Basket

Considering all the domestic difficulties the students must deal with, Codell invents a "Trouble Basket." Students write down their troubles on a slip of paper and put it in the basket. The idea is that students will be able to discard their troubles and concentrate on learning.

The Multiplication Cha-Cha Dance

To teach multiplication of double-digit numbers, Codell invents a "Cha-Cha" dance which teaches students where numbers go in the multiplication process.

Jordan Rules

The "Jordan Rules," as released by the Michael Jordan Foundation, are a set of teaching guidelines. Because the foundation is a large donor, Mr. Turner wants to adopt the rules, but Codell scoffs at the idea that basketball great Michael Jordan has better ideas about teaching than real teachers.

Iowa Standardized Test of Basic Skills

This test is administered near the end of the year to all students, and helps to track students' progress. Codell's class scores better than any other fifth-grade class in the school.



Themes

Struggles with Bureaucracy

Over and over, Codell finds herself butting heads with the school's administration, most often with the principal Mr. Turner. Codell is confident in her abilities as a teacher, and has many brave new ideas she would like to try. These ideas usually do not conform to the existing status quo. For example, when Codell brings an ambitious proposal for what she calls the Fairy Tale Festival, with its carnival games and fashion show, she is promptly slapped down by the school and told her ideas are too ambitious. In her own class, however, Codell enjoys greater freedom, and is able to institute many of her bold and unusual teaching methods, which enjoy success.

Codell's struggle with bureaucracy is crystallized in the "Madame Esme" controversy. Codell believes she should be called what she likes to be called, and she chooses the title Madame, along with her first rather than last name. Mr. Turner not only objects to a teacher being called by her first name, he strongly objects to "Madame," as in his mind it connotes a prostitute. Codell portrays an environment in which her individualism and creativity is stifled by an establishment that preaches conformity, even when such conformity results in a poorer learning environment. Codell believes a teacher is at his/her best when he/she is allowed the greatest freedom to stray from rigid curriculum. Teachers should be allowed to invent teaching methods that work best for them and their students. The "blanket approach" put in place by the school is inferior.

The Challenges of Inner-City Schools

From the very start of the year, when Codell is upset that her future classroom's window is riddled with bullet holes, the reader is introduced to the challenges inherent in teaching in poor, urban areas. Most obviously, there are the home issues that make learning difficult for students. Codell sees both Twanette and B.B. beaten into submission by their mothers. Ozzie's mother has an abusive ex-boyfriend who causes Ozzie's grades to plummet, and Ozzie also develops an eating disorder, gorging on hamburgers at lunch because he doesn't get enough to eat at home. Asha brings her two-year-old brother to school, presumably because of abuse or neglect at home. B.B. is afraid of going home to his crippled father (crippled due to gang violence). The list continues. Codell must constantly deal with these issues that infect the learning process. These issues even influence such things as the graduation speeches described in the Epilogue, which Codell characterizes as pleas to the students to refrain from violence and delinquency, a sentiment Codell contends would never find its way into the ceremony for a more affluent school.

Mr. Turner, who is black, has the attitude that teachers and the school system must give inner-city black students a long leash, forgiving their behavior and being lenient with grading and discipline issues. By contrast, Codell believes that the school system must

remain firm with these students and expect the same level of learning and good behavior that students in other parts of the country attain.

Innovative Methods

As Jim Trelease alludes to in his Afterword, part of the value of *Educating Esme* is the fact that Codell is a young, enthusiastic, and creative teacher who employs innovative learning techniques in the classroom. Her methods, which enjoy great success as evidenced by her students' "best in the school" standardized test scores, hint at the potential of American education if teachers are given more freedom in their curriculum.

Examples of Codell's innovation are numerous. She has the students build a marshmallow castle to learn about medieval history; sushi is made to help learn about Asia; Codell dresses up with roller skates and other accessories to teach about the people who invented those accessories; she makes a "time machine" out of a refrigerator box to get kids excited about learning history; she calls Math "Puzzling" and Science "Mad Scientist Time" so that kids can approach the subjects with a fresh perspective; Codell invents a "Thinking Cap" to provide students a way to arrive at better answers in class and a "Trouble Basket" so students can "discard" their home troubles; and many more.

Codell believes that lessons should be memorable and hands-on. They should also cover the range of the different ways in which people learn - aurally, visually, in groups, alone, etc. Codell also believes it is important for children to take responsibility for their education, to feel like they have an important role. A good example of this is Codell's approach to reading, in which children are divided into groups and then given specific roles that contribute to the group's overall understanding of the text.



Style

Perspective

Codell begins the book as a twenty-four-year-old, rookie teacher. She is confident bordering on arrogant, and believes she has a better way of teaching than many of the much more experienced teachers. She rails against the educational bureaucracy, and considers it a near-worthless obstacle in the way of the learning process. She is passionate, and she cares greatly about the success of her students, allowing herself to become emotionally attached to the children in her class.

There is a sense that Codell relishes conflict. She will not back down when Mr. Turner challenges her about her insistence on being called "Madame Esme," and she delights in annoying Mr. Turner and Ms. Coil with her eccentric behavior, such as wearing unusual costumes. Codell delights in challenging the status quo, whether it be innovative teaching methods, trying to get her ambitious Fairy Tale Festival approved, or being an outspoken opponent of the curriculum conformity that the visiting educational "chiropractor" advocates.

Given how forceful Codell's personality is, the reader develops doubts as to the author's reliability as a reporter of events. Codell sometimes portrays herself as totally right and others as totally wrong; the truth is probably, as it often is, in the middle; Codell's strong emotions probably cloud her perspective on some events. However, Codell also has the sense of humor to be able to laugh at her own stubbornness, so she does retain a certain amount of perspective.

Tone

Codell reveals herself to be brash, impetuous, ambitious, and hot-tempered, and the overall sauciness of the writing reflects this. Frequent italicized words and exclamation points for emphasis represent Codell's anger. She is frequently frustrated at the stifling bureaucracy of the educational system, and her entries reflect her exasperation. Occasional curse words and slang provide a sense that the journal is a private memoir not intended for the mass consumption it eventually enjoys. Codell's flippant, casual style is also endearing, and contributes to a sense that Codell is the one sane person in the "insane asylum" of the middle school.

Even though she is inexperienced, Codell's tone indicates she has all the right answers and possesses superior teaching techniques. By contrast, Mr. Turner is painted as a pompous fool, and the administrative bureaucracy in general is derided and mocked.

Though Codell is clearly angry with her experience battling Mr. Turner and the administration, she is able to use humor to convey that anger. She is able to step back and appreciate the irony or ridiculousness of a situation she might find herself in. Thus, Codell frequently uses sarcasm or exaggeration as a way to defuse otherwise

frustrating events with humor. The reader senses humor is very important to Codell in her struggles. If she could not laugh, perhaps the only alternative would be to cry.

Structure

Educating Esme is a collection of the real-life journal entries of Esme Raji Codell, although the names of people in the journal were changed to protect identities. Entries were written on a semi-daily basis during Codell's first year as a school teacher of the fifth grade. They vary in length and scope, as one might expect from journal entries. Some are long, describing significant events and stating Codell's philosophy on a variety of life and teaching issues; some are shorter, describing briefer events or a few disconnected thoughts. Other than the obvious chronological order of the entries, there is no discernible "build" or narrative. Codell may introduce a subject and return to it only months later, or perhaps she never returns to it.

The journal entries are divided into three parts. Part I begins shortly before school begins, and ends at the conclusion of the first semester with the class' "Cajun Christmas." Part II covers the second semester up until the beginning of April, when Codell's antagonism with Mr. Turner reaches a head. The end of Part II features Codell pondering quitting, and the conflict is resolved when Mr. Turner reassures her that she will return for the next year. Part III continues through to the end of the school year, until the last day of school when Codell says goodbye to her students. There is also an Epilogue, written three years after the journal, in which Codell reflects on her first year, and finally an Afterword in which Jim Trelease shares his thoughts on the relevance and value of the text.



Quotes

"Even if I fail, I have to try and try. It may be exhausting, but that is beside the point. The goal is not necessarily to succeed but to keep trying, to be the kind of person who has ideas and see them through."

Part I, "July 7," p. 8

"Ismene taught me basics: Ignoring bad behavior as long as you can stand it. Maintaining quiet lines. How a soft voice can be more effective than a loud voice. Starting out with positive comments to parents before lowering the boom. Waiting patiently for children to answer questions."

Part I, "July 23," p. 17

"This is my destiny, to have this group of children before me. As they were growing, aging to be fifth graders, I was training, and now we meet, in this unique place and time. The moment felt holy."

Part I, "September 18," p. 26

"Esther hasn't fist-fought anyone since she's been in my room, but she keeps putting voodoo spells on people. It was funny at first, but now it's making the kids a little spooked."

Part I, "October 25," p. 48

"It's not our job to be liked [...] it's our job to help them be smart. [...] Who gives a [blank] if they like us? Sometimes I can hardly stand them!"

Part II, "January 11," p. 87

"[Y]ou must treat people as you would like to be treated even in the event that they are ignorant and don't treat you as you would like to be treated. That's the tricky part. You must follow the Golden Rule even if you think they are stupid."

Part II, "February 1," p. 101

"If you let people walk over you while you're young, you should get used to wearing foot marks across your face for the rest of your life."

Part II, "February 15," p. 106

"I have no intention of staying at this silly [blank] hole, with this silly man who tells us we don't need a metal detector, the kids are just bringing the guns in to show." Part II, "April 1," p. 133



"So much of teaching is sharing. Learning results in sharing, sharing results in change, change is learning. The only other job with so much sharing is parenting. That's probably why the two are so often confused."

Part III, "April 5," p. 140

"Will I be shot by a student? So many of them have guns at home. Why will I be shot? For suspending, scolding, letting someone cut in line, for giving too much homework?"

Part III, "May 9," p. 152

"People snicker, 'Those who can't do, teach.' But, oh, how right they are. I could never, ever do all I dream of doing."

Epilogue, p. 194

"[Codell] is young, rash, exuberant, alternately innocent and street-wise, always child-wise, and sometimes irrational. But she is never irrelevant."

Afterword by Jim Trelease, p. 201

Topics for Discussion

What is the nature of the conflict between Codell and Mr. Turner regarding the title "Madame"?

What is Codell's attitude toward kids acting up in class? Should misbehavior be understood as the logical product of a broken home?

What is Codell's general attitude toward the educational bureaucracy?

According to Codell, what toll has a year of teaching taken on her?

Why is music so important to Codell as she struggles through the day?

How does Codell approach class reading? Describe the organizational structure she imposes on the class.

Why does one of Codell's students stab a substitute teacher with a pencil? What is Codell's response to this incident?