

The Story of Edgar Sawtelle

by David Wroblewski

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.

Praise for the Book

"...here is a big-hearted novel you can fall into, get lost in and finally emerge from reluctantly, a little surprised that the real world went on spinning while you were absorbed...grand and unforgettable."

— **Washington Post Book World**

"I flat-out loved *The Story of Edgar Sawtelle*.... I closed the book with that regret readers feel only after experiencing the best stories....Wonderful, mysterious, long and satisfying...I don't re-read many books, because life is too short. I will be re-reading this one."

— **Stephen King**

"Whether you read for the beauty of language or for the intricacies of plot, you will easily fall in love with David Wroblewski's generous, almost transcendently lovely debut novel...the scope of this book, its psychological insight and lyrical mastery, make it one of the best novels of the year...."

— **O Magazine**

Courtesy of Harper Collins

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. *The Story of Edgar Sawtelle* is his first novel.

Author Interview

Western Writers

An Interview with David Wroblewski

A conversation with the Colorado-based author of The Story of Edgar Sawtelle.

By Jenny Shank, 6-06-08

Westminster writer David Wroblewski's engaging, dramatic debut novel is poised to become one of the breakout books of the summer, with advance praise from Stephen King and Richard Russo and an extensive national tour. (My review for the Rocky Mountain News is here.) The Story of Edgar Sawtelle follows the life of a boy named Edgar, born mute (but not deaf) and raised on his parents' dog breeding farm in Wisconsin. The family breed, known as "Sawtelle dogs," is distinguished by its exemplary behavior. Trouble brews when a main character dies and another comes to usurp his place in the family. Until recently, Wroblewski worked as a software developer for Boulder's Collective Intellect ("Making software," he says, is "intensely creative, just a different kind of clay—and I intend to continue all my life.") But for now he's concentrating on promoting the novel, which he worked on for over a decade. I recently interviewed Wroblewski via email about his writing process, how living in Colorado helps him to write about Wisconsin, and Stephen King's "generosity." Wroblewski will read and discuss his book at the Tattered Cover (Colfax) on June 10 (7:30 p.m.) and at the Boulder Book Store on June 12 (7:30 p.m.).

New West: How long have you lived in Colorado, and what brought you here?

David Wroblewski: I visited Boulder for the first time in 1990. On my first evening in town, I watched the moon rise over the plains from the NCAR parking lot. I resolved to move to Colorado that very night, and I've lived in or around Boulder since 1991.

NW: What does it feel like to complete a project that you've been focused on for so much of your career as a writer? And what is it like, after a decade of working on the book, to make the transition from the solitary act of writing to public act of promoting your book?

DW: A long project like *Edgar* comes to feel almost like a lifestyle: there is always a draft that needs fixing, there always will be a next draft. For years the book existed as an evolving stack of laser printed pages. In my mind, that is the “real” book; the beautifully bound version with the gorgeous cover art, though lovely, seems a little foreign. The irony is that the final product looks more real to my friends than it does to me.

The promotion schedule for *Edgar* is a great gift from my publisher, Ecco/HarperCollins — they have been astonishingly good to this book, lavish, from day one. Part of the work of the book tour is to talk about what inspired the book, because that's fun to hear. Partly, it's a chance to point out good books that also deserve to be read, and which inspired me. But an equally important part of the work is to listen to readers' responses. This is a habit ingrained in me from thirty years of making software: you absolutely must watch how the thing you've created performs on the job. A novel is no different in that respect. I've said what I want to say about this story, and it's all on the page. Now I watch and listen. If I can keep my wits together, I suspect I'll learn a lot. And I'll hear a ton of dog stories. I'm really looking forward to that.

NW: What inspired the mythology of the Sawtelle dogs, who are bred for outstanding qualities of intelligence and empathy rather than because they look a certain way?

DW: I grew up around a lot of dogs. Probably the truest answer to this question is that the dogs themselves made me wonder, “How far could we go if we stopped breeding dogs for silly physical traits and concentrated instead on intelligence and imagination?” I knew that couldn't be an unusual thought. Many dog owners must wonder the same thing. I often have the guilty thought that the one thing holding back my own dogs from achieving their full potential is me.

Over time, I ran into two books that were tremendously influential: the first was Vicki Hearne's *Adam's Task*, in which she dissects the moral, ethical, psychological and linguistic issues involved in animal training. The second was a long out-of-print book entitled *Working Dogs* written by Elliot Humphrey and Lucien Warner. That book was published in 1934. The breeding program it described went by the name “Fortunate Fields”, which readers will recognize from *The Story of Edgar Sawtelle* because I rather rudely invented a third author, Alvin Brooks, and made Brooks a correspondent and mentor of Edgar's grandfather. The stated goal of that program was to produce “a strain of dogs which are peculiarly able to profit by instruction.” Well, I read that and my imagination ran wild. (We all know the results of that work, by the way: it resulted in the establishment of the Seeing Eye guide dog organization.) In *The Story of Edgar Sawtelle*, Edgar's grandfather begins raising companion dogs the way Fortunate Fields program raised service dogs, and many generations of dogs have come and gone before Edgar is born.

However, the original question came before any of the research. By now I have bookshelves devoted to dog research. I'm a canine history and ethology junkie. Readers can learn more about other influential books on the Edgar Sawtelle website, and see some interesting links to current research on the "Tangents" page.

NW: I enjoyed the parts of the book in which Edgar is searching through the records, and comes across old letters to his grandfather. The voice in the letters was very distinctive. How did you create this period perspective? Was it based on research into philosophies of dog breeding?

DW: The letters from Fortunate Fields were immensely fun to write. The voice of Alvin Brooks was almost effortless for me—all I needed to do was imagine a man trying a little too hard to be scientifically detached. I always thought of Brooks as a man struggling to contain his inner artist, and the sparks that fly between Edgar's grandfather and Brooks are in part due to Brooks' consternation at his own envy.

NW: Did you decide to make Edgar unable to speak so that he would have an even stronger bond of communication with the dogs?

DW: The origins of Edgar's muteness are fairly prosaic. I once had very minor surgery on my tongue. Nothing very serious was involved, but I was left with a few stitches that made it impossible to talk intelligibly for a week. I took it as a challenge to see how much of my life I could transact without talking. The answer was: a lot. As a side effect of my silence, I became distinctly more aware of my surroundings and the people I interacted with—an acute observer. A few years later, when I started on the book, I drew on that experience for Edgar, who is almost preternaturally observant as a result of being born mute.

And then there is the idea that the best kind of dog training entails jointly inventing a language in which to ask questions and receive answers. This was the point Vicki Hearne made so brilliantly in Adam's Task. By making Edgar mute, I thought I could explore that idea more thoroughly.

NW: Why did you decide to make your plot parallel that of Hamlet? And Once you'd committed to paralleling Hamlet, did you feel you had to follow through with correspondences to all the major events in Hamlet, or did you still feel free carry your book in its own direction?

DW: I think of this novel as a story haunted by another story—two stories in fact. The other being the Mowgli stories from Kipling. I certainly don't consider Edgar a "retelling" of Hamlet — that implies a degree of adherence to plot structure and dramatis personae that I continually tried to subvert.

There were certain elements I knew I wanted, of course. For example, I knew from the beginning that Edgar's story was told in five acts. A very formal structure for a novel. I understood that the Sawtelle dogs were Edgar's Denmark. I also knew that I wanted to draw on some of Shakespeare's other plays, snatching bits like the witches in MacBeth, or the blindness in Lear.

In almost all other ways, however, I let the story wander without any requirement to ever coincide with Hamlet, and in fact mostly it doesn't. The imperative was for Edgar's present story to be compelling, everything else was a distant second.

Curiously, no one ever asks about the connection to Kipling's *The Jungle Book*, even though it is explicitly referenced in the text. (Hamlet never is—with the single exception of the phrase "Remember me.") If we could ask Edgar what story most closely parallels his life, he'd point to Mowgli in an instant.

NW: I loved the descriptions of the natural world in the section where Edgar is fleeing through the Chequamegon forest. What meaning does setting and place have for you in your writing?

DW: Well, I grew up in farm country, and there is the inevitable daily contact with the natural world at scale. But to return to Shakespeare for a moment, I also wanted this story to incorporate the elements – earth, air, fire, water — the way Shakespeare's drama did. They should be present as enormous forces, with irresistible effects on the players.

NW: Your book received some enthusiastic praise from Stephen King and Richard Russo. Are either of these writers an influence on you? If so, what have you learned from them?

DW: Rick Russo was one of five teachers I worked closely with when I attended the creative writing program at Warren Wilson College. I also worked with Margot Livesey, Joan Silber, Ehud Havazelet, and Wilton Barnhardt — and here in Colorado with the writer Robert McBrearty. In other words, I was fantastically lucky. I studied with writers whose novels and stories I admired tremendously. Rick has a special place in Edgar's history because he was so enthusiastically behind the project and the writing, and also because his novel *The Risk Pool* was a great inspiration to me. I'd wanted to write about the people I knew, small town folks, Midwesterners; when I read *The Risk Pool* I got so excited, thinking, "See, you can write about this stuff! The characters can be smart and funny and still come from where I come from." Rick's stories are set in upstate New York, mostly, but I, like many other readers, felt he was talking about my neighbors, my home town, my experience.

As for Stephen King, I've been a gotta-have-it fan from the night, back in 1978, when I read *Firestarter* from cover to cover during a quiet third shift at the hospital where I worked. One of the things I love about King's stories is that they have such *heart* — surprising, when you consider that he's scaring the juice out of you at the same time. And yet, when you think about it more, it makes perfect sense: the things that frighten us most are often right next door to the things we hold dearest. Though we had never met, Mr. King was kind enough to read an early galley of Edgar's story, which speaks to me of his essential generosity. You have to understand what a commitment it is to read a beginning writer's book, not to mention a complete stranger's. You don't know what you're in for, and a writer has to be careful about what he reads. I couldn't be more thrilled that he responded to Edgar's story.

NW: Do you think you might write something set in Colorado some day?

DW: Anything's possible, but my guess is that I won't set any novels in Colorado while I live here. For some reason, a little distance helps me treat a place as a fictional setting. For example, whenever I went back home to Wisconsin for research trips, I got almost no writing done on the spot. But as soon as I was back in my office in Colorado, I could close my eyes and hear the voices and see the landscapes. That's strange, I know, but that's the way it worked for me. Other writers have talked about the same phenomenon.

NW: What are you working on now?

DW: I have a new novel brewing, but it's early days, and until recently whenever I came into my office I had to fight the urge to begin revising some part of Edgar's story, even though it was off to the printing presses. It was getting to be a real problem. I finally had to completely rearrange my office and that did the trick. I consider myself to be building the workshop in which I'll make the next novel right now—hanging the tools on the wall, metaphorically speaking, and hauling in the lumber. All sorts of jiggered up little scenes and characters are sitting in the corners, and my pile of interesting facts grows daily. I know the story in the large scale. It's a fun stage in the process—you allow yourself to play, pointlessly, for a while.

Wroblewski will read and discuss his book at the Tattered Cover (Colfax) on June 10 (7:30 p.m.) and at the Boulder Book Store on June 12 (7:30 p.m.).

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Comment By Jean Cryor, 11-05-08

This is the most wonderful book I have ever read. I re-read the descriptions of nature for they are so beautiful. My daughters and I have talk about the book. I describe it as being written both horizontally and vertically. We all love Almondine, how does one pronounce the name? The description of Henry Lamb whose sin is being an ordinary person stays with you. The mental illness of the Trudy is so perfectly done. Most of all I tell everyone to read it slowly, to savor it, and warn that they will weep when it is over.

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Discussion Questions

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?

Courtesy of <http://www.edgarsawtelle.com/discussion.html> retrieved 7/20/2009