A Series of Unfortunate Events Short Guide

A Series of Unfortunate Events by Lemony Snicket

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Overview

Each book in "A Series of Unfortunate Events" relates one catastrophe after another that occurs to the Baudelaire orphans, Sunny, Klaus, and Violet. In the first book, the children are at the beach one day when they are told that their house burned down, killing their parents. Left to an evil guardian, Count Olaf, they counter his plans to secure their fortune and spend each book thereafter escaping Count Olaf and his dastardly schemes. The Baudelaires lose two guardians to Count Olaf's murderous plots along the way, including the insect scholar, Uncle Monty, and their useless and fearful Aunt Josephine. Things continue to go from bad to worse, as the courageous orphans find themselves laborers in a sawmill, sent off to a cruel boarding school, stuck in the city with another evil guardian, exiled to an isolated village, and camped out in a halffinished hospital. Along the way, the orphans meet one stupid or bad adult after another, like the banker, Mr. Poe, who is supposed to take care of the orphans but fails regularly. The Baudelaires do find friends, including the Quagmire orphans, but they disappear for long periods of time.

To complicate matters, the strange narrator of the series, Lemony Snicket, seems involved in the Baudelaire story somehow.

Life never improves, but the Baudelaires, who are bright, decent, and determined, manage to get out of one thorny situation after another, and finding out how is part of the fun of reading these novels.

About the Author

Daniel Handler, born in San Francisco, California, in 1970, is the creator and alter-ego of Lemony Snicket, the mysterious "author" and narrator of the series recounting the unfortunate lives of the Baudelaire orphans. The wildly imaginative Handler was born in San Francisco, California, and grew up in a quiet neighborhood. His father is an accountant and his mother is a college dean. He attended Wesleyan University in Connecticut where he graduated in 1992. In 1990, Handler won an Academy of American Poets prize, and two years later received an Olin Fellowship that allowed him to write his first novel for adults, The Basic Eight (2000), a story of a satanic cult and murder. Handler also worked for two years as a comedy writer for "The House of Blues Radio Hour," a syndicated radio show in San Francisco, and has written freelance articles for Newsday and the Village Voice in New York.

Handler cites such writers as Carson McCullers, Vladimir Nabokov, and Haruki Murakami as influences on his work as well as children's writers like Roald Dahl and Edward Gorey. Early on he showed a taste for the unusual. After the success of his first novel, The Basic Eight, set in a high school, Handler was asked to write a young adult novel by an editor acquaintance. Handler resisted at first because he thought that so much children's literature was poorly written. However, he relented and reworked an earlier idea of a mock-gothic novel, never expecting it to be a success. The pseudonym, Lemony Snicket, had been a joke for Handler and his friends for some time, since he used it to do research for The Basic Daniel Handler (a.k.a. Lemony Snicket) Eight, contacting right-wing organizations for background for his novel. After the success of the "A Series of Unfortunate Events" books, Handler found himself on New York Times Best-Seller Lists as Lemony Snicket.

Handler continues to add books to his popular series, intending to write a projected thirteen books in the Unfortunate Events series, and appears all over the world to entertain his young readers. He presents himself as a representative for Lemony Snicket who cannot appear because he was bitten in the armpit by a gigantic black bug; he goes on to share the creative humor so evident in his books to the delight of children and adults. Handler works on other projects as well, such as a musical film inspired by the movie The Umbrellas of Cherbourg with his friend Stephin Merritt, songwriter of the group Magnetic Fields.

Handler moved back to San Francisco from New York in 2000 where he now lives with his wife, Lisa Brown.

Setting

Setting is very important in "A Series of Unfortunate Events," almost the other major character, especially given the mock gothic quality of the stories. Like Count Olaf, the setting in each book is antagonistic to the poor Baudelaires. For example, Prufrock Preparatory School, the setting of Book Five The Austere Academy, is a dark, depressing boarding school with buildings shaped like gravestones, a brown lawn, a school motto of "Momento Mori" ("Remember you will die"), and a shack for the children's dormitory. The shack is really bad, moreover, with only hay bales for furniture, infested with hundreds of small crabs, and the ceiling dripping with some nasty fungus. Needless to say, the school is inhabited by horrible teachers and a harsh vice-principal named Nero, final exams are pointless, and students have to go to school on weekends, too. The weird details the author adds make this perhaps the worst boarding school of all time, worse than Jane Eyre or David Copperfield ever had to endure. Still, the Baudelaires manage to overcome their circumstances.

Setting reinforces plot in this series, and hyperbole is as much part of the portrayal of setting as it is the plot. Each book could be titled, "How bad is it?" In The Miserable Mill, for instance, the unlucky orphans have to work and live in the Lucky Smells Lumbermill in the dull town of Paltryville.

The dormitory here has no windows, although someone tried to draw windows on the gray cement walls with a ballpoint pen, it smells damp, the food is damp, fellow employees are covered in sawdust, and the orphans all have to sleep in one bunk. The foreman is cruel, the work long and dangerous, and the outlook hopeless. The nasty Count Olaf shows up, of course, and the situation becomes truly desperate.

Other wretched settings include a dark city apartment to which the orphans have to walk up countless flights of stairs, a wobbly house on stilts that leans over Lake Lachrymose, a town in the middle of nowhere overrun by crows, and a half-finished hospital with no shelter from the elements. Darkness, creepiness, and discomfort characterize all the settings of "A Series of Unfortunate Events." The settings, from a brooding boarding school to a huge confusing hospital, are child-unfriendly. Furthermore, the time of the settings is strangely unspecific. Events happen in contemporary times with cars and computers. Yet, the stories almost seem to be happening in the nineteenth century, too; no one watches television or has cellular phones, and no one makes reference to any aspect of current pop culture. The children even walk a great deal to get from one place to another.

The gothic gloom also makes the time of the settings uncertain. All the settings are described in compelling ways, however, and nothing completely defeats the long-suffering orphans. To read about these settings is like attending a carnival with frightening rides and hair-raising side shows— awful, but fun.

Social Sensitivity

Specific social issues and the real perils of young adults are of no concern in "A Series of Unfortunate Events." The universal foibles of humankind are the target of black humor and exaggeration as well as traditional literary conventions. Still, the harshness of events, characters, and settings are not for very young children who would miss the humor. In fact, one school in Decatur, Georgia, banned the series for including the word "damn" once and for the possibility of Count Olaf marrying Violet in the first book. This darkly mirthful series is generally subversive without taking on issues like drugs or race or using harsh language. The world created by Handler is not the "real world."

Literary Qualities

On one level, this series is merely a group of crazy, suspenseful adventure stories with young protagonists. On another level, Daniel Handler demonstrates himself to be a twisted, self-aware twenty-first century Dickens, as concerned about the process of storytelling as the story itself. Given that second level, perhaps the most important aspect of "A Series of Unfortunate Events" is its literary qualities. The author is clearly playing with language and literary conventions. Irony and satire are typical throughout the narratives, the narrator—Lemony Snicket—is highly unreliable, the reader cannot help but notice all kinds of word play, wildly imaginative descriptions remind the readers that the stories are literature, and the books even bring attention to themselves as books. With this series, perhaps young adult literature goes postmodern.

"A Series of Unfortunate Events" overflows with irony. The first irony is, of course, the narrator's continuing warnings not to read the books at all because the stories are so grim. Still, Lemony Snicket keeps churning out stories and readers keep reading them.

Then, the adults in the stories are never aware, as the orphans and readers are, that terrible dangers surround the Baudelaires.

Count Olaf, for example, shows up in some ridiculous disguise in every story, and no one but the orphans can tell. Other ironies enter, too, but perhaps the greatest irony is that "A Series of Unfortunate Events" is an anti-formulaic series of what seem to be formulaic melodramas. The plot is essentially the same is each book, but the entertainment comes in discovering the new details, the ways the plot unfolds, and the moral of the story—which never comes at all. The author is being ironic with the conventions of the typical Victorian novel: poor orphans, eccentric supporting characters, dire events, one coincidence after another, and didactic children's literature.

Handler includes a good deal of satire as well as irony. He manages to make fun of newspapers, like The Daily Punctilio that never has the facts correct; bureaucracy, with an endless series of misinformed managers and silly rules; and being "cool," with the characters of Esme and Jerome Squalor who daily change their furniture, clothing, or whatever to mirror what is "in" and what is "out." Cliches are regularly blasted such as the idea that "it takes a village to raise a child." The Vile Village takes that notion to its extremes when the Baudelaires become the wards of an unsympathetic village in which town meetings decide the fate of the unloved orphans. Sometimes the narrator is the source of the satire as he makes fun of conventional wisdom and literary conventions alike. In The Vile Village, for instance, he says, "The quoting of an aphorism, like the angry barking of a dog or the smell of overcooked broccoli, rarely indicates that something helpful is about to happen." Other objects of satire are mindlessly cheerful volunteers in hospitals, the paranoid academic world, and crowd psychology. Plenty of human foolishness exists in these books.

One of the most suspect "characters" in the series is the alleged narrator, Lemony Snicket. Point of view has become a major device in literature in the last century, and

the point of view here is as unusual as the stories and characters. Lemony Snicket is a most unreliable narrator who digresses into his own life story and personal troubles, and who turns common sense and common expressions on their heads. For instance, he says in The Hostile Hospital, "Of all the ridiculous expressions people use—and people use a great many ridiculous expressions— one of the most ridiculous is 'No news is good news.'" He goes on to explain why the expression should be that "no news is no news." His dramatic notes to the editor at the end of each book point out the silliness of artificial literary devices that allow a series to continue. When even the book's narrator is a source of comedy, the book may be targeting traditional bookishness itself.

Handler consciously uses language, too, as a source of fun. The books include a multitude of puns, anagrams, allusions to pop culture and other literature, alliterative titles, and even silly doggerel like the following verse sung by the Volunteers Fighting Disease in the eighth book:

We visit people who are sick,
And try to make them smile,
Even if their noses bleed,
Or if they cough up bile.

Much of the humor is black humor, obviously, but its slightly perverse edge makes it all the more entertaining.

One of the most amusing language tricks, to be enjoyed by older readers, is the allusions to literature and art. For instance, the orphans are named the Baudelaires, and Charles Baudelaire was a nineteenth-century French writer whose major work of poetry was translated into English as the Flowers of Evil. Plenty of evil comes to the orphans, including the oldest, the inventor, Violet (a flower). Moreover, Baudelaire was a translator of Edgar Allen Poe, and the banker in charge of the orphans is the awful, coughing Mr. Poe. The names of the Quagmire triplets (one of whom died and so is not present) are Isadora and Duncan. Isadora Duncan was a famous expressive dancer with a tragic personal life. Sometimes the allusions are just that, like the name on a patient list, Emma Bovary. Sometimes, the allusions take on pop culture, like Klaus and Sunny Baudelaire; Klaus von Bulow, accused of the attempted murder of his wife Sunny, was involved in a famous court case several years ago about which a movie was made. Everything from high art to pop culture is fair game.

Names in "A Series of Unfortunate Events" are never innocent or accidental from the Damocles Dock in The Wide Window to Cafe Salmonella in The Ersatz Elevator. Other comedy with language includes the translations of Sunny's baby talk which becomes more advanced in each book. At first Sunny can only articulate nonsense syllables, but she says actual words later. These expressions may also be allusions as in The Hostile Hospital in which the orphans are talking about Count Olaf's mean assistants including one of indeterminate gender. "'Orlando!' Sunny said, which meant 'Or the one who looks like neither a man nor a woman.'" Here is a reference to another literary work by Virginia Woolf. Sometimes, the translations of Sunny's speech are plain silly as when in The

Reptile Room Sunny says "Jose!" which means something like "No way!" Occasionally, the word choice is just incongruous as when Hector, the children's friend in The Vile Village, allows them to stay with him and fixes them chicken enchiladas, a very un-orphan dish. Now and then, the author even throws in a neologism like "cranioectomy" in The Hostile Hospital in which Count Olaf is planning to cut off Violet's head. Word play abounds throughout "A Series of Unfortunate Events."

Unusual and imaginative descriptions add to the literary quality of the series and remind the reader that the world described here is not quite real. Pictures of large eyes, like that tatooed on Count Olaf's ankle, show up in odd places; hundreds of dreadful leeches attack people on Lake Lachrymose; and a whole library may have only three books. In The Vile Village as they walk towards the town, V. F. D., where they are supposed to live, the Baudelaires notice that everything from a distance seems to be pitch black and trembling slightly. Then the orphans discover why in the following passage: The town was covered in crows. Nearly every inch of nearly every object had a large black bird roosting on it and casting a suspicious eye on the children as they stood at the very edge of the village. There were crows sitting on the roofs of all buildings, perching on the windowsills, and squatting on the steps and on the sidewalks. Crows were covering all the trees, from the very top branches to the roots poking out of the crow-covered ground, and were gathered in large groups on the streets for crow conversations. Crows were covering the lampposts and flagpoles, and there were crows lying down in gutters and resting between fence posts.

Vivid images emerge from the author's descriptive powers.

Finally, even the books, as objects, draw attention to themselves as books. Each book is smallish and bound in a dark color as if a very serious tome, with equally dark illustrations on the front. They look like Victorian children's books one might find in an antique shop. A nameplate is printed on the inside cover, and each book is dedicated by Lemony Snicket to his mysterious lost love, Beatrice. For example in The Miserable Mill, the dedication reads:

To Beatrice—
My love flew like a butterfly
Until death swooped down like a bat
As the poet Emma Montan McElroy said:

"That's the end of that."

Also, the illustrations by Brett Helquist seem old-fashioned with Violet in a long burgandy dress, Klaus with a bow tie, and gothic arches in the background. Then one looks carefully and notices a baby biting a snake or a snowman that looks like a skeleton in winter clothes. A children's illustrator from a mad house might be an apt description for Helquist. These books offer the unexpected.

Clearly, the literary qualities of "A Series of Unfortunate Events" demonstrate an appeal to all ages of readers, from the early adolescent to the college professor. Like a number of contemporary cartoons such as The Simpsons, these stories in the format of children's literature subvert traditional ideas of the genre and work on several levels. The characters, settings, and plots are vivid if somewhat surreal. The language is engaging in many ways. Finally, the books are suspenseful, imaginative, and very funny.

Themes and Characters

As books written largely to entertain, the series does not offer particularly profound characters or complex themes. Most of the characters are caricatures, created to propel the plot or to entertain. Only the Baudelaire orphans come close to being fully human and somewhat believable. On the whole, characters simply allow the author to have fun. For example, the villain Count Olaf is an antagonist right out of a melodrama; he has no redeeming qualities. On top of pursuing the orphans relentlessly, Count Olaf has no eyebrows, a dirty house, no taste in theater, and his disguises are always apparent. His awfulness is a continuing tale itself.

The supporting characters, most of whom are dim-witted adults, are likewise flat but amusing. For example, the orphans encounter the honest and concerned Hector in The Vile Village, but he is too shy and humble to speak up for the children. Hal, the head of the Library of Records in The Hostile Hospital, is well-meaning but he cannot see very well and he thinks the worst of the Baudelaires. Only children seem to have a clue; the Quagmire orphans turn out to be good friends, for instance, but they vanish for a long time. The orphans must save themselves again and again, a wonderful childhood fantasy of control over one's life.

The Baudelaires are hardly realistic characters, but they are the most real and engaging characters, and they can carry the stories. Sunny, the baby, has four extremely sharp teeth which often turn out to be needed in various disasters; she likes to bite. She also seems to be developing an ironic sense of humor as the books continue. Sunny is a brave and capable toddler, as well. Klaus, a little over twelve when the series begins, wears glasses, likes to explore, and loves to read more than anything. Klaus is also brave and well mannered. Violet, at fourteen the oldest Baudelaire, has a knack for inventing. When she ties her long hair in a ribbon, she is thinking about some invention. Violet is courageous, and she feels responsible for taking care of her younger siblings.

Lemony Snicket describes the Baudelaires as intelligent, charming, and resourceful, noting that they have "pleasant facial features." They are so good they might not be sympathetic except, of course, so many awful things happen to them.

The Baudelaires, fortunately, are not perfect. They get mad at one another on occasion; they feel sad, worried, and disappointed often; and they learn to do things that are not nice in order to save themselves. They try to discover the mystery of their parents' death and their own place in life, too. If there is a theme in "A Series of Unfortunate Events," it might be sibling love. The one continuing stronghold in the orphans' lives is their love and concern for one another. They never leave each other in a lurch, going to extremes to rescue one another, and they always communicate and work well together. They admire the strengths of each sibling, and they are bound by memories of a happy life before their house burned down. Love for one's brothers and sisters is the one enduring, positive aspect of life in these stories.

As previously noted, no good adult role models emerge from "A Series of Unfortunate Events." Another theme, then, could be the foolishness of adult society, characterized by greed, deceit, cowardice, and pretense. Adults are certainly the objects of the author's satire. The adults fail to listen to the children, assuming that the orphans do not understand or are bad children, but they seldom seem to understand the situation themselves. Handler makes no attempt to portray a basically safe adult world in which the good guys win and everything turns out happy and just at the end. Handler's dark world is created for laughs, of course, but criticism of the adult world is also explicit. Children may see the truth better than adults.

Topics for Discussion

1. Which is your favorite book and why? 2. Who do you think is Lemony Snicket, and how is he related to the Baudelaires' lives? What are your impressions of this narrator? Is he trustworthy?

3. The Baudelaire orphans become good friends with the Quagmire orphans in The Austere Academy. Why? What do they have in common?

4. Compare and contrast the characters of the Baudelaire orphans, Sunny, Klaus, and Violet. Do they seem believable to you? Why or why not?

5. Adults continue to let down the Baudelaires. Choose three or four adult characters (like Aunt Josephine and Mr. Poe) and tell how they disappoint the orphans.

6. The narrator likes to explain the meanings of words in these stories. Make a list of eight to ten words that were new, or unusual, to you in the stories, and give their dictionary definitions.

7. Setting is very important in these stories. Describe the setting of one of thebooks. How would the story be different if the setting had been different? How does the setting contribute to the events in the orphans' lives?

8. There is a good deal of irony in these books. Define irony, and give two or three examples from the books.

9. A reader can find a number of literary allusions in these books. What is an allusion? Give three or four examples of literary allusions from "A Series of Unfortunate Events."

10. Names are important in "A Series of Unfortunate Events," like the address of their new guardians on 667 Dark Avenue; the apartment is indeed dark. Discuss the implications of the following names: the Squalors, the Quagmires, Lake Lachrymose, Curdled Cave, Captain Sham, Paltryville, and Last Chance General Store, and Heimlich Hospital.

11. There is a good deal of satire in the series, also. Define satire, and give two or three examples from the stories. Where else might you run into satire besides in a book? Give an example.

12. Count Olaf is really, really bad. Do you find him and his henchman frightening, too? Why or why not?

13. The descriptions in the books are often vivid and imaginative. Give two or three examples of descriptions that strike you, and tell why.

14. Predict how the series will end, and explain why your ending would be an appropriate one.

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Often, the Baudelaires end up doing adult work like keeping house for Count Olaf or working at the sawmill. Children used to do such work. Research the history of child labor. When and where did laws come into place limiting children working? Why? Does child labor still exist in some places in the world?

2. Find out how one would become a herpetologist (like Uncle Monty in the second book). What training would it take, and what kind of work would a herpetologist do?

3. The Baudelaires learn to cook puttanesca sauce in the first book. Find a recipe you would like to make, and write it down. If you can, try it out, and report how it went. See if you can find a cookbook for children, and tell about it.

4. Klaus becomes hypnotized in The Miserable Mill. Do a report on hypnosis, what it is, its history, its limitations, and how it can be used today. Is hypnosis real or just something you would see in a movie?

5. Are there really surgery theaters as in The Hostile Hospital? What are they used for? Have you ever been to a hospital? If so, what was it like? How are hospitals organized?

6. Find out whatever you can on the author Daniel Handler, and write a report.

7. In The Ersatz Elevator the author makes fun of the Squalors for being so worried about what is "in" and what is "out." Do real people worry about such things, and why? Take a survey of your peers to find out what is "in" and what is "out." Why is being fashionable so important in today's society?

8. In The Vile Village, the Quagmires escape in a hot air balloon. Write a history of ballooning, and find out where, why, and how people fly balloons today.

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Related Web Sites

Lemony Snicket Web Site http://www.lemonysnicket.com. March 29, 2002. This Web site offers more information about Lemony Snicket, book descriptions, information on the illustrator, and even games to play.

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