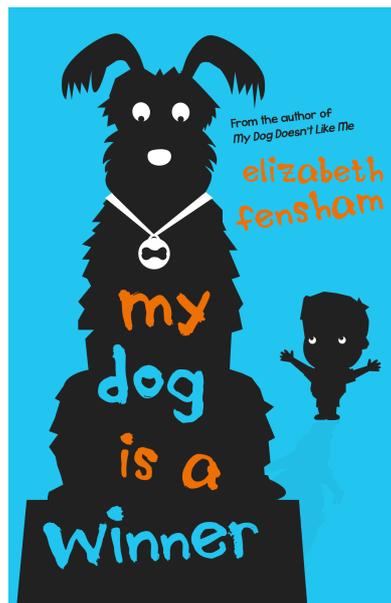


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MY DOG IS A WINNER

Elizabeth Fensham



Teachers' Notes

Written by a practising teacher librarian
in context with the Australian curriculum
(English)

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Synopsis	2
Themes	2
Writing Style	2
Study Notes	2
Author Motivation	6
About the Author	8

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SYNOPSIS

Eric and his faithful best friend, Ugly, are on a new mission to help Eric's moody but lonely sister. But with his dog-therapy work at the school, Ugly becomes withdrawn and listless, and Eric worries that Ugly is compassion-fatigued. How can he help both Gretchen and Ugly to feel better?

The third in this endearing and humorous series, *My Dog is a Winner* shows what can be achieved with a little bit of resilience and a whole lot of grit.

THEMES

- Friendship
- Resilience
- Compassion
- Loneliness
- Child and Animal Psychology
- Dogs; Therapy Dogs
- Taking Action

WRITING STYLE

My Dog is a Winner is written in first person, past tense. The third in this series, Eric's world view is cleverly portrayed through his naïve and honest voice, rendering this a humorous and clever narrative. The inclusion of Ugly's new role as a school therapy dog, together with Eric's plan to cheer up his brooding sister, shows the power of action and the importance of community. With its figurative language and engaging characters, *My Dog is a Winner* is a relatable and endearing text suitable for middle readers aged 8+ years.

STUDY NOTES

- After reading the first chapter, discuss the way in which the author has succeeded in hooking readers into the narrative from the very first sentence: 'My dog, Ugly, is a genius' (p. 1). After finishing the novel, return to this line. Giving evidence from the text, show in what ways this is true.
- Create a character portrait of Eric, using extracts from the text to help describe his traits. Why is Eric such an endearing character?
- Discuss Grandad's advice that 'if someone's being horrible to you, nine times out of ten that person is unhappy about something; you're not to blame because you're not the problem' (p. 3).
- How does Gretchen's character grow and change from the beginning to the end of the novel? What triggers this change?
- Write a reflection in response to Eric's statement: 'Friends are precious' (p. 8).

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- When looking at old photos of himself and Gretchen when they were younger, why does Eric say 'this was the Gretchen I had forgotten about' (p. 10)? Why is it important he remembers this side to Gretchen? Create a photo journal of you and one of your siblings/cousins. Add captions to the photos describing how it captures the nature of your relationship.
- Why does Ugly spend the night sleeping in front of Gretchen's door? How does Eric respond to this gesture?
- Discuss Eric's statement that 'a promise is a huge thing to make' (p. 11). Do you agree with him? Discuss.
- Examine the use of figurative language in *My Dog is a Winner* and the contribution it makes to the text. Examples include:
 - When Gretchen's in a grumpy mood, she can be scary – mouth pulled down and eyes blazing blue bullets of hate (p. 7)
 - I've wandered off track a bit, like a dog chasing a smell (p. 17)
 - When Maryam arrived, she was hanging on to her mum like an oyster clinging to a rock (p. 25)
 - His big whiskery cheeks flapped open like hairy wings (p. 30)
 - The twiggy branches fall around us like a curtain (p. 39)
 - Maryam nodded, her big greeny-blue eyes like the sea on a cloudy day (p. 41)
 - [My tummy] weighs me down like a ship's anchor (p. 58)
 - The classroom was pin-drop quiet! (p. 73)
 - Next to my bed, there's a mountain of books ready to topple any minute (p. 79)
 - Her speckly brown eyes looked bright and interested, like a happy sparrow's (p. 85)
 - She came out from behind the desk to greet us as if we were guests at a tea party (p. 85)
 - Grandad must have been throwing on the lather the way an artist slaps paint at a canvas (p. 98)
 - His shirt collar was too wide; his neck stuck out of it – long, skinny and blotchy, like a turkey's (p. 100)
 - He'd been snail-slow (p. 106)
 - Everything was dark except for a thin blur of pinky-white light along the edge of the world (p. 115)
 - My heart was in my boots (p. 115)
 - A happy song was singing its way up from my chest (p. 147)
 - She elbowed me aside as if we were players on opposing football teams (p. 154)
 - Her cat, Penelope, was draped across her knees like an old rug (p. 159)
 - That cat stared like he wanted to eat you (p. 165)

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- My heart was hammering in my chest (p. 172)
- My arms and legs feel as heavy as four wooden cricket bats (p. 177)
- Everything that happened this afternoon is marching like a brass band through my mind in loud colours and sounds (p. 177)
- Why does Eric like writing? How does he use it to help him process things?
- Eric's teacher, Mr Birdwood, says that the best way to get on top of a problem is to 'set it out in steps' (p. 12). In pairs, set out the steps used by Eric to help Gretchen with her problem.
- Create a 'welcome book' for your school to help new students adjust. Include labelled maps, photos and tips about daily life at the school. Consider labelling with multiple languages according to your school's needs. Similarly, make bilingual labels for objects around your classroom.
- Hold your own 'ancestor talks' like Mr Birdwood's class. Ask your parents where your family came from. Show the various origins of your class on a world map.
- What Australian slang does Maryam have to learn? Add to this list to help students new to Australia in your class or school.
- Eric and his friends learn about 'sharing salt' from Maryam. How does learning from Maryam allow Eric to help Gretchen?
- Conduct your own survey about how to make friends. After gathering your data, hold a class forum about friendship and making new friends.
- What is wrong with Ugly? Why is Eric concerned he may have compassion fatigue?
- Why does Gretchen find making new friends so difficult? What advice would you give her?
- Why does Eric think doggy playdates may help Ugly?
- Before reading Eric's letter to the mayor, write this letter yourself. After reading Eric's letter, compare yours with his. How would you change or edit your letter to sound more mature? What language features has Eric included to be taken more seriously?
- Both Maryam and Eric have learnt a great deal from their grandparents. What have you learnt from your grandparents? Share in a reflection.
- How do Ugly and Grandad help children like Eric, Barnaby and Maryam? Why do they win the mayor's special citizenship awards for their work?
- What is the importance of Barnaby's character in *My Dog is a Winner*? Why does Eric reach out to Barnaby when he has his meltdown? What is the significance of Barnaby saying the last words in this story?
- Describe the relationship between Eric and his grandad. How does Grandad help Eric? In what ways does Grandad allow Eric the space to

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grow and learn? Why, when he sees Grandad dressed for the mayor's meeting, does he say 'my heart bulged in my chest – a bubble of love that travelled up my throat' (p. 101)?

- Locate a map of your local area, taking note of its green spaces and parks. Where are your off-leash dog parks? What are the rules for dogs and dog owners in your local area?
- In the role of Eric, write a journal entry after receiving the letter from the mayor about the trial dog playdate.
- Why does Gretchen get in trouble from her dad about weighing up invitations to see if she gets a better offer?
- What triggers Eric's anger on the morning of the first doggy playdate? Why is his strategy to walk off his anger a good one?
- What helps Gretchen to begin treating Eric more kindly? How important is her apology to Eric? How important is it that Eric accepts her apology? Discuss the attributes of a sincere apology.
- Design the DOG PARK ETIQUETTE sign that appears at the first dog playdate.
- What role does Jimmy play in *My Dog is a Winner*?
- Choose the role of a minor character or one of their dogs to retell what occurred at the first doggy playdate.
- Keep a list of the many idioms throughout *My Dog is a Winner*, discussing their meanings and the ways in which they help Eric. Examples include:
 - With age comes wisdom (p. 3)
 - You're only as good as your word (p. 11)
 - Jumping the gun (p. 97)
 - A red-letter day (p. 108)
 - Don't count your chickens (p. 159)
 - Bigger than Ben Hur (p. 162)
 - The penny dropped (p. 188)
- Why does Eric say 'it takes a bit of time to make real friends' (p. 139)? How has this been true in your friendships? Discuss.
- Why does Eric feel a 'nasty worm twisting in and around [his] heart' when Alex mentions the pet show (p. 142)?
- Sketch what Pippa saw when she attended the doggy playdate (p. 143).
- How important is the theme of hope in *My Dog is a Winner*? How does Eric give people hope through his actions? Use evidence from the text to support your ideas.
- How do we know Gretchen is proud of Eric? Why does this come as a surprise to him?
- Make predictions about the pet show. What clues do we receive from the author about the likely outcome for Ugly and Eric?

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- Why is Eric angry with Ugly at the pet show?
- At the end of the pet show, why does Eric feel like ‘a kid who hadn’t been invited to a birthday party’ (p. 177)? Have you ever felt like this? Share in a reflection.
- Discuss Ms Davies’ comment that ‘every one of us ... is going to be horribly disappointed. It’s an excellent thing to have dreams and goals, but we need to know how to bounce back when things go wrong and to not lost heart’ (p. 184). Why does Eric think of Winston Churchill when she says this? Discuss a time when you have had to ‘bounce back’ after being disappointed?
- Select a scene from *My Dog is a Winner*, such as meeting with the mayor, to dramatise.
- Create a flyer to advertise the ‘doggy playdate’ in the park.
- Write a persuasive speech to convince the mayor to agree to a new dog park.
- In what ways is *My Dog is a Winner* a book about problem solving, resilience and action? What can you learn from Eric about persistence and doing things to benefit others?
- How does Eric’s character grow and change throughout *My Dog is a Winner*?
- Find out more about therapy dogs or consider inviting one in to your classroom.
 - <http://www.k9support.com.au/therapydogsforschools>
 - <https://therapyanimals.org.au/paws-in-schools/>
- Discuss the ending of *My Dog is a Winner*. Why is this such a satisfying and suitable way in which to end the text? How did the author plan for this ending?

AUTHOR MOTIVATION

In the final pages of the second book in the My Dog series, *My Dog Gets a Job*, the joy of meeting the noble hound Ugly prompts nine-year-old Barnaby FitzPatrick, a boy with autism, to utter his first sentence in public: ‘Mum! Ugwee likes me!’ Barnaby’s mother, elated by having witnessed the healing powers of a dog, asks Ugly’s owner, Eric Bright, if Barnaby can have regular contact with Ugly. So I knew this dear dog was going to be a classroom helper, but to write *My Dog is a Winner*, I needed to know what that entailed.

After a meeting with the director of a therapy dog organisation (what an eye-opener to learn the range of places therapy dogs visit – even prisons!), I was put in touch with one of the human volunteers. It was inspirational to observe Marg Moloney and her dog at work in primary school classrooms. I learnt that

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dogs help with a vast range of children's issues – social, emotional and educational.

It is not just children like Barnaby FitzPatrick who benefit, but any child. As the plight of refugee and immigrant children, traumatised by war and/or culture change, has always haunted me, here was a chance to explain something of this to young readers – and to show Ugly's restorative powers. This was how Maryam entered the story.

The final texture to the therapy dog part of the narrative was given by an old family friend. Angela Davies had been headmistress of a London charity school for girls, many of whom were from other cultures and suffering from the resultant upheavals. The scene in the principal's office – where Ms Davies and her dog deal with the distraught Maryam and Barnaby – describes the subtle methods the real Angela Davies employed in similar situations.

So then there was Gretchen. Eric can be exasperating, but Gretchen has not been a particularly likeable sister. She is miserably lonely. In our disconnected western society, loneliness is of epidemic proportions. We need positive, wholesome ways to meet people and make friends. 'Dog meets' in designated parks, where people and their dogs socialise, fit the bill.

Despite his dazzling achievements, Eric had to learn a lesson about winning and losing. How do we pick ourselves up and keep going following bitter disappointments? That's where the pet show came in. After Eric's expectations of glory for Ugly are dashed, he is a 'sore' loser. It is Barnaby FitzPatrick who counsels Eric to face up to some realities, including the need to have more empathy. Barnaby reminds us that people with disabilities also have skills, insights and wisdom that others can benefit from.

The My Dog series is also a homage to the role grandparents and other elderly people play in the lives of the young. Grandad and Maryam's grandparents (although we don't meet them) are the sort of patient, wise encouragers that any child needs.

But apart from the awesome Ugly, Eric is my hero, warts and all. This dorky, flawed kid is also brave, compassionate and a creative problem-solver. This story celebrates being a bit different.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Elizabeth Fensham's first novel, *Helicopter Man*, won the 2006 CBCA Book of the Year for Younger Readers. It was followed by her young adult novels *Miss McAllister's Ghost*, a 2009 CBCA Notable Book for Older Readers, and *Goodbye Jamie Boyd*, shortlisted for the 2009 Bologna Book Fair's White Ravens Award. Elizabeth's younger reader novels include *Matty Forever*, shortlisted for the 2009 CBCA Book of the Year for Younger Readers, and the companions *Bill Rules*, shortlisted for the 2011 Queensland Premier's Literary Awards, and *Matty and Bill for Keeps*. The first of the My Dog series, *My Dog Doesn't Like Me*, was published in 2014, followed by *My Dog Gets a Job* in 2017 and *My Dog is a Winner* in 2020.

The Invisible Hero was published in 2011. It won the Best Book for Language and Literacy Development – Upper Primary (ages 8–12) category in the Speech Pathology Australia Book of the Year Awards in 2012. In 2013, *The Invisible Hero* was shortlisted for the Reading and Enjoyment of Australian Literature (REAL) Awards (Years 7–9), Children's Choice Award; and the Australian Psychological Society's Psychologists for Peace Interest Group, Children's Peace Literature Award. It was also included in the IBBY Project – Outstanding Books for Young People with Disabilities 2013 selection.