

Teachers' Notes on *Fearless* by Colin Thompson, illustrated by Sarah Davis

SYNOPSIS

Although he is called Fearless, and to some people he appears quite fearsome, the Claybourne-Willments' new bulldog puppy is all heart, has apparently little brain and no courage at all. However, as we start to see things from Fearless's perspective, it becomes apparent that the world of human beings can be confusing and inconsistent from a small dog's point of view.

Having the name Fearless seems to exaggerate the puppy's frightened behaviour, but sometimes misunderstandings can work to his advantage. And so it is in this tale, when Fearless's welcoming bark and physical interest in an intruder in the house one night frighten the would-be burglar away.

Cleverly though, this doesn't herald a miraculous change in Fearless. Even though his owners think his fearful days are over, Fearless has his own reasons for reacting as he does to his reward.

THEMES

- Difference between intention and perception
- Difference between what we are called and our characteristics
- Being true to ourselves can reap rewards
- A rose by any other name might not necessarily smell just as sweet
- Being loving is just as important as being smart
- Why names suit some people and others seem misnamed
- Looks can deceive

WRITING STYLE

This is a gently humorous book that can be appreciated on a number of levels depending on the sophistication of the reader. Young readers will enjoy the humour in the incongruity of how Fearless looks and how he behaves.

Older readers will appreciate the more subtle humour that requires them to see everyday things from the dog's perspective, such as the dangerous black handbag or the biting broom, and they will also find humour in humans' misinterpretations of Fearless's actions.

The story also leaves gaps for older readers to fill. For instance, why should the Claybourne-Willments be called Smiths? What does this suggest?

AUTHOR AND ILLUSTRATOR COMMENTS

Colin Thompson: 'I have owned all sorts of dogs, including several sheep dogs, whippets, scruffy mongrels and a bull terrier, but the best dog I ever had was my bulldog, Wallace. He came to live with us when I still lived in England, when he was eight weeks old, and lived until he was twelve. He had the most wonderful personality and nature and loved everyone, especially small children. One particular very small boy that Wallace adored had to sit in a big cardboard box when he came to visit us, so Wallace couldn't bother him. Wallace would rest his chin on the box, and if he could have spoken, he would have been saying, 'I love you, Matthew.'

'As far as I can remember, Wallace was only frightened of two things — large, black handbags and shiny, black crash helmets. If he came into the room and either of them was lying on the floor, he would back away, growling. If the handbag or crash helmet made a move towards him, as they can do sometimes, he would turn and run.

'He used to sleep on a big cushion beside our bed and, contrary to popular belief, did not snore at all. He knew he wasn't allowed to get up on the bed, so he would just put his front legs on the doona and then fall asleep with his back feet on the floor.

'I would love another bulldog, but I think it's too hot where I live, so I've got a whippet and a hyperactive kelpie-cross puppy, who was dumped at the local rubbish tip.'

Sarah Davis: 'Fearless's personality is what drives the story, so I felt like I had to get to know him in all his dogginess. I always think it's a good idea to go to the real world for inspiration before I start drawing, and I used two main sources for cobbling together my ideas for the character of Fearless. I relied on memories of the dog I had when I was a kid, who was very like Fearless in some ways. I also tracked down seven real-life bulldogs!

'I took photos of all seven dogs, but didn't just copy the photos when I was drawing Fearless. Instead, I used them to get a feel for how bulldogs moved and behaved, and how their bodies were built. For Fearless's expressions, I basically imagined what a human face would look like when it was confused, scared or happy, and then tried to draw a bulldog face with that human expression, without losing any of its dogginess — not easy!

‘I wanted to develop Fearless’s family as characters in the pictures as well, but didn’t want to focus on the humans too much, because Fearless is really the unwitting hero of the story, and I thought his personality should shine out.

‘The pictures needed to be realistic enough for Fearless to feel like a real dog. I didn’t want him to look like one of those bulldog cartoon clichés, with bow legs and big fangs. But I wanted the illustrations to be a little bit cartoony and not too serious, because Fearless is such a great character, and the situations he gets into are really funny. So I drew all the characters from my imagination, to give them that unreal, slightly wacky look, and occasionally looked at a live model or a photograph to see how a pose should look. My lovely bloke actually climbed up on our dining room table clutching a handbag to pose as the dastardly robber!

‘For the final paintings, I used nice, thick watercolor paper, sketched lightly in pencil first, then used washes of ink and acrylic paint, and finished it off with Prismacolor pencils.’

EDITORIAL COMMENT

‘The story of Fearless was commissioned about three years ago. Originally, Colin Thompson was going to illustrate the book, as well as providing the very funny text. However, Colin has been so busy with all his books, winning awards and touring that, eventually, I suggested to him that we could get someone else to illustrate the story. Colin immediately suggested Sarah and the book developed from there. It was wonderful to watch the character of Fearless come to life, and Colin couldn’t be happier with the end result. *Fearless* is a funny, lively book that has lots of appeal for children of many ages. There’s plenty of humour in there for adult readers as well!’

MARKETING AND PROMOTION

Sarah Davis has created a wonderful trailer for the book that will appear on the HarperCollins website, Facebook page, YouTube and more.

STUDY NOTES

These study notes focus on both the written text and illustrations, and suggest ways of responding to the book connected to the themes identified above.

Cover

- The cover sets up the reader for the story contained inside. Discuss the contrast between the title, the image of the hiding dog and the expression on his face.

- Invite children to think about what the title might refer to. To assist them with this, talk about the colours used and how these influence what we think the tone of the story will be.

Names

- Photocopy and enlarge the page showing the dogs in the shop window, and invite the class to name all of the dogs.
- Vote to determine which names best match each dog.
- Why do you think the Claybourne-Willments should have been called the Smiths? What do the two surnames suggest to you?
- If he was your dog, what would you call him? Why?

Fear and courage

- Invite students to act out how Fearless feels on page 8, when the car backfires. Use facial expressions to show how being scared feels.
- What are the things that the family is afraid of? Are they real or imaginary?

Misinterpretation

- Why do people find Fearless's smile frightening?
- Share ideas about how Fearless's family could train him better.
- Why don't the family understand Fearless's point of view?
- After the attempted burglary, do you think the family will always see Fearless as brave?

Values

- How important is it to be smart?
- How important is it to be brave?
- Why do you like Fearless?

Illustrations

- Across the three double page spreads when the burglar comes, the colour changes and the background is filled in. Look at the use of shadows, colour,

framing and perspective and talk about why the illustrator has made these choices. Ask the children how these illustrations make them feel.

- Why are we looking down on Fearless and the burglar in the first two pages, and up at them in the third?

Alternative point of view

- During the burglary, we are told what Fearless is thinking. Invite students, with a partner, to write what they think the burglar and Dad are thinking.
- Ask students to write what they think Mum is thinking when she gives Fearless the bone.
- Students can then write the new points of view on Post-its and stick them on the relevant pages. They can then read these pages aloud to classmates and see how different the story becomes.