

The Matchlock Gun Short Guide

The Matchlock Gun by Walter D. Edmonds

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Overview

Based on an actual historical incident, *The Matchlock Gun* is a thrilling adventure story about self-preservation and the protection of loved ones. Set during the French and Indian War, which pitted the French and the Native Americans against the British government and settlers, the story provides a glimpse of American history from the perspective of a Dutch-American family living in the wilderness of newly settled New York State. Unlike a standard historical account of the war, Edmonds's story does not provide battle statistics or list the challenges facing settlers, but rather brings to life one gripping episode as experienced by a peaceful, loving family.

From their isolated home amidst the untamed fields and woods, Teunis Van Alstyne and his gentle wife, Gertrude, see the complex war only as a simple and immediate menace to their security.

Edmonds builds his story on the contrast between the warmth and love inside the household and the danger lurking outside. He creates suspense as he develops the characters of Gertrude, the concerned mother protecting her children in the absence of her husband; ten-year-old Edward, who rises to adult challenges to help his mother; and six-year-old Trudy, unable to conceive of the threat to her family.

About the Author

Walter D. Edmonds was born on July 15, 1903, in Boonville, New York. His childhood summers were spent with his brother and sister on his family's farm, and his first short story, written at the age of twelve, was based on his experiences in the country. Educated at private schools in the Northeast, such as Cutler School, St. Paul's, and Choate School, he remembers teachers who recognized his creativity and encouraged his interest in writing.

At Harvard, Professor Charles Townsend Copeland took a personal interest in Edmonds's career; Copeland's emphasis on simplicity in writing influenced Edmonds's work throughout his life. While taking a course with Copeland, Edmonds had his first story published, by Scribner's Magazine.

Edmonds's failure in his first Harvard chemistry course dissuaded him from pursuing a career in chemical engineering—his father's dream—and encouraged him to persevere with his writing. He served as president of the Harvard Advocate, the college literary magazine, while at Harvard.

Edmonds married Eleanor Livingston Stetson after the publication of his first novel. They had two boys and a girl and lived in upstate New York. After Eleanor died, Edmonds married Katharine Baker-Carr, in 1956.

Edmonds's most productive period as a writer began in 1930 with the publication of his second novel. *The Big Barn*.

In 1942 he was awarded the Newbery Medal for *The Matchlock Gun*. Based on a real incident involving the family of Thomas Shepherd of Ilion, New York, the book demonstrates Edmonds's self-proclaimed interest in allowing readers to experience historical events as they do the events of the present. Edmonds was convinced that *The Matchlock Gun*—neither written nor published for children originally—could be transformed into an excellent children's book.

Most of his books for children came about in this way.

Edmonds served as a member of the Board of Overseers of Harvard College from 1945 until 1950. He also served as director of the Harvard Alumni Bulletin from 1955 to 1972 and as its president and publisher from 1957 to 1966.

Edmonds especially enjoys writing historical novels that depict the strengths and accomplishments of American citizens. His book *Bert Breen's Barn* won the Christopher Award in 1975 and a National Book Award in 1976. He has been awarded honorary degrees from several American universities. He currently lives in Concord, Massachusetts.

Setting

Set in 1757 on the Van Alstynes' farm in Guilderland, outside of Albany City, *The Matchlock Gun* takes place at a time when the state of New York was still a British colony. Young Edward Van Alstyne is fascinated by the Spanish matchlock gun that his greatgrandfather brought from Holland to America. Over six feet long and very heavy, the old-fashioned gun can be fired only by igniting the priming "like a cannon." The action of the story takes place in and around the house in which the Van Alstynes live, not far from the sturdy brick house of Edward's grandmother, the Widow Van Alstyne.

The French and Indian War threatens the safety of the Guilderland community. Edmonds sets a scene of warmth and security in his initial chapters but hints at the danger that will soon intrude upon the domestic haven of the Van Alstynes' house.



Social Sensitivity

The main concern of Gertrude, Teunis, and Edward is survival of the family.

Edmonds's story of their survival, however, is disturbing for its negative depiction of Native Americans and its glorification of a young boy's initiation to manhood through his use of a big "man's" gun to slaughter three Native Americans.

Edmonds simplifies the complexity of the French and Native American war against the British. He depicts the Dutch immigrants as "true Americans": human, loving, and possessing an undeniable right to land and liberty. The Native Americans, defending land and rights that have been theirs for years, are portrayed as beasts: There were five of them, dark shapes on the road....They hardly looked like men...they were trotting, stooped over.. .like dogs sifting to the scent of food.

Parents and teachers may wish to supplement a reading of the story with a more accurate, realistic account of the conflict between the British and the Native Americans. They may wish to discuss the persecution and injustice suffered by Native Americans since the European settlement of the New World.

A related sensitive issue involves Edward's shooting the matchlock gun.

He fires the gun in order to protect his mother, whom the Native Americans have injured; in this sense, he is simply doing what his mother has instructed him to do. Parents and teachers may want to stress the care with which Teunis introduces the gun to Edward.

The gun is kept out of the children's reach, and only in desperation does Gertrude allow her son to handle the gun. Still, Edmonds's treatment of the actual shooting implies that Edward has filled his father's shoes by killing, as Teunis proudly notes, more "Indians" than all of the adult men. While Edmonds may have intended the book's final image—ten-year-old Edward sitting by the corpses of the three Native Americans, the huge matchlock gun in his lap—to be seen as heroic, it actually romanticizes war rather than addressing the atrocities of violence and slaughter.



Literary Qualities

Although *The Matchlock Gun* is a tale of adventure, suspense, and violence, Edmonds's prose is never choppy or exaggerated but instead exhibits the fluidity and lyricism of poetry. Edmonds contrasts sensuous descriptions of the Van Alstynes' warm, secure family life with ominous images of impending peril.

When the children go to bed in the loft, for example, Edmonds presents a cozy domestic scene: The two children slept together in the loft room...where the smoked hams made a scent in the darkness....The loft was warm from the all-day fire in the chimney....Above the roof, the wind hooted softly in the chimney mouth: the sound brought a sense of the cold and wet beyond the thickness of roof-board and shingle.

The chapter "In the Loft" ends, however, with foreshadowing of violence; what earlier seemed cozy and familiar now seems oppressive and frightening.

Although the children are safe in bed, the steady rain of a November storm pelts the house, and Edward lies awake, hearing "only the note of the wind in the chimney and the feeling of it on the roof, like a hand pressed down out of the darkness."

While the mood of the story becomes tense as danger closes in on Gertrude and her family, the omniscient narrative voice remains stable and matter-of-fact.

The point of view shifts from Edward to Gertrude so that the reader empathizes with both as their fear becomes palpable and the plot moves toward the climactic shooting scene. Edmonds describes this particular incident first from Gertrude's perspective and then from Edward's, so that the reader twice experiences the impact of the scene.



Themes and Characters

The main characters of the story are Teunis and Gertrude Van Alstyne and their children, ten-year-old Edward and six-year-old Trudy. Although he is absent during most of the action, Teunis Van Alstyne is a vital character in the novel. A robust Dutchman, twenty-nine years old, he has an outgoing, caring manner and is described as a "lusty," "manly" man who "could roar like a bull when he wanted." Edward greatly admires his father, who is captain of the Guilderland militia. When the story begins, Teunis is preparing to fight the French and Native Americans at nearby Palatine Bridge. Edward watches his father prepare for duty and asks why Teunis never takes the matchlock gun with him. Teunis explains that the gun is impractical in battle and shows Edward how to fire the weapon. Teunis and Gertrude share a tender goodbye before Teunis departs into the rainy night, and Gertrude then tucks Edward and Trudy in bed, singing a Dutch lullaby to them.

A devoted mother and loving wife, Gertrude Van Alstyne is described as almost saintlike. When she sings a lullaby to her children, her voice is "soft and sweet"; when she tucks Edward in bed, her hands have a "clean, buttery" smell; when she walks down the stairs by candlelight, the flame illuminates her face like a halo. Despite her soft appearance, Gertrude adheres to her strong convictions: she stubbornly refuses to seek refuge at her mother-in-law's house because the Widow Van Alstyne does not accept her as a daughter-in-law; she firmly raises her children to obey her; and she courageously safeguards her home against enemy warriors, lifting and loading the heavy matchlock gun.

Edward (Ateoord in Dutch), a curious, intelligent boy, struggles to support his mother and understand her problems.

Edward is afraid of the pending danger and at night imagines that the smoked hams, hanging from the rafters, are French soldiers marching toward him.

When Native Americans threaten his mother's life, Edward's observant nature and his desire to protect his mother enable him to handle the adult responsibility of shooting the gun and pulling his mother and sister to safety. Although he is in pain, his mother is unconscious, and his house is on fire, Edward calmly controls the situation and even manages to salvage the gun.

Trudy's character lends comic relief to the story. Oblivious to the threat of violence, she provides humor as the story grows tense and serious: when Gertrude begins to worry about the proximity of the warriors, Trudy sings out, "The Indians don't wear breeches!"; when the house is burning down and Edward tries to drag his mother out of danger, Trudy rescues her handkerchief doll, saying, "I didn't want it to get burned to death."

Almost all of the characters exhibit the fortitude and ingenuity upon which the book's theme of heroism is founded. The matchlock gun, which represents a legacy of power and protection, also expresses this theme. Handed down for generations, the gun has



been used to keep the family unified and safe from outside attack. Edmonds implies that Edward moves closer to adulthood as a result of his experience with the gun and that he emerges a hero: a ten-yearold who has killed three Native American adults. The author seems to suggest that the instinct to kill for love of family and country, and the desire to conquer the unknown and uncivilized, reflect admirable American qualities. Since the story was published during the United States' involvement in World War II, it seems possible that Edmonds intended to convey a patriotic theme of honoring, defending, and protecting the motherland at all costs.

Topics for Discussion

1. Why does Edward tell Trudy that she talks too much when Trudy mentions that Native Americans, too, must feel cold in the winter?
2. Why doesn't Gertrude allow Edward to take butter to Grandmother Van Alstyne?
3. Why doesn't Teunis Van Alstyne take the Spanish gun with him to war?
4. Why does Edward like the gun so much?
5. What other things might Gertrude have done to protect her family? Do you think she should have brought her children to the brick house of Grandmother Van Alstyne?
6. Find all of the references to blacks and slaves in the story. How do the Van Alstynes view blacks? How is their opinion of blacks similar to their opinion of the Native Americans?



Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. In *The Matchlock Gun*, Native Americans are referred to as "Indians."

Now most "Indians" prefer to be called "Native Americans." Why is this so?

What is the history behind calling these people by the name "Indians"? What other groups have expressed a desire to be identified by names of their own choosing? What is the importance behind a name?

2. In some countries guns are illegal.

Do you think American citizens need guns now? What are the advantages and disadvantages of having guns so readily available? What would happen if guns became illegal in America? What are some of the advantages and disadvantages of gun control laws?

3. Write a story similar to *The Matchlock Gun* but told from the point of view of another character: one of the Native Americans who died, Grandmother Van Alstyne, or Trudy.

4. Read another book written by Walter Edmonds. What kinds of things does Edmonds like to write about? What are the themes Edmonds stresses in his books?

5. Some people feel that "guns made America." In what ways is this true? In what ways have guns destroyed America? In what ways are guns destroying America now? How is the matchlock gun a symbol of American power?

6. In the book, the Dutch settlers are the heroes, and the Native Americans and the French are the enemies. In societies without easily defined enemies, heroism takes a different form. Is it heroic to teach children to view people who are different (whether they are from a different race or class, are physically or mentally disabled, or have different ideas) as equally beautiful, talented human beings?

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