Emil and the Detectives

Erich Kästner

About the author
Kästner began his literary career as a journalist. He then produced light but ultimately serious poetry against the backdrop of the rise of Nazism in Germany of the interwar years.

Kästner was opposed to Hitler and his inexorable rise to supreme power. Kästner’s 1931 novel, Fabian, charts the collapse of one man’s world at a time when the world of the Weimar Republic was collapsing. The novel was eventually publicly burned by the Nazis. Kästner himself was lucky to escape with only an interdiction on his publishing until after the war. His writings for children are characterized by a willingness to see children as thinking creatures. Indeed, he appeared to equate childlike qualities with basic humanity. He is quoted as saying: ‘Only the one who becomes a grown-up and keeps on being a child is a human being.’

For more information, see the Introduction.

Summary
Emil Fisher is a small boy from Newton, a small town in England. He is going to the city for the first time on his own, to stay with his aunt. He is carrying quite a lot of money which is stolen from him on the train, despite the fact that he pinned the notes to his pocket.

In desperation, Emil gets off the train one stop early and looks for the man he suspects. He sees him leaving the station and follows him. He tracks the thief to a café, where the man sits down to have a meal.

Emil doesn’t feel he can go to the police, because he committed a crime in his village – he put red paint on the nose of the statue in Newton. While Emil is trying to decide what to do, he is joined by Paul, a city boy with a lot of friends. When Paul hears Emil’s story, he and his friends follow the thief to a hotel and stake it out, while they make plans to get Emil’s money back.

After a couple of setbacks, the boys decide to surround the thief when he leaves the hotel and embarrass him into giving back the money. The first part of the plan works well, but then the thief goes into a bank and tries to get the stolen notes changed. Emil and his friends enter, and Emil is able to prove that the notes belong to him because they have pin marks in them.

The next day the story is in the newspapers and it turns out that Emil’s thief is a wanted bank robber with a price on his head. Emil gets a reward of £50.

Chapter 1: Emil Fisher, a small boy from Newton, is going to the city on his own for the first time. He is carrying quite a lot of money that his mother has given him. His mother tells him he has to be very careful with the money, which she had managed to save after hard work.

Chapters 2–3: Emil talks with the other passengers on his carriage. All but a man in a black hat get off the train. Emil falls asleep against his will, and when he wakes up the man and the money are gone, though he had pinned the notes to his pocket. Emil gets off the train one stop early and looks for the man he suspects. He sees him leaving the station and follows him. Meanwhile, his grandmother and cousin are waiting for him at the station. They think that something has happened but do not want to phone Emil’s mother so as not to make her worry.

Chapters 4–5: Emil tracks the thief to a café. While he is trying to decide what to do, he is joined by Paul, a city boy with a lot of friends. When Paul hears Emil’s story, he and his friends decide to help Emil. They follow the thief to a hotel and make plans to get Emil’s money back.

Chapters 6–7: The boys decide to surround the thief when he leaves the hotel and embarrass him into giving back the money. The first part of the plan works well, but the thief goes into a bank and tries to change the stolen notes. Emil and his friends enter, and Emil is able to prove that the notes belong to him.

Chapters 8–9: The next day Emil is in the newspapers: Emil’s thief is a wanted bank robber with a price on his head. Emil gets a £50 reward.
Emil and the Detectives

Background and themes
Emil and the Detectives has all the ingredients of the child’s adventure novel. The heroes of the story are all children, who overcome impossible odds to defeat evil and in the end receive a surprise reward. This novel is more than just an exciting plot.

First, it is a rite of passage story about a young, frightened country boy, lost and penniless in a big city, who faces up to his situation and deals with every problem that he is faced with. By the end of the story, Emil is no longer a wide-eyed innocent. He has learnt several lessons: you shouldn’t believe everything that strangers tell you, life is difficult sometimes but there are many kind people in the world and a true friend comes when you need help.

Second, it is a story which raises moral issues, the central one being whether it is right to steal something back from the person who stole it from you.

The theme of cooperation, how everybody is important and can contribute is also present in the story.

Generosity is also depicted, especially in Little Tuesday, who is ready not to participate in the most interesting and exciting part of the boys’ plans because he knows he is needed by the telephone.

Diversity and tolerance are other themes developed in the story. Emil doesn’t look like the rest of the boys in the city, yet, they help him out without questioning anything.

Discussion activities

Chapter 1
Before reading
1 The cover: Have students look at the cover and answer these questions:
  * Who’s the man in the cover? What does he do? What’s he doing? Why? How is he feeling? Why? What things can you see?

2 Guess: Ask students to predict what type of story this is, whether the ending is happy, sad, who the main characters are, where it takes place, etc.

3 Read carefully: Have students read the words in italics on page v. Ask them these questions: Where is Emil? Where is he going? Why does he have some money? Why does he need to make it safer?

4 Guess: Ask students to make a profile of Emil. How old is he? Does he have a family? What does he do? Where is he from? Where is he going? Describe a typical day in his life. As students go on reading, they go back to this profile and modify it accordingly.

5 Discuss: Transport
  Conduct this discussion by asking these questions:
  * What means of transport are safe? Which is the safest? If you have a lot of money and you must keep it safe, what means of transport will you use?

6 Find pictures: Work in pairs. Find these things in one or more of the pictures in the book.
  * a building
  * a café
  * a case
  * a crowd
  * a hat
  * a newspaper
  * a photographer
  * a cap
  * a building
  * a café
  * a case
  * a crowd
  * a hat
  * a newspaper
  * a photographer
  * a cap

After reading

7 Role play: Get students into pairs. One of them is Mrs Fisher, the other one is Mrs Martin. Mrs Fisher has just returned from the train station and she’s telling Mrs Martin about her feelings.

8 Guess: Have students predict what is going to happen next.

Chapters 2–3
Before reading

9 Guess: Have students read the title of Chapter 2 and say if they keep their ideas about what’s going to happen.

10 Discuss: The thief
  You can guide students with these questions: Is the thief a man or a woman? Is he/she young or old? What’s he/she wearing? Why is he/she a thief? Do his/her family know he/she’s a thief?

11 Look at the picture: Have students look at the picture on page 6 and ask them: Is the thief one of these people? Which one? Why not?

After reading

12 Guess: You can guide the students’ predictions with these questions: What is Emil going to do? Is he going to shout? What will the man do?

13 Discuss: Rules
  Ask students what rules they must follow when they are alone in a place, e.g. a bus, in the street. Can you talk to people you don’t know? Can you give them food? Can you say yes if they give you a sweet?

14 Discuss: Town and city
  Ask students to imagine Newton. Then they compare it with the big city, especially with the picture on page 13.

15 Discuss: Emil’s mistakes
  Get students to discuss the following: What mistakes did Emil make in the first part of Chapter 2? What clever things did he do?
Emil and the Detectives

Chapters 4–5

Before reading
18 Predict: Have students predict what’s going to happen after they read the title of Chapters 4 and 5. Who are Emil’s friends? What plan do they make? Do they find the thief?

After reading
19 Role play: Get students to role play the conversation between the lift boy and Paul.
20 Discuss: Stealing from a thief
Ask students if it’s OK to steal from a thief.
21 Emil: Have students imagine what Little Tuesday’s mother may be thinking about her son saying ‘Emil’ in his sleep.

Chapters 6–7

Before reading
22 Predict: Have students read the title of Chapter 6 and ask them to predict how they think the thief is caught. Who catches him? Where? When?

After reading
23 Role play: Have students role play the conversation between the bank assistant and the person he’s talking with on the phone.
24 Group work: A press conference
Have students get together in groups of five. One is Emil, the others are the reporters who ask him questions.
25 Write: Once students carry out the interview, ask them to write different articles for the newspaper. They can include pictures as well.
26 Guess: Ask students to read the last sentence of Chapter 7 and make predictions: Why and in what way is Emil going to be surprised?

Chapters 8–9

After reading
27 Write the story: Get students to write the complete story for the newspaper. Encourage students to include photos and pictures they can get from magazines or the Internet.
28 Discuss: A true friend comes when you need help
Have students give examples of this.
29 Read carefully: Emil’s mother wants him to be very polite. How does he show he’s polite?
30 Pair work: Have students discuss these questions:
   a What brave things did Emil and other people do in the story?
   b What silly things did Emil and other people do?
   c What clever things did people do?
   d What bad things did people do?
31 Vocabulary: Have students work in small groups. Ask each of the groups to make a list of the fifteen most important words in the story. For example, you can for example ask them if the word ‘flower’ is important, or as important as ‘money’ or ‘thief’. Ask students if it’s OK to steal from a thief.
32 Mimic game: Have students work in small groups. One of the members chooses a word from the list and mimics it to the rest. The other members have to guess the word.
33 What part is it?: Have students work in groups. One of them chooses a part of the story and mimics it to the rest. Encourage students to use gesture. They shouldn’t use words. The rest have to locate the part in the story.
34 The best and worst parts: Have students discuss the best and worst parts of the story. Ask them to rewrite the bad parts so that they suit their expectations better.
35 Advice: Get students to suppose they are Emil. Ask them to write a list of pieces of advice for children from the country travelling to the city on their own.
36 Point of view: Get students to retell the story briefly from the point of view of the different characters. For example, one can be Emil’s mother, another one can be Polly, another one can be one of the children who helped Emil, another one can be a newspaper reporter, etc. How much does each of them know? How different will their opinions be?

Vocabulary activities
For the Word List and vocabulary activities, go to www.penguinreaders.com.