



COOROOMAN PRESS

**THE MOST TRAGICKAL TALE OF ELDERBERG  
SPILLIKINS**

**WRITTEN BY MARK SVENDSEN  
DESIGNED & ILLUSTRATED BY DEREK LAMB**

**TEACHERS NOTES by Robyn Sheahan-Bright**

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## Introduction

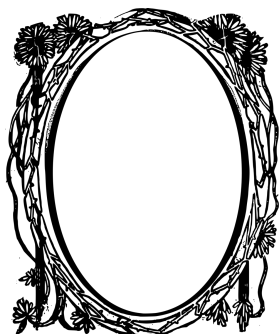
**SAD is the tale of Elderberg Spillikins,  
A mere complication of cough and of bones;  
Left by his mother on a street corner long ago  
And as for his father? Nobody knows**

Elderberg Spillikins is a lonely and seemingly lost soul. Virtually homeless, living in a 'cave under concrete', he has no relatives or friends, and his behaviour is anti-social, to say the least! A glimmer of hope appears when he encounters an ailing young woman who seems to offer the hand of friendship. But the woman he so admires is not long for this world. And he misinterprets her gesture for the possibility of romance. Hence, he eagerly endeavours to entrance her, to disastrous and dramatic effect. And yet, the spark of empathy and compassion between them remains the final impression left with the reader at the story's end ...

Mark Svendsen's inventive and subversive poetic text is a tribute to classic literary genres such as the long tradition of the cautionary tale, and utilises literary devices such as the rhyming couplet, simile, literary allusions, alliteration, and arcane phraseology. This story is reminiscent of the Victorian melodramas of the past but elides those tropes with imagery drawn from retro commercial catalogues and magazines from the 1950s, and with present day colloquialisms. This is an extremely literary work of genre bending experimentation.

It is also a highly artistic work in its use of typography, since it was designed, laid, printed, and bound by fine letterpress artist, Derek Lamb.

For readers young and old who relish the power of words and imagery to convey multiple intriguing interpretations, this is a consummate work of art.



## Themes & Curriculum Areas

Several themes are covered in this book which might be related to the Australian Curriculum Areas, including:

### Humanities & Social Sciences (HASS)

<https://www.australiancurriculum.edu.au/f-10-curriculum/humanities-and-social-sciences/hass/>

- **Childhood Trauma**

**Discussion Point:** Elderberg is a homeless orphan who has become subject to bullying, and his mental and physical health reflect his deterioration. The ailing girl, long confined to her sick bed, recognises his pain and how ‘Enduring life differently means you’re outcast.’ Elderberg has the heart of a poet. But his detractors consider him a freak and a horror. How much of his behaviour is determined by past trauma? How much of her empathy for him also stems from her own suffering?

- **Crime and Punishment**

**Discussion Point:** The notion of committing a crime and of capture and punishment is another idea embedded in this work. What did Elderberg actually do to break the law? Why do the coppers follow him? Are crimes often a matter of interpretation? Does Elderberg deserve his ultimate demise? Does it reflect the nature of his crime? Is justice done to him? What would be a just and fitting punishment? What responses do the ideas of justice and what is ‘fitting and right’ elicit from your students? For example, can war ever be just?

**Activity:** Write a short story that shows a wrong that is put right, a story where justice is done to one or more characters.

**Discussion point:** Criminals sometimes achieve fame for their misdemeanors, For example, Ned Kelly is an Australian outlaw, killer and bushranger who was hanged for his crimes. Well over 100 years after his death, Ned Kelly’s memory still elicits great sympathy from many Australians. How do students feel towards Elderberg, the girl and her mother at the end of the tale? Is it a tragedy? What is a tragedy?

- **Friendship and Love**

**Discussion Point:** The unlikely tentative friendship between the gravely ill young woman and the lonely, seemingly unlovable Elderberg Spillikins is

painfully interrupted. The girl's initial reaction is of both fear and compassion, but he mistakes that for romantic love. Nevertheless, what do the final scenes indicate about the relationship between them? Does Elderberg die a happier man? And has she also found emotional comfort on her deathbed?

- **Homelessness**

**Discussion Point:** Elderberg's home in 'a cave under concrete' equates to homelessness. Mark Svendsen's Author's Notes indicate that he was inspired to write this tale having witnessed a homeless youth's plight in Brisbane. What does this tale suggest about the homeless? How should society address the needs of the homeless and the poverty-stricken?

### **English Language & Literacy**

<<https://www.australiancurriculum.edu.au/f-10-curriculum/english/>>

**Discussion Point:** This book is an example of a Cautionary Tale – a longstanding genre or convention in literature. Several nineteenth century writers became famous for such works, for example, *Grimm's Fairy Tales* (1812), *Der Struwwelpeter* by Heinrich Hoffman (1845 German, 1848 English), and Hans Christian Andersen's stories were often cautionary, eg *The Emperor's New Clothes*. Hilarie Belloc parodied them in *Cautionary Tales for Children: Designed for the Admonition of Children between the ages of eight and fourteen years* (1907). Edward Gorey illustrated and enhanced Belloc's stories as have others. [See **Bibliography**.]

And, of course, in the present day, Maurice Sendak penned the classic *Pierre: A Cautionary Tale in Five Chapters and a Prologue* (Series: Nutshell Library) (HarperCollins, 1962). Carole King wrote music to accompany these words, in a song. [See **Bibliography**.] Roald Dahl's works *Revolting Rhymes* (1982) and *Dirty Beasts* (1983) illustrated by Quentin Blake were also often very cautionary! Andy Griffiths' *The Bad Book* (2004) and *The Very Bad Book* (2010) illustrated by Terry Denton are two further examples. David Walliams' *The World's Worst Children* (2016) illustrated by Tony Ross is another. Discuss and compare these cautionary tales.

**Activity:** After reading *The Most Tragickal Tale of Elderberg Spillikins*, and some of these examples, write a cautionary tale in verse.

**Discussion Point:** Rhyme is used in the second and fourth lines of each verse in this tale. Use such rhyming in the cautionary tale you write.

**Discussion Point:** If this is a cautionary tale, what caution or warning does it convey?

**Discussion Point:** Does the saying, ‘the road to Hell is paved with good intentions’ apply to Elderberg Spillikins? What were the girl’s intentions? What were Elderberg’s? Her mother’s? How is it that good intentions may lead to unintended consequences?

**Discussion Point:** The literary trope or genre of romantic love has featured in, and been studied throughout the history of literature. What is the nature of romantic love?

**Activity:** Arcane expressions litter the text. Discuss with students the meaning of these expressions. [See **Worksheet 1.**]

**Activity:** Similes included in this book include:

blacker than emptiness

Linger like loneliness

Smiles flicker like knife blades

Howls like a wild dog

as Sharp as a blade

like the mewl of a new-born thing

Slinks from the house like a satisfied cur

as bright as a bridegroom

Invite students to discuss any of these similes and their meanings. Then have them create inventive similes like these. Begin with the first in the list: ‘blacker than ...?’

**Discussion Point:** Alliteration is another device used in this text, for example, ‘mewls and mutters’, ‘Mumbling muttering’, ‘Exalted, in ecstasy’. Find other examples of this device.

**Activity:** Different language words for ‘friend’ appear in this book. Invite students to share other words for ‘friend’ in another language.

**Discussion Point:** The narrator addresses the reader in ironic asides such as: ‘Cue the melancholy strains & for those of a sensitive nature prepare a nice pot of tea & a big box of soft tissues.’ This technique is sometimes called metafiction. There are also textual ‘signposts’ in the work: ‘A Beginning’, ‘A Middle’ and ‘An Ending’. Study the concept of ‘metafiction’ as it is used in literature. [See **Bibliography.**]

**Discussion Point:** Many uncommon words appear in this book. Test students' comprehension given the context in which they appear, eg 'perfidious'. Make a class list of the words and their meanings. Have fun locating other words which are uncommon, and use them in sentences.

**Discussion Point:** Literary references used include the following. Research those which require definitions.

Phrase	Definition
<b>Tempus Fugit</b>	
<b>Amor Vincit Omnia</b>	
<b>Love is in the air</b>	Popular song by George Young and Harry Vanda (1977) and released by Jean Paul Young as the lead single on his album of the same title (1978).
<b>He moves in mysterious ways</b>	' "God Moves in a Mysterious Way" is a Christian hymn, written in 1773 by William Cowper from England. It was written by Cowper in 1773 as a poem entitled "Light Shining out of Darkness".' <i>Wikipedia</i> <a href="https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/God_Moves_in_a_Mysterious_Way">https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/God_Moves_in_a_Mysterious_Way</a>
<b>Meet thy doom</b>	"Proud and insolent youth," said Hook, "prepare to meet thy doom." "Dark and sinister man," Peter answered, "have at thee." J.M. Barrie, <i>Peter Pan and Wendy</i> (1904)
<b>Love's Labour's Lost</b>	Shakespearean play written around 1595–6 and first performed in 1597.
<b>Other?</b>	

**Discussion Point:** Hyperbole is a literary technique used when an author or speaker employs extreme exaggeration for emphasis and effect. Some of the language used in this book is deliberately hyperbolic, eg 'Bountiful Gravy of Eternal Joy and Desolation'. Identify other examples of hyperbole.

**Activity:** The tale opens and closes with nearly the same words, a common device in telling such as tale. It begins: ‘Sad is the tale of...’ and ends ‘Cruel is the fate of...’. Use repetition in the story you write above.

**Activity:** Make a list of the many cautionary statements you have been told to observe by your parents or carers, eg. ‘Eat up all your crusts, and your hair will grow strong and curly!’ [See also **Worksheet 3.**]

**Discussion point:** The text includes many lists of synonyms, or associated words that possess similar meaning, eg. ‘There he lingers like loneliness, desolate, shivering,/Forsaken with misery, wretched, alone –’. What effect do you think the author is trying to create with these lists of similar and associated words?

**Activity:** Test your students’ **comprehension** by asking them questions about the written and visual text. [See also **Author’s Notes** below.]

### **Visual Literacy**

<<https://www.australiancurriculum.edu.au/f-10-curriculum/the-arts/visual-arts/>>

The visual and written text of a book combine to tell a story using the various parts of the book’s design and illustrations, as explored below:

**Activity:** The **cover** of a book conveys ideas about its content, and often features an image, but this is a text-based cover. The design mimics the classic works of literature bound in cloth. Design and illustrate an image-based cover for this book.

**Activity:** The **endpapers** are marbled, as in classic works of literature. Experiment with students to make some marbled paper or cards. [See **Bibliography.**]

**Activity:** The **title page** depicts lettering: ?ES! How do you interpret this lettering?

**Discussion Point:** Numbers and symbols appear on the cover and throughout the book in sequences that are unclear or which may need interpretation. Ask students what they make of these numbers.

**Activity:** The **visual medium or styles** employed are letterpress typography and archival printer’s advertising images are used in collage. A variety of fonts and forms of lettering, and many classic printed elements appear in this book as part of the image design. Invite students to illustrate the cautionary tale they

wrote above using similar techniques for the opening page of their story. If working by hand they can simply cut out letters from newspapers or magazines, and glue onto a page.

**Discussion Point:** Read and observe other picture books that use lettering in this way, for example, Scieszka, Jon *The Stinky Cheeseman and Other Fairly Stupid Tales* Ill. by Lane Smith. Viking Press, 1992. Compare them to this book.

**Discussion Point:** How do you imagine the girl or Elderberg Spillikins to look, based on this text? Why are there no images of them? Does this visual omission matter to the reader? How do the images of men and women that are used extend the reader's understanding of the character of Elderberg Spillikins, the girl and her mother? [See **Worksheet 2.**]

**Discussion Point:** A Colophon is a statement at the end of a book, typically with a printer's emblem, giving information about its authorship and printing. Here it explains that this book was typeset in Alternate Gothic No. 2. Discuss fonts and typeface with students and compare some fonts which are both serif and non-serif fonts. [See **Bibliography.**]

**Discussion Point:** Sub-text or inter-textuality is used in this book in intriguing ways. Examine any double page spread and invite students to discuss the interplay between words and images.

## **Creative Arts**

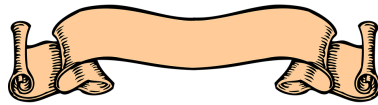
- 1. Create a cartoon or comic image** illustrating a moral lesson you've been told to observe by your elders. [See also **Worksheet 3.**]
- 2. Cut words from news headlines or advertisements** in newspapers or magazines and then re-arrange them to form new sentences in a suggestive collage.
- 3. Shoes** feature in several pages in this book, eg On the page headed: 'Then she wakes! She sees him leaning above her, ...' a number of women's shoes appear. Design and draw a creative image of footwear.
- 4. Create a poster** to advertise this book using interesting fonts and arresting images.
- 5. Create a Book Trailer** to promote this book. [See **Bibliography.**]



6. This book was first created as an **Artist's Book**. Create an artist's book that engages with the same themes of mixed romantic messages but with a 'just' or 'fair and fitting' outcome.

## Conclusion

This is an intriguingly stylish work by a masterful collaboration between writer and letterpress artist. Together they have challenged conventions and created a work which defies categorisation but which will speak to many audiences.



## Author's Notes

It was the summer of 2002/3, a very tropical summer in Brisbane. I retreated to write in the air-conditioning of the State Library of Queensland as I had a deadline for completing the novel *Ratface & Snakeyes* and I kept dripping sweat on the keyboard at home.

The Silent Study Area on the fourth floor of the library looks across the Brisbane River towards the riverside expressway that runs parallel along the riverbank opposite. I watched as a rather dishevelled looking adolescent fellow walked down the concrete path beneath the freeway. He squatted beside the path then, with not so much as a shimmy, disappeared under the concrete. During the four hours I was there that day he did not reappear. It was obvious he was living either in a hole under the path or in a stormwater drain attached. He intrigued me right from the start. I wondered who he was and how he came to be living there and gave him the name that popped into my head, Elderberg. Elderberg Spillikins. The back story I made up for him was pure imagination. I saw him only once more, the next day, and then he was gone from my life forever, even before I'd plucked up the courage to go and say hello.

So after I had finished my novel I started on 'The Most Tragickal Tale of Elderberg Spillikins'.

Very early the content suggested poetry in the Edgar Allan Poe vein. High Gothic is so very teen. Overwrought emotions reminded me of the heavy metal music I used to listen to myself as a teenager. Interestingly three people who read the text in manuscript said it sounded like a dark opera! We all know that heavy metal and opera are simply different sides of the same emotional coin. I love both so who am I to argue?

When finished I sent the first draft out to publishers to receive standard rejections from everyone I could find in Australia and many more in the UK and USA. Over the ensuing years I rewrote the poem more than 30 times until finally, in 2015, I approached an illustrator with the intention of employing them to illustrate the work I would eventually self-publish. After two years, developing characters, storyboarding and roughs it became evident that we were not on the same aesthetic wavelength.

In 2017 Derek Lamb and I discussed if he could illustrate the work using different letterpress fonts and other advertising print elements from his fantastic collection. Derek wanted a particular font so I contributed financially to have it made at a foundry in San Francisco. After that Derek worked on Elderberg when he had time, finally finishing in 2021, (though the full title page was printed in 2019). After that I worked with designer Michelle Black on all the necessary scans and alterations and Voila, like magic, 20 years later, the public get to meet Elderberg Spillikins.

## **Letterpress Artist's Notes**

Elderberg Spillikins was originally conceived as a fairly conventional illustrated book. However, for a number of reasons it didn't prove practical. To salvage the project I suggested to Mark that it could perhaps be given a more typographic treatment and the use of letterpress stock illustrative cuts included. This is something that printers have played with in the past and has an established tradition in Dada and before.

For me, I was also thinking of the eccentric English tradition of things like *1066 and All That* and *What a Life!* and even *The Goons*. There are also lots of literary allusions and even bits of Latin and certainly a good deal of nonsense. Some of it was planned in advance, however many things suggested themselves as I was setting the type. It is one thing to read a text and another to slowly set it in metal type. This methodical process often brought new thoughts and ideas. Goodness knows where it all came from ... the printer has no idea!

The landscape format of the book was dictated by Mark's long lines. It would have looked wrong to carry over so many lines in a conventional page. The length of the lines and the poem itself suggested a retro sans serif face and condensed further helped fit everything on a page. I think the landscape format was also great for adding lots of playful elements around the verses.

## About the Author

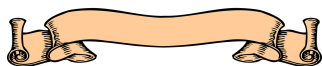
**Mark Svendsen** is the author of young adult and children's novels and picture books. Several of his works have been Children's Book Council of Australia (CBCA) Honour Books. *To Die For* (2011), part of the RHA Classics Series, was shortlisted in the Qld Premier's Award. He has collaborated with Ben Redlich on picture books: *Circus Carnivore* (2005), *Whacko the Chook* (2007) and *Not This Little Black Duck* (2012). He also wrote the lyrics for two choral symphonies by acclaimed composer Elena Kats-Chernin. He holds a MA in Creative Writing from Queensland University of Technology. He is the founder of Coorooman Press which specialises in books about Central Queensland history. Mark lives in Zilzie, Central Queensland with his composer/teacher/cellist wife, Anne Svendsen.

Derek Lamb created *Elderberg Spillikins* in a very limited edition artist's book (65 hand made copies) with Mark Svendsen in 2021, and this is the first mass produced trade edition.

## About the Letterpress Artist

**Derek Lamb** is an internationally recognised letterpress artist and printmaker based in Rockhampton. He has produced a wide range of material including cards, broadsheets, flyers, and typographic posters, in addition to limited edition artist books. His fine press editions are held by the National Library of Australia, Oxford and Cambridge University Libraries, the National Library of Ireland, and several state libraries and universities across Australia.

Derek bought a nineteenth century printing press in 2011 – an Alexandra, built by William Notting in London in 1887. 'He also works with two cylinder proof presses, made in 1965 and 1971. He created the name 'The Officina Athelstane' as an imprint (a tradename under which works are published). Officina means 'workshop' in Italian and Athelstane is the range that runs across the western side of Rockhampton. It's partly an homage to the great Italian private press Officina Bodoni.' Source: 'Man of Letters: Derek Lamb and the Officina Athelstane' *Rockhampton City Council*  
<https://www.rockhamptonregion.qld.gov.au/AboutCouncil/News-and-announcements/Latest-News/Derek-lamb-Man-of-Letters>



## WORKSHEETS

### WORKSHEET 1 ARCANES EXPRESSIONS

A. The following arcane expressions appear in this book. Write your own interpretation and then check sources to see if you are correct.

Expression	Meaning
Take a gander	
Utter nutter	
A pox on you	
Snug as a bug in a rug	

B. What other arcane expressions do you know? (They may be things your grandparents or parents have said to you.) Make a list and then compile a class list and have students research what they mean. (For example, a common expression heard in this writer's childhood was: 'a wigwam for a goose's bridle' meaning 'something absurd or a nonsense object, or latterly "none of your business"'. It is an old English phrase from the United Kingdom which later found particular favour in Australia, where its first recorded use is in 1917,<sup>[1]</sup> and also in New Zealand.<sup>[2]</sup> 'Wigwam for a goose's bridle' *Wikipedia* [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/A\\_wigwam\\_for\\_a\\_goose%27s\\_bridle](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/A_wigwam_for_a_goose%27s_bridle)

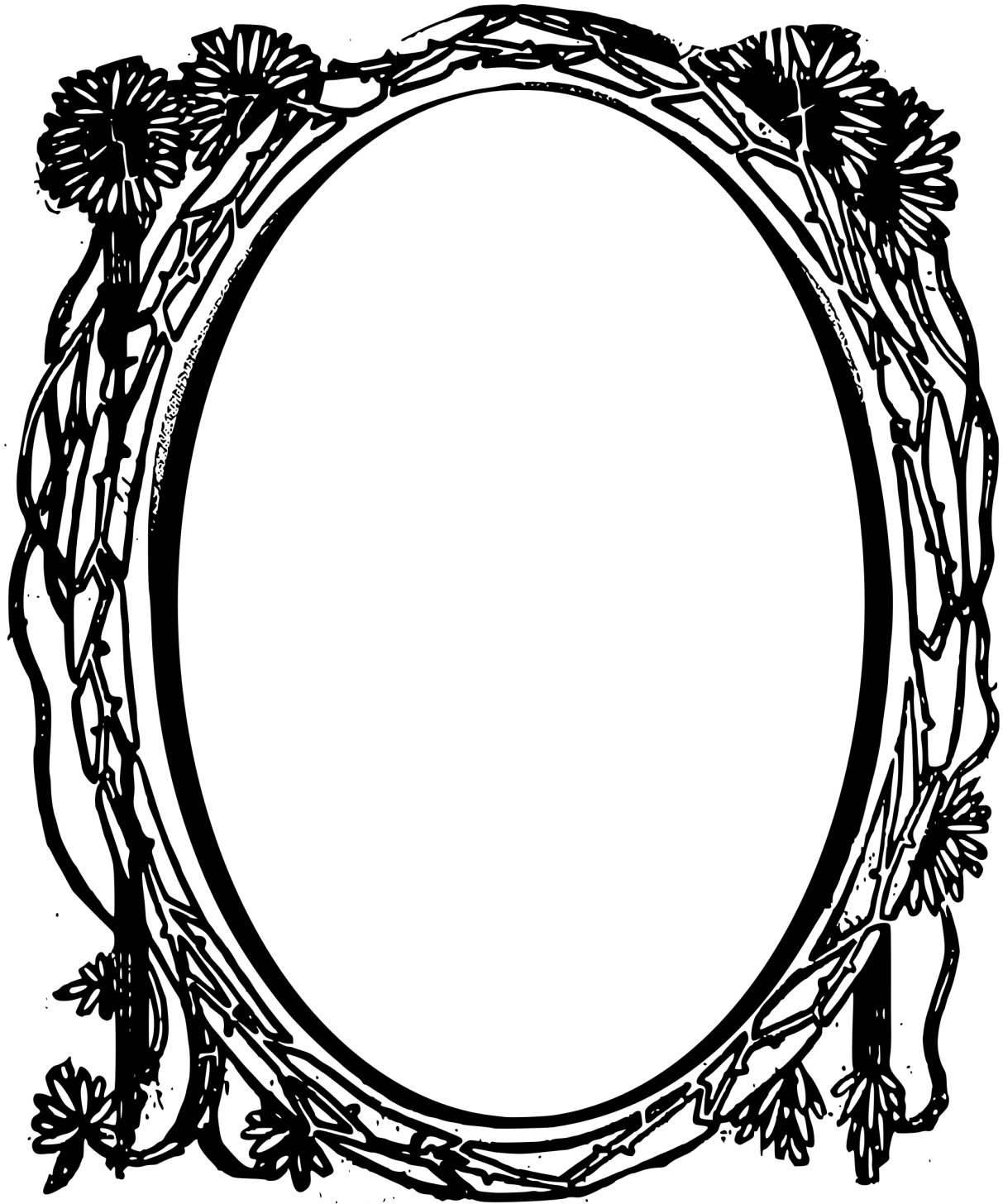
Expression	Meaning

German Gothic.

A B C D E F G H I J K L M N  
O P Q R S T U V W X Y Z  
a b c d e f g h i j k l m n o p q r s t  
u v w x y z 0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9







## WORKSHEET 2 PORTRAIT

Draw a portrait of the girl as you imagine she might appear in the portrait she placed in Elderberg's locket. Or instead draw a portrait of Elderberg Spillikins.



## WORKSHEET 3 CAUTIONARY TALES IN IMAGES

Identify the common lessons or sayings which might be represented by these images:

 <p>Cautionary Tales</p>	
1.	2.
	
3.	4.
	
5.	6.

**Answers: 1. If the wind changes your face will stay like that. 2. Don't speak back to your elders. 3. There's always room for one more. 4. Don't play with fire. 5. Pride comes before a fall. 6. Don't speak to strangers.**

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## About the Author of the Notes

**Dr Robyn Sheahan-Bright** operates justified text writing and publishing consultancy services, and is widely published on children’s literature, publishing history and Australian fiction. In 2011 she was the recipient of the CBCA (Qld Branch) Dame Annabelle Rankin Award for Distinguished Services to Children’s Literature in Queensland, in 2012 the CBCA Nan Chauncy Award for Distinguished Services to Children’s Literature in Australia, and in 2014, the QWC’s Johnno Award. In 2021 she was appointed a Member of the Order of Australia.

