



The Story of Edgar Sawtelle LP

By David Wroblewski
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Introduction

Born mute, speaking only in sign, Edgar Sawtelle leads an idyllic life with his parents on their farm in remote northern Wisconsin. For generations, the Sawtelles have raised and trained a fictional breed of dog whose thoughtful companionship is epitomized by Almondine, Edgar's lifelong friend and ally. But with the unexpected return of Claude, Edgar's paternal uncle, turmoil consumes the Sawtelles' once peaceful home. When Edgar's father dies suddenly, Claude insinuates himself into the life of the farm—and into Edgar's mother's affections.

Grief-stricken and bewildered, Edgar tries to prove Claude played a role in his father's death, but his plan backfires—spectacularly. Forced to flee into the vast wilderness lying beyond the farm, Edgar comes of age in the wild, fighting for his survival and that of the three yearling dogs who follow him. But his need to face his father's murderer and his devotion to the Sawtelle dogs turn Edgar ever

homeward.

David Wroblewski is a master storyteller, and his breathtaking scenes—the elemental north woods, the sweep of seasons, an iconic American barn, a fateful vision rendered in the falling rain—create a riveting family saga, a brilliant exploration of the limits of language, and a compulsively readable modern classic.

Questions for Discussion

A warning: discussion questions can be—and probably *must* be—spoilers. Read on at your own risk!

1. How would Edgar's story have been different if he had been born with a voice? How would Edgar himself have been different? Since Edgar can communicate perfectly well in sign most of the time, why should having a voice make any difference at all?
2. At one point in this story, Trudy tells Edgar that what makes the Sawtelle dogs valuable is something that cannot be put into words, at least by her. By the end of the story, Edgar feels he understands what she meant, though he is equally at a loss to name this quality. What do you think Trudy meant?
3. How does Almondine's way of seeing the world differ from the human characters in this story? Does Essay's perception (which we can only infer) differ from Almondine's? Assuming that both dogs are examples of what John Sawtelle dubbed *canis posterus*, "the next dogs", what specifically can they do that other dogs cannot?
4. In what ways have dog training techniques changed in the last few decades? Do Edgar's own methods change over the course of the story? If so, why? Do different methods of dog training represent a trade-off of some kind, or are certain methods simply better? Would it be more or less difficult to train a breed of dogs that had been selected for many generations for their intellect?
5. Haunting is a prominent motif in *The Story of Edgar Sawtelle*. How many ghosts, both literal and figurative, are in this story? In what ways are the ghosts alike? Who is haunted, and by whom?
6. One of the abiding mysteries in Edgar's life concerns how his parents met. In fact, Edgar is an inveterate snoop about it. Yet when Trudy finally offers to tell him, he decides he'd rather not know. What does that reveal about Edgar's character or his state of mind? Do you think he might have made a different decision earlier in the story?
7. At first glance, Henry Lamb seems an unlikely caretaker for a pair of Sawtelle dogs, yet Edgar feels that Tinder and Baboo will be safe with him. What is it about Henry that makes him fit? Would it have been better if Edgar had placed the dogs with someone more experienced? Why doesn't Edgar simply insist that all the dogs return home with him?
8. Claude is a mysterious presence in this story. What does he want and when did he start wanting it? What is his *modus operandi*? Would his methods work in the real world, or is such behavior merely a convenient trope of fiction? Two of the final chapters are told from Claude's point of view. Do they help explain his character or motivation?
9. In one of Edgar's favorite passages from *The Jungle Book*, Bagheera tells Mowgli that he was once a caged animal, until "one night I felt that I was Bagheera—the Panther—and no man's plaything, and I broke the silly lock with one blow of my paw and came away." There is a dialectic in Edgar's story that is similarly concerned with the ideas of wildness and domestication. How does this manifest itself? What is the "wildest" element in the story? What is the most "domestic"?
10. Mark Doty has called *The Story of Edgar Sawtelle* "an American Hamlet." Certainly, there are moments that evoke that older drama, but many other significant story elements do not. Edgar's encounter with Ida Paine is one example out of many. Are other Shakespearean plays evoked in this story? Consider *Macbeth*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *Othello*, and *The Tempest*. In what sense is *The Story of Edgar Sawtelle* like all Elizabethan stage drama? Is it important to know (or not know) that the story is, at some level, a retelling of an older tale? Do you think Elizabethan audiences were aware that *Hamlet* was itself a retelling of an older story?

11. Until it surfaces later in the story, some readers forget entirely about the poison that makes its appearance in the Prologue; others never lose track of it. Which kind of reader were you? What is the nature of the poison? When the man and the old herbalist argue in the Prologue, who did you think was right?

12. In the final moments of the story, Essay must make a choice. What do you think she decides, and why? Do you think all the dogs will abide by her decision?

About the Author

David Wroblewski grew up in rural Wisconsin, not far from the Chequamegon National Forest where *The Story of Edgar Sawtelle* is set. He earned his master's degree from the Warren Wilson MFA Program for Writers and now lives in Colorado with his partner, the writer Kimberly McClintock, and their dog, Lola. This is his first novel.