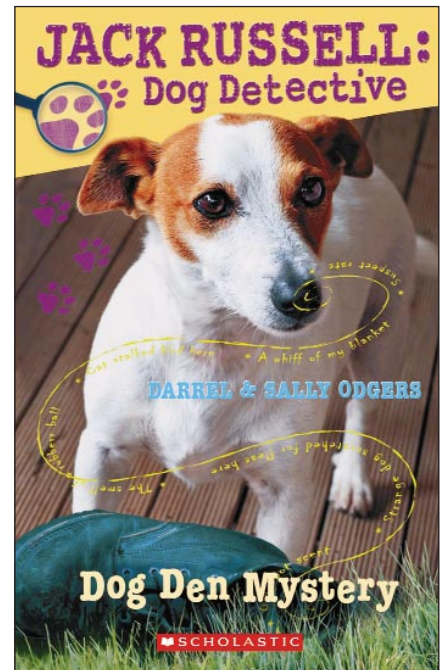


Jack Russell #1: Dog Den Mystery

Written by Darrel and Sally Odgers



◀ The Back Story ▶ with Darrel and Sally Odgers

How do you work when you collaborate on a story, and do you find it easy?

Collaborating on *Dog Den Mystery* was easy. We've written quite a few books together. Ideas for collaborations tend to come from conversations, or else one of us will come up with the bare bones of a plot. We discuss the basic situation and storyline and make decisions about characters, and then write up a synopsis. Sally writes the first draft, then Darrel goes over it and makes written comments. The second draft incorporates these. We don't argue about the story because we collaborate only on subjects and stories that really appeal to both of us.

Where did you get your inspiration to write the Jack Russell: Dog Detective books?

The characters Jack and Foxie were inspired by our own Jack Russells, Ace and Tess. We used male characters because the name 'Jack' is male. Many of the things Jack and Foxie do, like hiding under the bed, guarding belongings and burrowing under blankets, come directly from our observation of Ace and Tess.

The Squeakes are based on some little dogs we knew. We used to call them 'The Yap Pack'. Lord Red is invented. If you look at the triumvirate of Jack, Foxie and Lord Red, you can see a traditional grouping. Jack is the brave, resourceful hero, Foxie is the somewhat cranky but loyal sidekick, and Lord Red is the aristocratic and slightly dim would-be helper.

We've collaborated on detective/mysteries stories before and we had fun thinking of the kinds of mysteries that Jack might solve.

What special approach did you take when you wrote the story?

We set out to make the Jack stories accessible to a wide range of readers. We included humour and puns because these appeal to many readers, and the dog facts and many of the jokes are designed to bring a smile of recognition from anyone who knows dogs, and, specifically, Jack Russells.

Sally has been visiting schools to do talks and workshops for many years and has noted that stories about dogs always bring a great response from children and teachers. Mention of a dog title, or of our own dogs, will inevitably result in a flood of anecdotes about pets. Children who write to authors very often mention their pets along with their parents and siblings, and so we have Jack befriend many different dogs in his adventures, so readers can perhaps identify their own dogs in the stories.

The glossary and facts sections help break up the text, and also add to the accessibility. Newly independent readers shouldn't find the text too daunting, while experienced readers will enjoy the jokes and special terms Jack uses. We hope dog-loving readers of all ages will enjoy Jack's adventures.

How did you try to get across the doggy-ness of your characters?

Right from the beginning, we decided on some rules for the Jack Russell stories.

The first, and most important, was that Jack and Foxie and the other dogs would be dogs, and not disguised humans. They look exactly like real dogs, and act like them. They have the physical capabilities and characteristic behaviour of their breeds. The only concession we made was that Jack and his friends should understand English, and even that isn't much of a stretch since clever dogs undoubtedly understand quite a few phrases and words.

Another rule was that Jack should interact with humans in a natural way. There are no major child characters in the books, because Jack is the protagonist and the hero, and introducing child characters would have taken the focus away from Jack. Jack and Foxie live with Sarge and Auntie Tidge respectively. This gives them plenty of spare time for solving mysteries, as Sarge works away from home and Auntie Tidge is busy with domestic concerns. They regard Sarge and Auntie Tidge as 'our people'. As with Lord Red and his person, Caterina Smith, the bond is one of respect and affection. In general, Jack wants to please Sarge, as long as doing so doesn't run counter to something he wants more.

The third rule was that events and characters should always be seen as Jack would see them. He sees things from his own level, and has to jump high to see over gates or fences. Therefore, he is more likely to look through gates, and will often get himself into Auntie Tidge's or Sarge's arms if he needs a good vantage point.

Jack detects mostly by smell, sound and sight, and uses deduction. His assumptions are not always correct, but they are logical from his point of view. Jack is territorial, and is very concerned with his pack position. He sees himself as the natural leader of the dogs of Doggeroo, and tends to regard Sarge as his equal. He sees the respect Sarge gets in the town, and assumes a similar mantle for himself.

The fourth rule was that Jack's world should be timeless. He lives in a time and place where it is generally safe for a dog to trot about the town. Sarge is an old-fashioned policeman, who is on good terms with the locals. Jack's world includes cars, television and telephones, but not mobile phones or strict dog-control laws. The postman rides a bicycle. Doggeroo is a large country town, with a showground, railway and river. We planned it carefully (and Darrel drew up a map) to allow Jack plenty of points of reference.

What do you like about Janine Dawson's illustrations for *Dog Den Mystery*?

Janine is an expert at getting expression onto dog faces while still having the dogs look like *dogs*. Janine even checked whether we wanted Jack to be a smooth or rough coated Jack Russell. Her interpretation of Sarge and Auntie Tidge is wonderful too. Animal illustrations need a lot of movement in them, and Janine's Jack manages to be both solid and active. His powerful little body and cocky stance give a perfect impression of the way Jack sees himself; as a big dog in a small package.

About the authors:

Darrel and Sally Odgers

Darrel was born in Smithton, in the far north west of Tasmania, but moved east to Moriarty when he was thirteen. I [Sally] was born at Latrobe. We lived nine kilometres apart for seven years and never attended the same school. We finally met when Darrel was 21 and I was 20. Darrel was driving a milk tanker that called regularly at the dairy farm where I was living, and one day he invited me out. We were married in 1979, and have two grown-up children, James and Tegan.

By the time we married, I was already a published author. My first book, *Her Kingdom for a Pony*, was published in 1977 when I was nineteen. I now have over 240 books in print. Darrel and I have collaborated on a number of books. Our first collaboration, *Timedetectors*, a time-travel mystery story, was written in the 1990s.

When we aren't writing, we enjoy walking, gardening, kayaking and looking after our cockatoos, our cat and our Jack Russell terriers, Ace and Tess. We have four 'Jack Russell' books coming out in 2005, and have other ideas for him in the future.

Teaching Ideas ✓

Before Reading ✓

- Look at the cover of *Dog Den Mystery*, paying attention to the title, main illustration, the smaller pictures and the back cover blurb. Ask the students what they think the story will be about. Make a list of their predictions on butcher's paper so that they can tick them off as they read the book.
- What is a mystery? How are mystery stories like puzzles? Talk about the main stages in a crime story: the committing of the crime, the gathering of the clues and the solving of the crime.
- Some of our oldest stories, such as Aesop's Fables, have animals as their main characters. Old favourites like Beatrix Potter's stories are full of animals, too. Collect a selection of animal stories with the students. Why are animal stories appealing? How are the animals in these stories turned into characters that appeal to people? Do they have qualities that make them, in some ways, more like people than real animals?

Activity

Classroom detective

Detectives have to use their powers of observation to solve their crimes. Students can test their own powers of observation and deduction using a game of memory.

Break the class up into groups of four or five students. Sitting on the floor, place a tray of ten assorted small objects with each group. Give the students a few minutes to memorise the objects (without touching them). The teacher chooses one child from each group to be the detective and leave the room. Then the teacher chooses one person from each group to be the thief (by a tap on the shoulder, so the detectives won't hear). The thief then takes one object off the tray and puts it in their pocket. The detectives return. They have two minutes to look at the tray and try to remember what has vanished. Then the detectives come to the front of the room and say what was stolen and by whom. They must give a reason why they think that person is the thief, for instance, 'Josh took the model car, because he likes cars'.

During reading ✓

- The main story of *Dog Den Mystery* is sprinkled with different types of writing. Point out the different types of writing that the authors have used in the book, such as the 'Jack's facts' sections, the glossary, the doggy words and the sniff maps.
- Look at the drawings and ask the students to find the parts of the story that each illustration shows.
- As they come across doggy words, ask the students to think of the original words they were based on.
- Find some words in the story that a detective might use. What do they mean?

Activities

The plot thickens

As you read *Dog Den Mystery*, stop at the end of each chapter and jot down what you think is the chapter's main event. For instance: Chapter One – Jack and Sarge move to Doggeroo, Chapter Two – Jack's squeaker bone is stolen. (If the book is being read to the whole class, the chapter summaries could be written as a class list.)

When you reach the end of the book, you will have what Sally Odgers calls 'the bare bones' of the story. This exercise will help you to learn about plots and how authors plan their writing.

Dog detective dictionary

Darrel and Sally Odgers had a lot of fun making up dog versions of English words and using language that you hear in television detective dramas. Make your own dictionary by dividing an A4 page into four or six boxes and writing one of these words from the book in each box. Then you can try and define the word in your own words, and illustrate it with a sketch.

After reading ✓

- What makes *Dog Den Mystery* a funny story? The things that happen? The characters? The doggy words? Something else?
- Jack is a bold little dog. When he has a problem, he doesn't waste time worrying about it, he goes out and tries to solve it. Discuss with students whether this is a good way to approach problems.
- Jack imagines a very complicated story to explain the disappearance of his squeaker bone, his blanket and Red's ball. Is the real story much simpler? Do you think people often make up very complicated explanations for things where a simple explanation would do?
- Jack is disappointed that he hasn't really caught a criminal and that the mystery wasn't as exciting as he imagined it to be, but do you think the ending where Jack finds a home for Foxie is satisfying?
- *Dog Den Mystery* is illustrated with black ink drawings. Ask the students if they think the drawings add much to the story. Would the book be as much fun to read without them?
- What do you think the humans make of the goings on of their pets?

Activities

Working together

Dog Den Mystery was written by two authors. Break up into pairs. Choose a topic (this could be as simple as one word). Work together to write a very short story on the topic. When you have finished your story, discuss what was fun or difficult about collaborating on a story together.

Cat detective?

Pretend you are one of the cats in the story. Write a short story based on one of the scenes in the book, such as the night that Jack catches Foxie in the dog den. See if you can think of fun cat words based on real words. Don't forget to illustrate your story.

Sniff-and-search

Jack uses his nose to find out a lot about the world. Make a sniff map like the ones in the book of your playground or of your home.

My pet

Write a list of your own pet's characteristics: appearance, personality and likes and dislikes. Now write some pet facts, like 'Jack's facts', that show how your pet might see the world.

Literature study

Use the following ideas to prompt student's understanding of their reading of *Dog Den Mystery*.

- Typically stories are said to have three parts: a beginning, a middle and an end. In a mystery story you might call these three parts the crime, the gathering of the clues and the solving of the crime. Can the students decide where they would break *Dog Den Mystery* to fit into these three parts?
- Doggeroo is an imaginary town. How have the authors given us an idea of the town? How do their descriptions of the town appeal to our different senses?
- Break the class up into small groups and give each group a character to think about. They should write the names of their characters on butcher's paper. List words that describe the character, then talk about how the authors show us that the character has that trait. Students may present their ideas to the class.
- Do you think that the dog characters in this story are strong because we already have an idea of the reputation of the breeds of dog? Would it be a big surprise if a dog behaved in a different way to the way its breed is supposed to? For instance, if a toy poodle was quiet and sensible?
- Compare the dog characters in the story. How are they different? Is it important to have sharp contrasts in a story? What would the story be like if the characters weren't very different from each other?
- The authors have used special language features to convince us that *Dog Den Mystery* really was written by a dog. Would the story be less convincing, funny and interesting without these special features?
- Look at the line drawings in *Dog Den Mystery*. How does the illustrator show these things in her drawings: night, movement, shadows, smells and feelings? Look at individual characters and talk about how the illustrator shows us their personality and makes them look different to each other.
- When authors write about animal characters they often anthropomorphise them, that is, they give them human characteristics. In what ways are Jack, Foxie and Red more like people than real dogs?