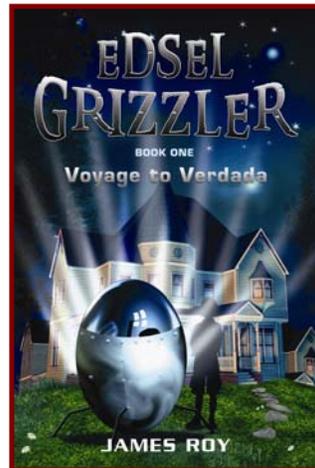


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# EDSEL GRIZZLER:

## Voyage to Verdada

### James Roy



## Teachers' Notes

Written by a Middle School Teacher-Librarian

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**SYNOPSIS**

*Edsel Grizzler: Voyage to Verdada* is the first book in a new series for 8-12 year olds. Edsel is an unusual boy who has never felt akin to his overly protective and embarrassing parents. His only friend is Pete who works at Edsel's favourite junk shop where he finds a curious, egg-shaped object.

The object turns out to be a spaceship that transports Edsel to the seemingly Utopian Verdada. Once in Verdada, Edsel is forced to choose between staying permanently where he has finally made friends his own age, has unlimited food and shelter as well as what appears to be a lot of freedom, or returning home. Tempted by the promise of being awarded his Heart's Greatest Desire if he stays, Edsel decides to sacrifice his earthly life to live in Verdada where he will be, 'forever young in a place of forever fun'.

Edsel quickly discovers, however, that Verdada is controlled by the Mira and is perhaps not the perfect world it at first appears. He finds that parts of the landscape are fake. He also discovers that he is adopted, hence his feelings of disconnectedness from his parents. When he learns that his parents lost a baby son several years earlier, Edsel suddenly realises the terrible mistake he has made by staying in Verdada. He sets out to find a way to return home.

It is his new best friend from Verdada, Jacq, who helps Edsel return to Earth. She volunteers to end her earthly life and be sent away from Verdada to allow Edsel his passage home.

**THEMES****Relationships:**

- Edsel finds it difficult to make friends. He is teased and bullied at school.
- Edsel is embarrassed by his overly protective parents. His greatest desire is to be allowed to do normal, everyday activities – surfing, swimming in the ocean, skate boarding – all of which his parents have never let him do.
- When in Verdada, Edsel seems to find his niche. He makes friends easily and is uninhibited by his parents' over-protective ways. He feels free.
- Edsel makes his first best friend, Jacq. It is Jacq who ultimately saves Edsel by sacrificing her own life.
- Edsel realises he is adopted. He also discovers his adoptive parents lost a baby son. This helps him to reassess what family really is.

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**Acceptance:**

- Edsel finally accepts his parents.

**Euthanasia:**

- Jacq decides to give away her life on Earth where she lies in a coma so that Edsel can return home.

**Family:**

- Families are more than flesh and blood.
- Families make mistakes. They also make decisions based on protecting their loved ones.

**Temptation:**

- Edsel is tempted by the lure of his Heart's Greatest Desire. He sacrifices his earthly life to be granted this wish.

**WRITING STYLE**

*Edsel Grizzler* is written in third person, past tense. The parallel dimension, Verdada, introduces younger readers to science fiction/fantasy elements. It includes vocabulary specific to Verdada. The language is appropriate to the intended age level of the audience.

**STUDY NOTES**

- Before reading, examine the book's cover. What genre is this? What clues are there? What might this book be about?
- Choose a character from the book on whom to create a character profile such as Edsel, Kenny, Ben or Jacq. Brainstorm everything you know about them including their likes and dislikes, fears, characteristics, appearance, strengths, weaknesses etc. Present your profile using Microsoft Word.
- Either make a map or paint / draw a scene of Verdada. Include key elements such as the beach, forest, roller coasters, the Domus etc.
- Draw caricatures of Edsel's parents, Barry and Tilda, using their descriptions on p2-3 as a guide.
- Mr Sullivan, the school principal, asks the students to write a composition entitled, "If only ..." Write your own response to this task.

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- Read picture books such as *Just Another Ordinary Day* by Rod Clement, *When Henry Caught Imaginitis* by Nick Bland or *Imagine A Day* by Sarah L Thomson to provide stimulus for this task.
- Design a blueprint, then make a model of your own spaceship. Be sure to evaluate your design and suggest possible improvements to your design where appropriate.
- On an A3 page, draw a line diagonally from one corner to the other. In one half, describe West Malaise, in the other half, describe Verdada. Use words and images to compare these two worlds.
- Verdada is depicted as a type of Utopia, although turns out to be in many ways dystopian. Discuss these concepts.
- Watch the film *The Truman Show* and compare *Edsel Grizzler: Voyage to Verdada* with the film. Comparisons could take the form of a table, a mind map, a compare / contrast paragraph or short essay.
- If you were given the chance to be granted your Heart's Greatest Desire, what would it be? Why would you choose this? Remember that in Verdada, this request would also mean you'd never see your family and friends again. Is the granting of this desire worth the sacrifice? Discuss.
- Edsel chooses very quickly to stay in Verdada. Why does he make this decision so quickly?
- He soon changes his mind but it's too late. Why does he change his mind?
- Would you like to be 'forever young in a place of forever fun'?
  - Use De Bono's *6 Thinking Hats* to assess this fully.
  - Use the concepts of Barrie's Neverland and *The Lost Boys from Peter Pan* to help also.
  - Write a journal entry to express your opinion on this topic, explaining the various sides of the issue.
- The themes of temptation and sacrifice are present in this novel. List as many examples of both temptation and sacrifice that you can think of in the text, incorporating ideas from both West Malaise and Verdada.
- In Verdada, wind turbines generate electricity. Investigate wind energy. Draw diagrams or make models to demonstrate how wind power works.

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- Create a glossary of terms unique to Verdada. Think about the terms used in the text to include in the glossary such as Mira, Domus, Charter etc.
- What is the difference between homesickness and heresickness? Explain.
- How does Edsel's character change or develop from the beginning to the end of the novel? What events have brought on any such changes?
- How would you define the word 'family'? Is it only flesh and blood or is it more than that? Why does it take Edsel so long to feel a connectedness to his parents?
- Jacq selflessly sacrifices her earthly life to allow Edsel to return home. Why has she done this? Should she have done this? Does this raise ethical dilemmas?
- Discuss Euthanasia. Consider the role that Euthanasia plays in the novel. Debate this issue. De Bono's *6 Thinking Hats* would be a useful tool to use.

**AUTHOR MOTIVATION****About the Book:**

The book follows a pretty classical three-act structure. The problem I faced was that the first section was written some time ago, and was quite surreal, verging on caricature. But when the time came to take Edsel to Verdada, I began to see a slightly darker element emerging - the idea that a Utopia might in fact be hugely artificial, and have a far darker purpose, as well as underlying 'rules of engagement' that would change the way a young person might look at that world. So I had to bring the surreal back a few notches.

I was also interested in the idea of spending one's life trying to attain something wonderful and fanciful and ideal, when in fact everything we need to be happy (family, friendship, understanding) is quite often already in our lives. I think there's something terribly sad about people who spend their entire life looking for happiness when it's right under their noses.

One of my favourite ways of looking at characters in stories - both as a reader and as a writer - is to ask the main character WHAT THEY WANT. In Edsel's case it's freedom, as well as friendship. The writer's job is then to make it as difficult as possible for the character to achieve what they want. And of course, the pursuit of those desires will, in most cases, cause the character to change. I think this would be an interesting discussion point for students, to look at Edsel's character, both in terms of the conflict/complications he faces, and his 'character arc'.

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**Where did the concept of Verdada and all that it entails come from?**

The first part of the story had been rattling around in my head for over ten years – the idea of a quirky boy who discovers a mysterious inter-dimensional pod/portal. But that was as far as the story went. But then, in my usual way, I simply forced myself to launch into the story and 'follow my nose'. What I ended up with was something of a classic three-act structure but, ironically, the first act, despite being set in the real world, felt too surreal, almost cartoonish, whereas Verdada was a rather more austere, soul-less kind of place, despite its pretense of being 'A Place of Forever Fun'. So I had to make Edsel a rather more sad, lonely kind of individual than he'd originally been.

I also think there's a bit of a fable going on, speaking to this idea of reality and artificiality. There might even be a touch of humanism. I find the idea of people disregarding the wonder and joy of being in the present while they look for something better quite sad. I don't think life is a dress rehearsal.

**Your hero Edsel faces a difficult choice, and suffers the consequences of choosing too quickly. What messages are there for readers about signing up for a 'sure thing' before reading the fine print?**

I find the word 'message' suggestive of some kind of agenda, which young readers despise. Having said that, if a kid was to read my book and, as a result, begin to think about how they can find joy in the everyday, that wouldn't be a bad thing.

***Voyage to Verdada* sits comfortably alongside *Alice in Wonderland*, or even *The Wizard of Oz*, where the simple pleasures of home outweigh the excitement of the discovered world. Were you thinking of the 'stranger in a strange land' scenario when you wrote the novel?**

I think that all good stories put characters in different 'worlds'. Harry Potter and the Narnia books are obvious examples. But in some ways, 'realistic' books deal with this idea as well. One of my favourite books is *Josh*, by Ivan Southall, which is about a city kid who ends up in a country town where his pedigree dictates that he should fit in, but he doesn't.

But if I were looking for a real link to the 'stranger in a strange land' scenario, I'd probably look at the nine years I spent in PNG and Fiji as a missionary kid. Perhaps at some subconscious level I'm exploring my own questions of belonging. That's what writers do, isn't it?

**The book ends with the prospect of a return to Verdada. How will Edsel face the chaos he has caused?**

The way I see it, Edsel has two major issues to confront in the two books to come. One is to make things right with Jacq, who has lost a great deal more

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than most. I don't think that's fair, so I need to make that right. The other issue is that of Edsel's brother.

So far Edsel has pretty much had it all his own way and has had it pretty easy. He is, in fact, quite selfish. So he's going to have to pay his way a bit, I think.

**You get to work closely with your audience at residencies and school visits. What do you think teens are looking for from a good book in this digital age?**

I don't believe that what young people want from their entertainment has changed all that much. Basically, a good story with strong, believable characters will do it every time. What has changed a little is how we access that story.

Seth Godin says that we no longer accept being interrupted by our entertainment. The Sunday night TV movie has declined in popularity, because

we now prefer to buy the DVD of a show we really like and watch several episodes in a row, rather than sitting down to watch it at a prescribed weekly time, interrupted by ad breaks.

In the digital age the method of getting the story – audio book, digital reader, e-book, graphic novel, or conventional novel – is somewhat secondary to our universal desire for a strong story. We love stories. It's actually very simple.

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

James Roy lived on the islands of the South Pacific in his younger days, and was surrounded by adventure and books. Now he writes books for young people and thinks that might be one of the best adventures he's ever had. His stories have earned popular and critical praise, especially the CBCA Honour Books *Captain Mack* and *Billy Mack's War*, the non-fiction title *The 'S' Word – a boys' guide to sex, puberty and growing up* and, most recently, *Town*. He lives with his family in the Blue Mountains, and relaxes by bushwalking and playing his guitar. He doesn't like olives very much.

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**AWARDS**

- *Town*
  - Winner of the New South Wales Premier's Literary Awards Ethel Turner Prize 2008
  - Shortlisted CBCA Notable Book 2008
  - Shortlisted Queensland Premier's Awards 2008
- *The Legend of Big Red* – CBCA Notable Book 2006
- *Billy Mack's War* – CBCA Honour Book 2005
- *A Boat for Bridget* – CBCA Notable Book 2002
- *Captain Mack* – CBCA Honour Book 2000
- *Full Moon Racing* – CBCA Notable Book 1999