

A FRIEND FOR



Teachers' notes
Written by Jean Yates

The *Old Tom* series By Leigh Hobbs

A note from the author:

"In the *Old Tom* books I never refer to Old Tom as a cat. In character he is a seven year old boy and Angela Throgmorton is the archetypal mother/authority figure. Theirs is essentially a parent/child relationship. Old Tom defiantly will never be shamed into helping around the house for he knows that ultimately, Angela's love for him is unconditional.

In fact Angela and Old Tom are both outcasts and all of the *Old Tom* books are character studies. *A Friend for Old Tom*, in particular, shows us not only how Old Tom & Angela met, but more importantly why they stay together in spite of the 'differences' between them. Angela has always wanted someone to care for, and Old Tom has always wanted someone to love and accept him. Children respond to these themes and they identify with Old Tom. He is, after all, the child in all of us."

Old Tom is a scruffy, careless and lazy cat who is constantly up to mischief.

When he turns up on the doorstep of Angela Throgmorton, an immaculate, fastidious and fussy woman, things are bound to go wrong.

But, just like the original odd couple, this pair soon finds that they need each other and so begins an unlikely but solid partnership.

Angela tries to train Old Tom and to curtail his behaviour. Old Tom, for his part, tries to be good. But his scruffy, disheveled and, frankly, odd appearance, makes it difficult for him to fade into the background.

No matter what, things are never going to be quiet with Old Tom around!

Many students will be familiar with Old Tom from the very popular ABC television series. Join Old Tom and Angela Throgmorton in:

- *Old Tom*
- *Old Tom at the Beach*

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- *Old Tom Goes to Mars*
- *Old Tom's Guide to Being Good*
- *A Friend for Old Tom*

These books lend themselves to a wide range of age-groups, depending upon the depth of analysis. The following activities and questions for discussion are designed to be used with students of all ages.

Pre-reading

The two main characters in these stories are Angela Throgmorton and Old Tom. Just from their names what sort of character do you think each one is?

Ask the students to draw and/or describe each character.

- Show the students an illustration of each character. How accurate were they in their own descriptions?

Given these character descriptions, ask students to predict what might happen when these two characters come together.

Characters

Discuss the power of characters' names.

In *Old Tom's Guide to Being Good*, Old Tom has to learn manners so that he can go and meet the Queen.

- Look at the names of the other people at the garden party – *Sir Cecil Snootypants*; *Boswell Crosswell*; *Lady Arabella Volcano* and her husband *Horace*; *Sir Basil Bossy* and his wife *Babette*; *Sir Bertie Boodle*; *Lady Winifred Pineapple De Groot* and her husband *Sir Ernest*.
- What sort of people do you think they would be?
- How has Leigh Hobbs used these names for comic effect?
- Are these people ever likely to accept Old Tom? Why?

Old Tom tries very hard to be good, but he still seems to make a lot of mistakes.

- Why do you think this is?

Sometimes when we go to very important places it is hard to be good.

- Why is this?

Why do you think the Queen enjoys Old Tom's company so much? Why is this humorous?

Students are to work in pairs. Each student is to create a character. Give the character a name. Draw a picture or write a detailed description of this character (including personality traits as well as looks).

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- Tell your partner the name of your character. They need to draw or describe your character based only on the name.
- Compare illustrations/descriptions to see how similar your images are.

Old Tom is often described as being “not so much like a cat as a naughty little boy”. In fact, the author, Leigh Hobbs, never refers to Old Tom as being an animal at all.

- In what ways is Old Tom like a child?

Why does Old Tom carry an old fish head with him everywhere?

In what ways is Angela Throgmorton like a typical mother or caregiver?

Angela Throgmorton loves Old Tom and is able to accept his unusual behaviour. Other people seem terrified and horrified by him.

- Why do you think they react differently from Angela?

In what ways do you think Old Tom is judged by his unusual looks rather than his behaviour?

- Can you think of other circumstances in real life when we judge people by their looks rather than for who they really are?

Do you think Old Tom is purposely naughty?

Why do you think Angela Throgmorton allows Old Tom to stay with her when he is so different from her?

What does this tell us about people?

Creative Writing

Why do you think Old Tom was living on the streets until he met Angela Throgmorton?

- Write the story of Old Tom's life before he meets Angela Throgmorton.

What sort of life do you think Angela Throgmorton lived before she met Old Tom?

- Write a diary entry by each character describing their life and how they feel.

Write another diary entry from each character after Old Tom moves in with Angela Throgmorton.

- How have their lives changed?
- How do they feel now?

Old Tom gets up to some amazing adventures. In different stories he travels to Mars and joins a band of pirates.

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- Do you think that these things really happen to Old Tom?
- In what ways are his stories typical of young children?

What other sorts of adventures do you think Old Tom might have?

- Write your own Old Tom story in which he has a hugely exciting adventure.

Illustrations (most of these activities are for use with older students)

The *Old Tom* series provides a wonderful introduction to the relationship between text and illustrations.

- What proportion of the story is conveyed through the text and what proportion through the illustrations?
- Where does most of the humour lie? How is this humour created?

Consider the style of the illustrations.

- How does Leigh Hobbs' choice of pen and ink drawing and the busy-ness of the drawings add to the impact and humour of these stories?

In many cases the text carries no humour. It is introduced through sarcasm or irony caused by the contrast between the text and the illustration.

- Give an example of this technique from one of the books and explain how it has been used to effect.

Consider how different a story can be if the illustrations change.

Story boarding activity:

Students need to divide 2 pages into 6 equal boxes.

In this story a car is seen driving down a road. The car stops and a woman gets out. She looks at one of her tyres. Another car approaches. A man steps out. He approaches the woman.

Draw the storyboard twice so that the illustrations show two different stories e.g.:

- A murder mystery
- A love story
- A comedy

Discuss the power of illustrations in creating mood atmosphere and story.

Students may like to write brief, minimal text to accompany these illustrations. Try to make one story board humorous by making the text contrast with the illustrations in the same way that Leigh Hobbs does.

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