

TEACHER'S NOTES FOR *FLITTERWIG*

Written by Edrei Cullen

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EDREI CULLEN was born in Glasgow. When she was five, her family moved first onto a motor yacht and later a cargo ship and sailed the Mediterranean. She lived with her younger sisters, two teenage cousins, her uncle, her parents and an ever-changing crew. Edrei (pronounced ee-dree) and her sisters were home schooled primarily by her mother. During a gale, the ship took shelter in a Spanish port and the family settled there.

When Edrei was eleven her mother thought it was time for the children to be socialised. Edrei and one of her sisters were sent to boarding school in England. Edrei hated boarding school. To cope, she told herself stories in bed at night, inventing the Magicals, little creatures that got up to all sorts of things.

Years later at London University, Edrei studied French and Italian language and literature. This is where she began to write down her tales of the Magicals.

In London, Edrei met and married an Australian man. They now run a music management business in Sydney, representing a number of respected and successful Australian musicians. Edrei has two daughters. They are the ones who encouraged her to try to get the stories about the Magicals made into a book.

SYNOPSIS

Ella has always felt different to other people. She has floating, out-of-control hair, pointed ears, gangly limbs and skin so pale it seems almost see-through. Ever since her mother and brothers died in a car accident, she has been hidden away with her grandparents, her governess and their driver. Her father can't bear to lay his eyes on her.

One night, a package is delivered for Ella. Inside she finds a pair of red-rimmed spectacles. When she puts them on, her eyes are opened to a world she didn't know existed. It's full of pixies, goblins, elves, imps, Ponkaluckas and Troggles. And Ella is a part of it. She is a Flitterwig – a human with magical blood.

A talkative goblin named Wrinkles informs Ella that the Sacred Dewdrops have fled, their trust in the Rulers having been broken because they have been stolen from

Magus – the world of pure magic – by the evil Duke. Without the Dewdrops, Magus is doomed. The Magusian Tomes prophesy that a Flitterwig known as the Clearheart can return the Dewdrops to the good Ruler and save the Magicals. And the Magicals believe that Ella is the Clearheart.

Although she feels like she's imagining things, Ella is soon swept up in the adventure. Learning about magic as she goes, she confronts many dangers, from the machine-loving Duke, to bands of sugar-addicted, smelly Troggles. Luckily she has the help of friends like the pixie Dixon, Mr P, Manna, and her neighbour Charlie Snoppit. But her greatest asset is her clear heart, which helps her make decisions based on love. With it alone she wins back the trust of the Dewdrops and saves Magus and all the Magicals.

WRITING *FLITTERWIG*

Edrei Cullen's first novel *Flitterwig* has grown out of the stories of magical creatures she has been telling herself at least since the age of eleven. When her daughters were very small, Edrei began telling them stories of the Magicals to lull them to sleep. She jotted down what happened in the stories in notebooks and wrote some of them out in full.

Edrei kept her stories shut away in a trunk. Over the years she had taken various writing courses, but her wildly imaginative stories hadn't received much acceptance or encouragement. However, Edrei's eight-year-old daughter Daisy told her that she had a friend whose mum was a publisher. Daisy suggested that Edrei talk to someone like her friend's mum, 'because they make books happen,' explaining that 'Words belong in books, not trunks.'

Edrei took Daisy's advice and began to concentrate on writing a novel. She says that, 'The day I started writing *Flitterwig* seriously, it dawned on me that writing for children was a voice I inhabited naturally. I wasn't a *bad* writer, as I had imagined, it was just that my writing had a tone and feeling that sat comfortably in children's stories. That was a wonderfully liberating moment.'

With two children to care for and a business to run, Edrei mostly wrote at night when everyone was asleep. She says that, 'While it was tiring, I love writing, so it was something I did for myself.' Her main characters, Ella and Dixon, were already well

defined in her mind and as she wrote ‘the characters and the magical features must have appeared out of my past memories all by themselves.’ Ella was, in Edrei’s words, ‘a lonely little girl with skinny ankles and elf blood, who spent time in lollipop factories and undertook spectacular adventures with a pixie.’ While Edrei recognises elements of herself and her sisters in her Flitterwig character, she says ‘Ella is her own person’.

The original stories, ‘The Magical Adventures of Ella and Dixon’, were short stand-alone tales that were suited to a bedtime telling. Now Edrei had the task of creating one longer, coherent story. She went away for a week to write on her own and the fragments finally came together. While writing this first draft, she found she had to be disciplined and not use every idea that popped into her head. She also began to see the possibilities of a magical kingdom with a history and the Flitterwig Rooniun on Earth, and of a series of books based on these ideas.

This first draft of the story was accepted, and Edrei’s publisher helped her develop her ideas, weaving a back-story that would allow many possibilities in future stories. On her next two drafts, Edrei worked on developing the ‘other world’ she had created. Her publisher helped by making her ‘write a short synopsis of each chapter and then stick to what was in the plan.’

Copyright issues demanded the fourth rewrite. Edrei explains that, ‘the plot of *Flitterwig* was loosely hung around a song my father used to sing to me that encouraged seeing the magic in the world – dancing, loving, laughing, dreaming. Unfortunately, when I asked for permission to use the lyrics in the story, the owners of the copyright told me I could only do so if they pretty much owned the rights to the book. So any reference to the song had to go.’

The final draft was made with the input of her editor. Edrei feels that being edited made her ‘a more organised, succinct writer.’ She says, ‘While I was caught up in the wind of the story, flying along, my editor battened down the hatches and reeled me in.’

While being edited tamed Edrei’s story, the wild playfulness remains. In a large part this is due to Edrei’s love of playing with words: Dixon tags rhyming words onto nearly everything he says, there are lots of invented words such as ‘stretchify’ and ‘pollucification’, and there are many unusual names of features in the Magicals’ world, such as Troggles, Ponkaluckas and Geograpixies. Edrei says that for her there is a ‘sense

of freedom in invention for the pure pleasure of sound and the visual treat of something that has meaning but is new to the eye.'

The main things Edrei hopes her readers get from *Flitterwig* is this sense of fun and that they enjoy the characters. She hopes it makes children who feel they are in some way outsiders feel 'a little more special'. She also thinks that perhaps by 'wrapping up our innate connection with nature in a story about a little girl and a pixie' readers will get a sense of the natural environment's importance, though she certainly wants this message to reach them 'by experience and osmosis, rather than by dictation'.

Edrei is currently working on the next *Flitterwig* story.

DISCUSSION POINTS AND ACTIVITIES

1. As students read the book in sections, discuss the events of the story, the characters and how their attitudes change as they face new situations.
2. How does Ella feel about herself at the beginning of the story? How have her feelings changed by the end? Why does she feel better about herself?
3. How does the author use words to make the characters seem different to other people (Ella), scary (the Duke), silly and harmless (Dixon), unpleasant (Mrs Dribbleton-Faucet), or friendly (Mr P)?
4. Talk about the character's motives. Why does the Duke want to control the Dewdrops? Why does the Queen want to stop him? Why does Charlie do as the Duke says at first? Why does Ella want to help the Queen?
5. We see different parts of the story from different characters' points of view. How does this help us understand the reasons why they do things? Are some characters' points of view left out? Choose a scene and write it from another character's point of view.
6. How does pollution affect the Magicals? How does too much sugar affect them? What is the author saying about pollution and eating too much unhealthy food?
7. There are lots of made up words in *Flitterwig*. Have students make up a new kind of nice, naughty or nasty Magical. What special qualities does this Magical have? Make up a short story about this Magical and make a portrait of one of them.

8. Have fun making models or costumes for different Magicals from odds-and-ends materials. Use them to act out part of the story.