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English Core

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Evan Tries an O- Level

-By Colin Dexter

Brief Biography of Colin Dexter

English crime writer Colin Dexter was born in Stamford, Lincolnshire. He earned both his bachelor's degree and master's degree in classics from Christ's College, Cambridge. He was a teacher for most of his life and eventually had to retire due to his worsening deafness. After a stint writing textbooks, Dexter turned to mysteries, eventually penning thirteen mystery novels. He created the famous detective Inspector Morse in 1975. The Inspector Morse series soon moved to the small screen, and so did Dexter—he made frequent cameo appearances on the TV show. Dexter earned two Silver Daggers, two Golden Daggers, and a Diamond Dagger from The Crime Writers' Association of Britain. He was knighted in 2000, honored as an Officer of the Order of the British Empire. He married Dorothy Cooper in 1956, and the couple had a daughter and son.

Historical Context of *Evans Tries an O-Level*

Much of “Evans Tries an O-Level” takes place at HM Prison Oxford, which was housed in Oxford Castle from 1888 to 1996. By the fourteenth century, the Norman medieval castle was no longer a valuable military post and was in increasingly poor shape. It then served a stint as a county administration building, an informal jail, and a criminal court. In 1611, King James sold the castle, whose new owners promptly sold it to Christ Church College. Although much of the castle was destroyed in the English Civil War, the remaining structures were turned into a formal prison by the seventeenth century and gradually built upon in the following century. Conditions were harsh—the prison was infested with vermin, and there were often 60 people to a room. It was also a for-profit entity, as Christ Church College leased the space to prison wardens who

then made money by charging prisoners for room and board. John Howard, a prison reformer, visited the prison in the 1770s and made scathing criticisms that spurred the County to purchase, rebuild, and remodel the premises. By 1876, the prison also housed children—the youngest being a seven-year-old girl named Julie-Ann Crumpling, who was sentenced to seven days of hard labor at the prison after being caught stealing a baby carriage. At the time, it was common for children to be jailed at Oxford Castle as punishment for relatively minor offenses—a dramatic attempt to break the child’s rebellious spirit and scare them into proper behavior. In 1888, the establishment took on the name HM Prison Oxford (as it appears in “Evans Tries an O-Level”) in the wake of national prison reforms. Despite the reforms, the prison closed in 1996 due to overcrowding and poor conditions only a few years after Dexter’s story was published. Oxford Castle was then renovated and turned into a multiuse development, boasting of a hotel, marketplace, museum, restaurant, and office building.

Summary

The story starts with a telephonic conversation between the Governor and the Examination board secretary. The prison authorities want to conduct an O-Level exam in German language for a prisoner named Evans. The secretary asks about the venue of the exam and also about the invigilator for it. The Governor replies that the exam can be conducted in Evans’s cell and a churchman will be appointed as the invigilator for the exam. They both then end their conversation by deciding on how and when the exam will be conducted. A senior prison officer Jackson visits Evans’s cell to conduct an inspection so that if any weapon may be hidden. They are going through this checking because Evans had successfully escaped from prison earlier also, the episode gave him the name of ‘Evans the break’. The governor was not ready to take any risk with this as it could bring a bad name to him. Jackson and Stephens checked the cell thoroughly. They had taken away his nail scissors earlier and Jackson ordered Stephens to take away his razor blade as soon he had shaved. Jackson ordered Evans to take off his hat but left it because Evans requested him not to do so as it was his lucky hat for the exam. All sorts of arrangements were made to keep a check on Evans, even a microphone was placed in his cell. On the day of the exam Mc Leery, the churchman reached the prison and was assisted to the cell by Stephens. The Governor was informed that the exam was about to begin and that the cell did not have any weapons. The Governor ordered the officer to check the churchman so that Evans may not use any belongings of Mc Leery as a weapon. The churchman and his belongings were

searched; the paper knife was also removed so that Evans might not use it to injure the churchman in order to escape. During the search, Jackson found one abnormal thing in the Churchman's bag. It was a semi filled tube. When asked the reason for keeping it, McLeery said that he had to use it as he suffered from piles. The exam began and everything being spoken in the cell was constantly heard by the Governor. Meanwhile, a phone call from the examination board for some corrections in the question paper made the Governor suspicious. He cross checked it by dialing the number again which turned out to be busy. Then again, there was a phone call from the Magistrate demanding for police officers and a van. Such things were suspicious to the Governor but he calmed down as he was sure of his arrangements. Stephens stood outside the cell and peeped inside after every minute. It was always the same but later on, he noticed that Evans had put a blanket around himself. Though he doubted it at first but then stopped thinking much as it was cold inside the cell. Later on, the exam was conducted and as the Governor ordered on the phone, Stephens accompanied McLeery to the gate. Everything went as planned and Stephens was happy. To be sure of himself, he once again went to the cell for a final look. He was shocked to see Mc Leery lying in a pool of blood. Soon the news spread that Evans had injured the invigilator and had escaped from the jail by impersonating him. McLeery who was badly injured was taken to the Governor as he had some important information. Mc Leery told the Governor about the photocopy being placed on the question paper which shared the escape plan with Evans. The Governor tried to decode the German language and found out that Evans would reach Newbury after his jail break. Soon Superintendent Carter was called and Mc leery was sent with him to catch Evans. Both Jackson and Stephens were scolded for being unaware about Evans having a false beard and the churchman's belongings in his cell. He then ordered both of them to go to St Aldates Police Station and meet Chief inspector Bell. Meanwhile, Carter called him up to inform that they had missed Evans while chasing him and that McLeery was sent to Radcliffe hospital. The Governor called up the hospital and came to know that they had sent an ambulance to the examination board but the churchman had already disappeared. He understood the whole plan that Mc Leery, who was helping them to search Evans, was in fact Evans himself. Soon the real Mc Leery was also found by the police who was tied up at his house. On the other hand, Evans had reached hotel Golden Lion and was enjoying his freedom. When he reached the hotel room, he found the Governor in his room. He told

Evans that he had all of his men around so there was no chance for him for escape again. The Governor asked him about his plan and Evans told every bit of it to him. Finally, the prison van was called to take Evans to the prison. The Governor felt proud of catching him again. As soon as the van started, the prison officer unlocked Evans's handcuffs and asked the driver to drive fast so that the police could not catch them again. Finally, Evans once again managed to escape from the clutches of the police with the help of his friends.

Themes

➤ Intelligence and Deception

Colin Dexter's "Evans Tries an O-level" follows kleptomaniac James Evans's creative and highly complicated attempts to break out of prison. After three escapes at various maximum-security prisons, Evans is transferred to Oxford Prison, overseen by the prideful, no-nonsense Governor. Despite the Governor's best efforts, Evans escapes yet again—he studies O-level German for six months, sits for the final exam, and escapes disguised as the proctor in the final moments. Although Evans's deception is not necessarily lauded as something the reader should replicate, Dexter takes a permissive, almost admiring attitude toward Evans's trickery. As the story unfolds, Dexter suggests that Evans's deception is successful—and somewhat commendable—because it requires intelligence, careful preparation, and flexibility.

➤ Instinct, Paranoia, and Pride

"Evans Tries an O-Level" follows the Governor of Oxford Prison as he deals with a new and particularly unruly prisoner named James Evans, a cheerful kleptomaniac known for his uncanny ability to break out of prison. The prison officers find Evans's sudden interest in German particularly suspicious—he takes night classes in O-level German for six months (as the only student in the class) and eagerly asks to take the final exam, claiming he's "dead keen to get some sort of academic qualification." In the story, the prison officers' suspicions about Evans are right. However, all of the prison guards repeatedly ignore their own nagging suspicions, telling themselves that they're just being paranoid. This careful, logical self-talk is almost always a way to avoid looking stupid. As the story unfolds, Dexter emphasizes the power and accuracy of human instinct while also revealing the extremes people will go for the sake of protecting their pride.

➤ Appearances vs. Reality

In Colin Dexter's "Evans Tries an O-Level," a notorious kleptomaniac named James Evans makes his fourth escape from prison, this time from Oxford Prison, overseen by the no-nonsense

Governor and a senior prison officer named Jackson. A tension between appearances and reality runs throughout the story, as many characters—especially Evans—subvert the expectations and judgments other people make of them based on their appearance. This impulse to judge based on appearance is particularly dangerous in the world of this mystery story, which is filled with deception and disguises. Dexter ultimately highlights how making judgments based on appearances are an unproductive habit, and that people and situations are not always what they seem.

➤ Friendship

In “Evans Tries an O-Level,” “congenital kleptomaniac” James Evans comes up with a creative and ultimately successful plan to break out of Oxford Prison: he takes night classes in German for six months, asks to take the final exam, and then disguises himself as the proctor, Reverend McLeery (who is actually one of Evans’s accomplices disguised as the real proctor) when the day finally comes. Having escaped three times from other prisons in the past, “Evans the Break” has quite the reputation among prison guards. However, as the story unfolds, it’s clear that Evans doesn’t work alone, nor does he proudly assume credit for himself—he’s grateful to have a lot of “friends,” and also has the skillful ability to endear people to him (whether they realize it or not). The value Evans places on friendship, coupled with his ability to make friends (or at least “warm enemies,” as his relationship with the senior prison officer, Jackson, is described) is critical to his eventual escape from prison—and his ability to escape again in the process of being sent back.

Question and Answers

Q1- Reflecting on the story, what did you feel about Evans’ having the last laugh?

A1-Evans was a very cunning person who smartly devised his plan to escape from the jail. He kept on misleading the police and the Governor with false evidences so that nobody could reach him. When Governor tracks him in the hotel and feels satisfied about his being able to catch his prey, Evans makes up another plan to escape and this he did again with the help of his friends who impersonate as the prison officer and driver and takes him away again in front of the eyes of the governor. So, we can say that Evans’ had the right to laugh as he managed everything very well.

Q2-When Stephens comes back to the cell he jumps to a conclusion and the whole machinery blindly goes by his assumption without even checking the identity of the injured 'McLeery'. Does this show how hasty conjectures can prevent one from seeing the obvious? How is the criminal able to predict such negligence?

A2-When Stephens comes back to the cell he sees Mcleery lying in a pool of blood. He was badly hit on his head and the blood was dripping on his beard and clothes. Stephens was a new recruit. He was not having much experience of such tricks and so when he saw an injured man in the cell, he instead of paying attention to the identity of the injured person mistook him as the real Mc Leery. He at once came to the conclusion that he escorted Evans to the gates and so the story spread like that and everyone else in the prison also believed it to be so. Evans was being a cunning criminal knew the weakness of all the officers and that is why he knitted his plan in a way that things went well in his favour.

Q3- What could the Governor have done to securely bring back Evans to prison when he caught him at the Golden Lion? Does that final act of foolishness really prove that "he was just another good-for-a-giggle, gullible governor, that was all"?

A3-In order to correct all the previous mistakes, the governor should have accompanied Evans himself to the prison. But he trusted the fake prison officer and the driver who were none other but friends of Evans. This was not his first mistake; he had done such mistakes in the past also. For example, he never verified about the German teacher who was later found to be Evans's friend and not even Mc Leery who also was one of the Evans's friends. He didn't inform Stephens or Jackson that he was able to track Evans through the correction slip. In order to show himself the smartest person he thought of taking the whole situation in his own hands and took his friends to be the real prison officer and the driver without even verifying their identity and let Evans escape once again. So yes we can say that he was good-for-a-giggle.

Q4-While we condemn the crime, we are sympathetic to the criminal. Is this the reason why prison staff often develops a soft corner for those in custody?

A4- Yes, it is right that everyone condemns the crime. But when we see a criminal bearing the punishment our perception towards him changes. So, is with the prison officers who with the passage of time develop a soft corner for them. This can be seen in the story as well. Jackson, who was a strict officer, also let Evans wear his hat because he considered it to be his lucky charm. Whereas Evans was a very tricky person who had already discovered the emotional side of the Jackson.

Q5-Do you agree that between crime and punishment it is mainly a battle of wits?

A5- Yes, we can say so if we go by the story. We all know that each battle is won by the strong person. In the story the whole war was based on the mental ability and not the physical ability. The prison officer had taken away all sorts of weapons from Evans so that he may not find any way to escape but Evans used his tricky brain and managed to escape.

Q6.What kind of person was Evans? Why did he want to sit for the O-level German examination?

Answer. Evans was a young prisoner who had tried to escape thrice from the prison. For this reason, he was also known as 'Evans the Break'. He seemed to be quite a pleasant and astute person, but he was basically a kleptomaniac. His desire to sit for the O-level German examination was only a plot to hoodwink the authorities and escape from the prison.

Q7.What was the contents of the small suitcase that McLeery carried?

Answer. The suitcase that McLeery carried had a sealed question paper envelope, a yellow invigilation form, a special authentication card from the Examination Board, a paper knife, a Bible, the current copy of the Church Times and a small semi-inflated rubber ring.

Q8.What was the precautions taken for the smooth conduct of the examination? ‘

Answer. The prison authorities had taken elaborate precautions to ensure the smooth conduct of the examination. Evans' cell was thoroughly frisked a night

before. All sharp edged objects like razor, scissors, etc., were taken away. Even the suitcase of the invigilator was carefully checked and the prison officers kept a close watch on him (Evans) throughout the process.

Q9. How did the Governor react to the two phone calls he received in quick succession?

Answer. The Governor had a sharp presence of mind and wanted to give Evans no chance to escape. As a part of his multi-step elaborate precautions, he verified the first phone call he received. However, he did not do so with the second call as he thought he was being paranoid and that he had taken all possible precautions for the safe conduct of the examination.

Q10. How did the question paper and the correction slip help the prisoner and the Governor?

Answer. The purpose of the cleverly superimposed photocopied sheet on the question paper and the correction slip was to finalize the details of the plan of escape. This information had to reach Evans. It was also meant to make the authorities believe that the wounded man was McLeery himself. The question paper and correction slip helped the Governor to locate the place where Evans was hiding. Thus, the two clues helped both the prisoner and the Governor.

Q11. Why did Evans not take off his hat when Jackson ordered him to do so?

Answer. Evans knew that the duplicate McLeery, who was to invigilate during the O-level German examination, had short hair. So he cropped his hair to pass off as McLeery later. The “bobble hat was an important part of the plan to conceal Evans” cropped hair.

Q12. How does McLeery explain the presence of a small semi-inflated rubber ring? What did it actually contain?

Answer. McLeery tells Jackson that he is suffering from hemorrhoids’ (piles) and the ring helps him when he has to sit for a long time. In reality, the ring contained

pig blood, which Evans would splatter on his head and escape from the hospital as McLeery who had been injured.

Q13. What clues did the answer sheet of Evans provide to the Governor? (Delhi 2009)

Answer. The index number 313 and the centre number 271 on the answer sheet proved to be the clues for the Governor. Putting the two together and with the help of the Ordnance Survey Map for Oxfordshire, he managed to catch Evans in the hotel.

Q14. How did Evans outwit the Governor in the end?

Answer. Evans was recaptured by the Governor and handcuffed by a prison officer. He was given farewell by the Governor, who thought he was sending Evans back to Oxford jail. Ironically, it was not so. The prison officer, who was actually a friend of Evans in disguise, took Evans to the police van and unlocked the handcuffs as soon as the Governor was out of sight. Evans finally escaped to Newbury. Thus, Evans outwitted the Governor and had the last laugh in this case.

Q15. Describe the precautions taken by the prison officers to prevent Evans from escaping.

Answer. As Evans had tried to escape before, the prison authorities had taken all possible precautions for the smooth conduct of the examination. Evans' cell was thoroughly frisked a night before and all sharp-edged objects like razor, nail-file, scissors, etc., were taken away from him. The suitcase of the invigilator McLeery was carefully checked. Also, the Governor had himself decided to supervise the examination by listening in through the microphone connected to Evans' cell. Prison officer Stephens was deployed to observe Evans from the peep-hole every minute or so. Another prison officer Mr. Jackson was in constant contact with the Governor on the phone. Both the gates of the wings of Evans' cell were locked tightly. Thus the authorities left no stone unturned in ensuring the smooth and safe conduct of the examination.

Q16. How did the negligence of the prison officers prove to be a boon for Evans?

Answer. The prison authorities had taken multi-step detailed precautions for the safe conduct of the examination. However, some lapses on their part at critical moments proved to be a boon for Evans. First of all, no one tried to verify the identity of the invigilator McLeery and that turned out to be a key mistake in this case. Similarly, the identities of the van driver and the officer who handcuffed Evans were not verified. All of them later turned out to be Evans' accomplices. The Detective Superintendent also acted hastily and did not drive the injured McLeery to the hospital. This gave Evans the chance to escape. Finally, the Governor, who had a sharp presence of mind and hawk-eyed vigil, made the greatest blunder. When he nabbed Evans at the hotel, he did not bring him to the jail with himself and sent him with a driver and 'silent' prison officer. Thus, Evans escaped yet again.

Q17. Give a character sketch of the Governor of Oxford Prison based on your understanding of the story, 'Evans Tries an O-level'.

Answer. The Governor of the HM Prison, Oxford, appears to be kind-hearted fellow at the start as he arranges for an O-level exam for a prisoner renowned for his ability to escape. He was, though, quite skeptical of Evans and made every arrangement to make sure that Evans had no means to escape. He was also very proud and self-conscious. He did not want Evans to disgrace him by escaping from his prison. He had a sharp presence of mind, which was clear from the fact that he cross-checked every call that was made to the prison that day. However, he got over-confident of his arrangements and gave Evans the opportunity to escape. Also, he was a person who did not mind showering praise on a prisoner. When Evans revealed the secret plan to him, he admired him. At last, he proved to be just another good-for-a-giggle, gullible Governor when again Evans tricked him and successfully escaped. His overconfidence and self-praise let him down.

Q18. How was the injured McLeery able to befool the prison officers?

Answer. Evans acted really well as the 'injured' McLeery. The fake blood that was supplied to him by his invigilator friend was pouring down from his head. With a 'feeble' hand, he got his handkerchief and held it to his bleeding head. In fact in that process, he was able to hide his face from the eyes of the prison officer. He was in so much pain that he could hardly utter a coherent word! In this way, he

concealed his voice and was able to dodge the officers. The moment he heard the suggestion of bringing in an ambulance, he interrupted and asked them to call the police; he offered them his help in tracing Evans whom the authorities thought had escaped. This was a part of his plan in which all officers were trapped.

Evans acting as the injured McLeery fooled all the officers and he became successful in making them believe that the injured invigilator was really trying to help them. Thus, by his superb acting of an injured person, he was completely successful in befooling and confusing the prison officers.