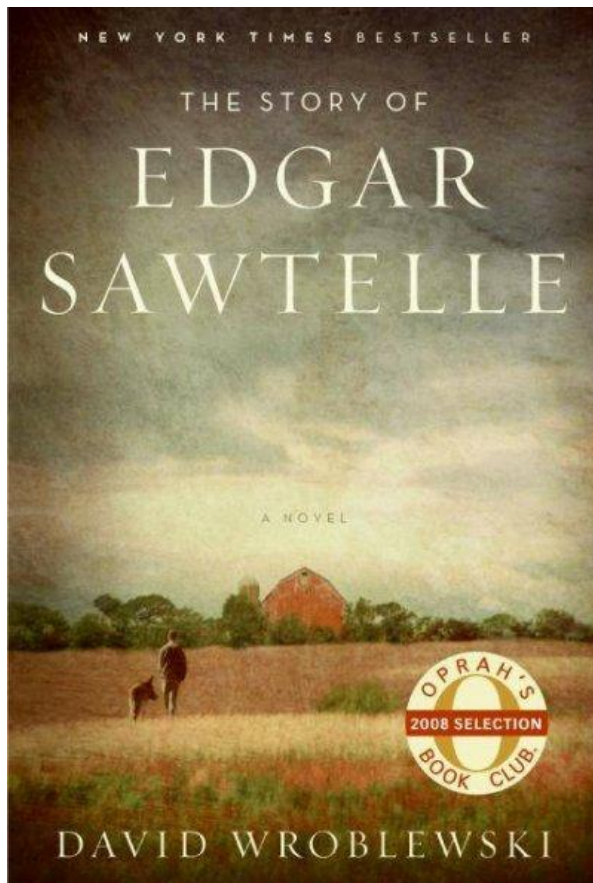


## Ann Arbor District Library: Book Club to Go Discussion Guide

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1336358>

### About the Book



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.

## About the Author



David Wroblewski was born in a suburb of Milwaukee, Wisconsin and grew up in the middle of the rural, dairy country part of the state. As a teen, Wroblewski wrote creatively and even won a Wisconsin arts contest with a short story he wrote about a pack of wolves.

He put his pen down when he decided to pursue acting at the University of Wisconsin. In the end, he chose the practical over the creative and graduated with a computer sciences degree, which led to a 25 year career as a software developer.

David Wroblewski has lived in or around Boulder, Colorado since the early 1990s. Currently, he shares his Westminster, Colorado home with writer Kimberly McClintock, their dog Lola, and their cat Mitsou.

## Awards

*The Story of Edgar Sawtelle* was named Booklist Editors' Choice: Adult Books for Young Adults in 2008 (<http://www.booklistonline.com/Booklist-Editors-Choice/pid=3229715>).

## Reviews

*Publishers Weekly* \*Starred Review\*

A literary thriller with commercial legs, this stunning debut is bound to be a bestseller. In the backwoods of Wisconsin, the Sawtelle family—Gar, Trudy and their young son, Edgar—carry on the family business of breeding and training dogs. Edgar, born mute, has developed a special relationship and a unique means of communicating with Almondine, one of the Sawtelle dogs, a fictional breed distinguished by personality, temperament and the dogs' ability to intuit commands and to make decisions. Raising them is an arduous life, but a satisfying one for the family until Gar's brother, Claude, a mystifying mixture of charm and menace, arrives.

When Gar unexpectedly dies, mute Edgar cannot summon help via the telephone. His guilt and grief give way to the realization that his father was murdered; here, the resemblance to *Hamlet* resonates. After another gut-wrenching tragedy, Edgar goes on the run, accompanied by three loyal

dogs. His quest for safety and succor provides a classic coming-of-age story with an ironic twist. Sustained by a momentum that has the crushing inevitability of fate, the propulsive narrative will have readers sucked in all the way through the breathtaking final scenes.

*Library Journal Review* \*Starred Review\*

Set in Wisconsin, this deeply nuanced epic tells the story of a boy, his dog, and much more. Father, son, and even dog take turns narrating before the story is told primarily by the inexplicably mute Edgar Sawtelle. Part mystery, part *Hamlet*, the story opens with a sinister and seemingly unrelated scene that begins to make sense as the narrative progresses. The rich depiction of Edgar's family, who are breeders of unique dogs, creates a warm glow that contrasts sharply with the cold evil that their family contains. This tension, along with a little salting of the paranormal, makes this an excruciatingly captivating read. Readers examine the concept of choice, the choice of the dogs in their relationship with people, and the choice of people in their acquiescence to or rejection of their perceived destiny. Ultimately liberating, though tragic and heart-wrenching, this book is unforgettable; overwhelmingly recommended for all libraries

*Kirkus Reviews* \* Starred Review \*

A stately, wonderfully written debut novel that incorporates a few of the great archetypes: a disabled but resourceful young man, a potential Clytemnestra of a mom and a faithful dog.

Writing to such formulas, with concomitant omniscience and world-weariness, has long been the stuff of writing workshops. Wroblewski is the product of one such place, but he seems to have forgotten much of what he learned there: He takes an intense interest in his characters; takes pains to invest emotion and rough understanding in them; and sets them in motion with graceful language (and, in eponymous young Edgar's case, sign language). At the heart of the book is a pup from an extremely rare breed, thanks to a family interest in Mendelian genetics; so rare is Almondine, indeed, that she finds ways to communicate with Edgar that no other dog and human, at least in literature, have yet worked out. Edgar may be voiceless, but he is capable of expressing sorrow and rage when his father suddenly dies, and Edgar decides that his father's brother, who has been spending a great deal of time with Edgar's mother, is responsible for the crime. That's an appropriately tragic setup, and Edgar finds himself exiled to the bleak wintry woods—though not alone, for he is now the alpha of his own very special pack. The story takes Jungle Book-ish turns: "He blinked

at the excess moonlight in the clearing and clapped for the dogs. High in the crown of a charred tree, an owl covered its dished face, and one branch down, three small replicas followed. Baboo came at once. Tinder had begun pushing into the tall grass and he turned and trotted back." It resolves, however, in ways that will satisfy grown-up readers. The novel succeeds admirably in telling its story from a dog's-eye view that finds the human world very strange indeed.

An auspicious debut: a boon for dog lovers, and for fans of storytelling that eschews flash. Highly recommended.

## **Literary Criticism**

### *Novel Sets Standard for Fiction about Dogs*

In *The Story of Edgar Sawtelle* David Wroblewski has written a terrific novel wherein chance too often is the deciding factor. Although its 562-page length may seem daunting, it is by no means wearisome and is necessary to its telling. A debut novel such as this does not come along often.

Edgar Sawtelle is the only child of Gar and Trudy Sawtelle, operators of a family dog-breeding business on a farm in northern Wisconsin on the edge of the Chequamegon Forest, near where the author grew up. Born in 1958, unable to speak (but not deaf), Edgar uses sign-language not only with his parents but with the dogs, one of the many subtle paranormal and spooky elements--including ghosts--that add to the attraction of the novel.

Edgar, obviously, is not an ordinary boy, and these are not ordinary dogs. The business was started by his late grandfather, John Sawtelle, whose principle of dog-breeding is nothing like that of standard breeders.

In a method continued by his son and grandson, John used mutts and strays--dogs he simply liked for valuable characteristics he saw in them. He bred not from specific traits in pedigreed animals, as others do, but from what he perceived as the "finest individuals," believing that then the excellent traits will emerge in the breeding line.

At one point not too far into the novel, Edgar thinks that his grandfather's vision--naive and wrong-headed in the opinion of other dog-breeders--might have come to pass. You might think so, too, because Wroblewski

meticulously describes their training, designed to make them canine companions that don't merely obey, but understand why they should obey.

It is a largely self-contained world, but a pleasant existence until, in the early 1970s when Edgar is about 14, his long-lost Uncle Claude--his father's brother--turns up at the farm. Actually, Claude makes his first appearance, unidentified, in a creepy prologue set in South Korea in 1952 involving a mysterious, highly poisonous substance.

Echoes of this short prologue will resound again and again. With the entrance of Claude the novel takes on its background theme of *Hamlet*. Edgar's father dies under peculiar circumstances, his mother takes up with his uncle, and Edgar begins to suspect his uncle of murder.

When Edgar accidentally and tangentially becomes involved in the death of a friend of the family, he lights out in panic for the Chequamegon, accompanied by three of the dogs. In the last 100 pages or so, the plot ratchets up into a tension-filled thriller.

Along the way there are some delightful bits and pieces. For example, check out the Hot Mix Duck Massacre, pages 431-32.

Source: Miller, Roger K. "Novel Sets Standard for Fiction about Dogs." *Tampa Tribune* (24 Aug. 2008): 10. Rpt. in *Contemporary Literary Criticism*. Ed. Jeffrey W. Hunter. Vol. 280. Detroit: Gale, 2010. Literature Resource Center. <http://www.aadl.org/research/browse/books>

**Discussion Questions** Source: <http://www.davidwroblewski.com/>

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?

## Multimedia

### ***Something Is Rotten In The State Of... Wisconsin? (Radio Broadcast)***

<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=92029508>

A discussion of the novel on NPR.

### ***Watch the Story of Edgar Sawtelle Webcast (Video Clip)***

<http://www.oprah.com/oprahsbookclub/Watch-The-Story-of-Edgar-Sawtelle-Webcast-Video>

An Oprah's Book Club webcast discussion with the author.

## Further Reading

### ***Author's official website***

<http://www.davidwroblewski.com/>

Information, events, and biography.

### ***Official website for the novel***

<http://www.edgarsawtelle.com/>

Resources and reactions.



## Read-Alikes

***The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*** by Mark Haddon

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1204058>

(Call number: Fiction Haddon)

Christopher Boone, the autistic 15-year-old narrator of this revelatory novel, relaxes by groaning and doing math problems in his head, eats red-but not yellow or brown-foods and screams when he is touched. Strange as he may seem, other people are far more of a conundrum to him, for he lacks the intuitive "theory of mind" by which most of us sense what's going on in other people's heads. When his neighbor's poodle is killed and Christopher is falsely accused of the crime, he decides that he will take a page from Sherlock Holmes (one of his favorite characters) and track down the killer. As the mystery leads him to the secrets of his parents' broken marriage and then into an odyssey to find his place in the world, he must fall back on deductive logic to navigate the emotional complexities of a social world that remains a closed book to him. In the hands of first-time novelist Haddon, Christopher is a fascinating case study and, above all, a sympathetic boy: not closed off, as the stereotype would have it, but too open-overwhelmed by sensations, bereft of the filters through which normal people screen their surroundings. Christopher can only make sense of the chaos of stimuli by imposing arbitrary patterns ("4 yellow cars in a row made it a Black Day, which is a day when I don't speak to anyone and sit on my own reading books and don't eat my lunch and Take No Risks"). His literal-minded observations make for a kind of poetic sensibility and a poignant evocation of character. Though Christopher insists, "This will not be a funny book. I cannot tell jokes because I do not understand them," the novel brims with touching, ironic humor. The result is an eye-opening work in a unique and compelling literary voice.

***The Black Prince*** by Iris Murdock

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1049555>

(Call number: Fiction Murdock)

Bradley Pearson, an unsuccessful novelist in his late fifties, has finally left his dull office job as an Inspector of Taxes. Bradley hopes to retire to the country, but predatory friends and relations dash his hopes of a peaceful retirement. He is tormented by his melancholic sister, who has decided to come live with him; his ex-wife, who has infuriating hopes of redeeming the past; her delinquent brother, who wants money and emotional confrontations; and Bradley's friend and rival, Arnold Baffin, a younger, deplorably more successful author of commercial fiction. The ever-



mounting action includes marital cross-purposes, seduction, suicide, abduction, romantic idylls, murder, and due process of law. Bradley tries to escape from it all but fails, leading to a violent climax and a coda that casts shifting perspectives on all that has preceded. "Fertile invention is put to the service of an expansive sense of character; and since the book also has Miss Murdoch's usual narrative energy and intellectual weight, it is the best novel she has written in years."

***A Thousand Acres*** by Jane Smiley

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1062721>

(Call number: Fiction Smiley)

A successful Iowa farmer decides to divide his farm between his three daughters. When the youngest objects, she is cut out of his will. This sets off a chain of events that brings dark truths to light and explodes long-suppressed emotions. An ambitious reimagining of Shakespeare's *King Lear* cast upon a typical American community in the late twentieth century, *A Thousand Acres* takes on themes of truth, justice, love, and pride, and reveals the beautiful yet treacherous topography of humanity.

**\*Book Club To Go!\*** *The Art of Racing in the Rain* by Garth Stein

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1392778>

(Call number: Fiction Stein)

Enzo knows he is different from other dogs: a philosopher with a nearly human soul (and an obsession with opposable thumbs), he has educated himself by watching television extensively, and by listening very closely to the words of his master, Denny Swift, an up-and-coming race car driver. Through Denny, Enzo has gained tremendous insight into the human condition, and he sees that life, like racing, isn't simply about going fast. Using the techniques needed on the race track, one can successfully navigate all of life's ordeals. On the eve of his death, Enzo takes stock of his life, recalling all that he and his family have been through: the sacrifices Denny has made to succeed professionally; the unexpected loss of Eve, Denny's wife; the three-year battle over their daughter, Zoë, whose maternal grandparents pulled every string to gain custody. In the end, despite what he sees as his own limitations, Enzo comes through heroically to preserve the Swift family, holding in his heart the dream that Denny will become a racing champion with Zoë at his side. Having learned what it takes to be a compassionate and successful person, the wise canine can barely wait until his next lifetime, when he is sure he will return as a man. A heart-wrenching but deeply funny and ultimately uplifting story of family, love, loyalty, and hope, *The Art of Racing in the Rain* is a beautifully crafted

and captivating look at the wonders and absurdities of human life . . . as only a dog could tell it.

**Extras!**

Dogs are central to this story – share your memories of pets that have been important to you or your family.

