



Living Rough

Cristy Watson

Reading Level: 2.5

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Book Summary

In most ways, Edgar is like the other kids in his school. He thinks about girls and tries to avoid too much contact with teachers. He has a loving father who helps him with his homework. But Edgar has a secret, and almost every day some small act threatens to expose him. He doesn't have a phone number to give to friends. He doesn't have an address. Edgar and his father are living in a tent on city land. When the city clears the land to build housing, he worries that they might not be able to find another site near his school. Will Edgar have to expose his secret to get help for himself and his father?

Author Biography

Cristy Watson is a teacher who loves reading and writing poetry and YA novels. She was born in Calgary, Alberta, and has lived in San Francisco, Kamloops and North Vancouver, and now resides happily near the beach in sunny White Rock, British Columbia. Cristy hosts open-mike readings at her local coffee shop and likes to enter writing contests, especially ones where there is a challenging time limit. *Living Rough* is Cristy's second novel in the Orca Currents series (the first was *Benched*).

Connecting to the Text

Character and Point of View

1. Ask students to reflect on the way Edgar (Poe) describes his dad in chapter 5. As a group, read the following quotes aloud. Then lead a discussion, asking how Edgar feels about his dad. Does he blame his dad? Could Edgar be more supportive? Has Edgar lost confidence in his dad?
 - ♦ *Trees crashed to the ground...Amazingly, [Dad] was still asleep. Sleeping was something he was good at.*
 - ♦ *He had gone from trying to find a job to trying to find money for food.*
 - ♦ *He used to be strong, but now he was a rack of bones.*
2. Edgar's dad is unemployed, and he and Edgar are homeless and living in a tent on city land. As the novel's title suggests, they are living rough. Edgar thinks his father is pretending nothing is wrong. In chapter 5, Edgar says, "My dad had this delusion that things were all right. He thought that if we acted as if everything were normal, it wouldn't matter where we were." Through journal writing or active role-play, ask students to consider the situation from both sides: Edgar and his dad. Questions to use for prompts:
 - ♦ Is Edgar's dad really "pretending" everything is okay, or do you think he knows they're in a bad predicament and he wants to make life easier for Edgar?
 - ♦ Could Edgar's dad's actions (playing cards, picking up library books for Edgar and talking about their "temporary situation") be a way for him to cope during a very difficult situation?
 - ♦ How much does pride or shame play a role in how Edgar and his dad deal with their situation? Could it be that they are too proud to ask for help? Consider that Edgar said his dad would "flip if he saw me asking for a handout" (chapter 11).

Theme

Perhaps to Edgar's surprise, Ben sees Edgar as strong and not a loser. Ben says, "I can't imagine how you've been living in a tent all this time...and through the winter too? Man, you and your dad must be strong. I couldn't do that" (chapter 13).

As a writing exercise, ask students to reflect on a key theme in *Living Rough*, describing Edgar's experience as well as providing their own thoughts and opinions. Encourage students to incorporate quotations from the novel in their responses. Ideas to get students started are below.

- Sometimes a difficult situation can build personal character and make us stronger and more resilient. And sometimes it can break us. Consider what Ben said in chapter 13: "You've got to look at this like one of those Greek tragedies. The kind where the hero undergoes a bunch of trials." How do Edgar and his dad see their situation, before they're discovered and after?

- It can be hard to ask for help if we feel shame or embarrassment about a situation we feel we're stuck with. Consider that Ben said, in chapter 13, "I really didn't know. I would have helped." How does Edgar feel, before and after his secret is discovered? How does that affect his actions?
- Paul said that homeless people "don't count" and "half of them are crackheads" (chapter 8). What would make Paul feel that way? What might change his prejudices?

The Writer's Craft

There are many examples of the author building suspense in early chapters of *Living Rough*. Ask students to identify one example from each of chapters 1, 2 and 3, and explain if and how it helped them engage with the character Edgar or piqued their interest in what might happen next. Here are some examples:

- (ch. 1) *Something he said made me panic. I looked up. He was staring straight at me. Did he know my secret?*
- (ch. 2) *I wasn't worried that Mr. J. knew what was really going on—he wasn't too good at noticing the signs. His comments today were probably about the bullying he saw today. But still...*
- (ch. 3) *I have to admit, the sandwich filled a void that was getting bigger and bigger every day.*

Connecting to the Curriculum

Citizenship

In chapter 14, Edgar tells the TV reporter that there aren't any shelters for a father and son, and they didn't want to be separated. That was part of the reason they lived in a tent. Edgar also explained that "bad stuff happens" and they didn't choose to be homeless.

- As a research project, invite students to find out about resources that are available in your community for homeless people. Are there enough for all who need them? What do shelters or outreach programs need most to provide help to homeless people? How can students in the community help out?

Language Arts

1. In *Living Rough*, characters use different words to describe themselves and the people in their lives. Encourage students to list these words as they read the novel, and write a sentence for each that explains how the speaking character feels about the person they're describing. For example, what can we tell about Edgar by the words he chooses in the quotations below?

- (ch. 1) "loser poor kids" (describing himself in the school's morning meal program)
- (ch. 1) "a keener" (describing kids in student council)
- (ch. 4) "another privileged *jerk*" (describing the man in the store who took two cups)

2. At the end of *Living Rough*, Edgar has to decide whether to live with Inna's family or Ben's. As a creative writing exercise, invite students to imagine that Edgar has chosen one of the families and is writing in his diary or journal two months after the events in the book. How is Edgar? How is his dad? What's it been like for Edgar to live in a house with another family?

Connecting to the Students—Ideas for Exploration

1. Edgar has a habit of counting things. He counts how many days in a row it has rained, the number of linoleum squares from the school breakfast room to the office and the pace of his own breathing. In chapter 1 he says, "Counting helps my nerves to chill."
 - ♦ Ask students what methods they use to calm themselves, and then share their methods in a group discussion. Some examples could include deep breathing, journaling or talking it out with family or friends.
 - ♦ Challenge students to research and try out a calming technique they've never used before, such as yoga or creative visualization.
2. Theo calls Edgar a "cave dweller" and Edgar describes himself as a loser. He is homeless, hungry most of the time and struggling to keep his situation secret. Luckily, he eventually gets "discovered" and Edgar and his dad get the help they need.
 - ♦ If Edgar was a student in your school, what resources would be available to him and his dad? Who could he talk to? If a friend of yours was homeless and hungry, what would you do to help?

Web Resources

National Coalition for the Homeless

www.nationalhomeless.org/factsheets/index.html

Video clips on homelessness and children. (Please preview to ensure content is appropriate for your class.)

http://center.serve.org/nche/ibt/aw_video.php