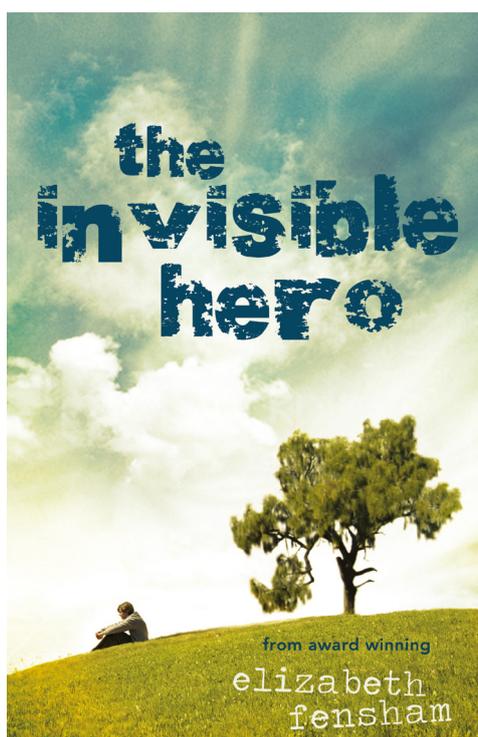


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# The Invisible Hero

by Elizabeth Fensham



## Teachers' Notes

Written by a Practising Secondary Teacher in Context  
with the Australian Curriculum (English)

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**OVERVIEW**

*The Invisible Hero* contains layers of content that will form the basis for study in the upper middle school/ lower secondary classroom. It reminds us that we can't underestimate young people, their capacity to be resilient and the importance of every young person having a significant adult who cares about them in their lives. The book features a range of characters, themes and situations that invite the reader to see the world through different eyes. Activities should allow time for reflection and discussion.

*The Invisible Hero* offers teachers an opportunity to address National Curriculum General Capabilities: Intercultural Understanding, Social Competence, Ethical Behaviour and Teamwork. Readers will hear about some famous and not-so-famous real-life heroes, read quotes from literature and public figures and be exposed to the heroic acts of everyday people, contemporary heroes and historical figures.

**SYNOPSIS**

Philip has spent his whole school life invisible. He's used to being the loner, the odd one out.

When his class is told to keep diaries about any hero or villain, tensions rise as battlelines are drawn. They discover heroes and villains who ruled nations or fought oppression, who were persecuted or persecuted others, and who struggled for justice and changed the world forever.

But Philip and his class soon learn that there are heroes and villains much closer to home and that they come in many disguises.

From award-winning author Elizabeth Fensham comes a book with heart for the hero in us all.

**AUTHOR MOTIVATION**

In planning activities to study the book, it is recommended that teachers familiarise themselves with the author's motivation statement:

For a long time, my hero, the brave and old-man wise Phil Dugan, was a presence hovering in my mind, asking to be made known. He speaks for those young people who battle the challenges of dyslexia and its concomitants – the attitudes of various peers and adults who cannot see beyond chaotically misspelt ideas to the intelligence, courage and nobility that often lie behind.

There seem to be many overlooked heroes. And the heroes society often celebrates are questionable – attention-seeking celebrities and those who zealously pursue wealth and power. Macca and his father represent the smug, self-congratulatory people who openly admire and adopt Machiavellian modes of living. As readers see beneath the polished, assured exteriors of these characters, they will hopefully question the rationale of 'survival of the fittest' and start to redefine 'fittest'.

Macca believes he is entitled to his sense of superiority. He would be unlikely to clearly see his bullying tactics for what they are. His father ensures that. How on earth can adults expect children to be kind to each other when much of the adult world still hasn't got its act together? All we need to do is switch on the TV to see politicians and other community leaders bullying and insulting each other. The fact is, too many grown-ups who should know better are behaving badly. Doesn't this make those anti-bullying posters you see adorning school hallways a bit of a joke?

Thank goodness, there have always been genuine heroes – people who manage to keep the balance, to resist oppressors, to dare to speak the truth, to put more value on people than on ‘outcomes’ and productivity, to model a type of living that is tolerant, caring and peace loving. Learning about these people gives us the courage to be better. As the reader journeys through *The Invisible Hero*, know that discovering some of these heroes was my journey, too. I read about and talked to some inspiring people. In the end, it is the words of Father Gerard Hughes that linger in my mind, ‘Peace starts with the individual.’

### **Heroes and villains featured in *The Invisible Hero*:**

- Machiavelli
- Gandhi
- Mother Teresa
- Albert Einstein
- Sir Edmund Hillary
- Guru Teg Bahadr
- Aung Sun Suu Kyi
- William Burke and William Hare/Dr Robert Knox
- Ernest Shackleton
- Mustafa Kemal Ataturk
- Nelson Mandela
- Lord Bloody Wog Rolo
- Wangari Maathai
- The White Rose – Christoph Probst, Sophie and Hans Scholl et al.

### **References to Literature:**

- Poem – ‘The Road Not Taken’ by Robert Frost
- *The Hobbit*
- Poem – ‘If’ by Rudyard Kipling
- Henry Scott Holland

### **THEMES**

#### Friendship:

- Different types of friendships are highlighted in the book.
- Friendships formed with Genelle and Macca seem to be more about power and protection from bullying by being friends with the bully.
- We also see genuine friendships form throughout the book as classmates begin their acts of kindness and the Little Red group forms.
- Philip’s nan is a friend to many families from the neighbourhood who may otherwise suffer social exclusion. Mrs Canmore is a friend or significant adult to many students.

- Raphaela makes a new friend through Facebook and they enjoy a genuine and respectful exchange of ideas using the social media as their means of communication.

Courage:

- Philip Dugan displays courage to get through each day and he inspires his classmates to demonstrate courage in sticking up for him and themselves.
- Mrs Canmore has the courage to stand up to Mr Quayle.
- Stories of great courage and strength appear throughout the book as we hear of the heroes chosen for study by the students.

Bullying:

- Macca, Genelle, Mr Quayle and Macca's dad use different forms of bullying. For Macca, bullying is his way of staying 'on top' and maintaining his popularity. For Genelle, bullying is about socially excluding others. Mr Quayle bullies Philip about his learning disability and indirectly bullies students by not addressing the bullying behaviour of Macca and his friends. Macca describes his parents' relationship and it is clear that his mother experiences bullying at home.
- Macca's group poison the tree and target Philip's nan as part of their bullying campaign.

Independence:

- Through their study of heroes and the events of the term, the Little Red group discovers that it is not necessary to behave like someone else in order to be friends with them.
- Philip demonstrates his personal capacity for independence in caring for his nan and coping on his own when she is in hospital.

Responsibility:

- The students who adopt the tree and step up when it is destroyed demonstrate a shared responsibility for something that is important to them.
- Macca takes no responsibility for the consequences of his actions.
- Charlie takes responsibility for the attack on Philip's nan and is prepared to face the consequences.
- Philip's nan took on responsibility for Philip when he was a baby and has sacrificed and saved to ensure that Philip gets the care and support he needs. Philip, in turn, steps up to be the family member responsible for his nan as she gets older and has two trips to hospital.

Resilience:

- The students' journal entries reveal the way they respond to difficult or challenging situations. Mustafa uses humour, Ruth cries easily, Raphaela keeps to herself, Philip stays true to himself and does what he thinks his nan and pop would want him to do, and Macca attempts to find ways to punish those who cause him difficulty. The students learn about themselves as they learn about their heroes and the acts of kindness begin. When Philip stands to give his speech and Mr Quayle refuses to hear him we see the resilience that his friends have been building through their refusal to give their speeches.

- Philip has dealt with disappointment, pain, hurt and being bullied. He has to work much harder than other students to edit his work and get it right. He has suffered the loss of his mother and his pop and remains strong when his nan is sick. His optimism and self-belief are evident in the final paragraph of the book (p223).

Trust:

- Mr Quayle breaches the trust of the class and Philip when he reads Philip's journal to the class after telling them their journals are private.
- The students begin to trust each other and demonstrate their trust in each other on the day of the hero speeches.

Love and family:

- Through the characters in the book readers are exposed to a range of different family structures, relationships and traditions. We see love expressed through words, actions and simply through family members interacting. Readers see that love and family relationships continue beyond death through the memories and story telling of family members

## CHARACTERS

The author has created a rich ensemble of characters with varying backgrounds, experiences and points of view. They could represent almost any classroom and will be familiar to many students who may either identify with particular characters or recognise the qualities displayed by some of their classmates. The style of writing in the book lends itself to getting to know the characters deeply and offers ample opportunity to discuss how the author is positioning the reader in relation to each character.

In order of appearance:

Jake 'Macca' MacKinnon (p1):

The book opens with Macca, described by the Principal as a 'good all rounder'. As his character develops, it becomes clear that Macca is a bully. We also learn about Macca's mother and father and gain an insight into the home environment that contributes to some of Macca's views of the world and what is appropriate behaviour. There are opportunities to discuss the way Macca's father treats his mother, the 'survival of the fittest' attitude instilled in Macca by his father and Macca's bullying of his classmates (examples p31, 102, 168.)

Philip Dugan (p4):

Philip is dyslexic and requires hearing aides. He lives with his nan. Philip is intelligent but struggles with his schoolwork due to his difficulties with reading and spelling. Philip is bullied by Macca and his teacher Mr Quayle but demonstrates resilience, strength and a quiet dignity. Through Philip readers learn about his nan, his pop and the 'soup friends' – a group of neighbours from a range of cultures and religions his nan brought together.

Philip's journal entries are published unedited (with poor spelling and grammar) and edited. The difference between the two is stark and gives an opportunity to discuss the challenges faced by students with learning disabilities and the assumptions made about Philip's intelligence due to his problems with reading and written expression.

The edited version of Philip's journal is much more accessible to readers than the unedited version but it is important that readers engage with the unedited pages at times to ensure that they build an understanding about what learning must be like for Philip.

Genelle Harris (p14):

Genelle is Macca's girlfriend and is one of a group of girls who bully other students. Some girls in the class are Genelle's friends simply to protect themselves from being bullied by her.

Raphaela Rosetti (p15):

Raphaela is new to the school and sees her challenge each day as surviving. She is intelligent and capable but is treated as an outsider.

Imogen Webb (p17):

Imogen is not part of the group led by Macca and Genelle. Imogen is one of the outsiders who try to keep quiet and avoid drawing any attention from the bullies.

Tiffany Smith (p19):

Tiffany is a friend of Genelle. She is more interested in socialising and going on Facebook than focusing on her studies.

Mustafa Gulecoglu (p21):

Mustafa's grandfather emigrated from Turkey in the 1960s. His grandfather still lives with the family and, along with his old friends, they teach Mustafa about tradition and culture.

Sam de Grekh (p29):

Sam is Macca's best mate. Sam is not academic but chooses an interesting pair of villains as the focus of his speech; therefore his research, shared bit by bit in his journal entries, is compelling.

Ruth Stern (p70):

Ruth is a thoughtful and intelligent girl with a strong social conscience. She lives with her sister and her mother who is a member of Amnesty International and works two part-time jobs to support her family as a single mother. Ruth's family is Jewish. Her grandparents were Polish refugees.

Other Characters:

- Mrs Canmore – English teacher
- Mr Quayle – History teacher
- Charlie Cheung – Friend of Macca and Sam

- Oliver Johnston – Class member
- Dede – Mustafa's Grandfather
- Nan – Philip's nan
- Pop – Philip's grandfather (deceased)
- Mr Rajendra Singh – Friend of Dugan family, is a Sikh
- Ago Cejvan – Friend of Dugan family from Bosnia, his family were killed in the genocide
- Wahidi family – Friends of Dugan family from Afghanistan
- Tawka Ko – Friend of Dugan family from Burma

### SUGGESTED ACTIVITIES

- Prior to reading, invite students to collaborate online using an EtherPad (<http://ietherpad.com/>) to create a class list of the qualities that make someone a hero. Students could cut and paste the text of the EtherPad into a series of Wordles ([www.wordle.net](http://www.wordle.net)) to display around the classroom throughout the unit of work. During and at the completion of reading, invite students to go back to this list of qualities and consider whether they would like to change or add to these.
- This book features its own heroes and villains. Invite students to choose a character from the book and use examples to explain why that character is a hero or a villain.
- The story is told through the journal entries of the characters. Invite students to start their own journal (or blog) to record their reactions as they read the book. Teachers could provide guiding questions for these entries.
- The adults who feature in the novel have their stories told through the eyes of the students in their journals. Students could choose one of the main adult characters – Mrs Canmore, Mr Quayle or Phil's nan – and write a series of journal articles recording their reactions at key points throughout the book. For example: the day of the speech presentations or the day of the fire prank.
- Use a video camera or a web cam to record interviews or video diaries in character. Students could take on a character from the book and consider how that character would have reacted to events that have been told through the journal entries of other characters.
- Start a 'Heroes and Villains Wall' in the classroom. As heroes and villains are mentioned in the book allocate these to individuals or groups to find an image of that person (if available) and undertake some further research to write a brief biography to add to the wall. Students can be encouraged to do the same thing to add their personal heroes to the wall.
- Take one of the characters presented in a very positive way (i.e. Mrs Canmore or Phil Dugan) and consider the way readers have been positioned by the author.
- Throughout the novel, students give some persuasive arguments as to why their chosen person is a hero or a villain. Invite students to consider which are the most compelling or persuasive statements. Discuss persuasive devices and how writers and speakers can manipulate these.

- In the closing pages of the book the school principal, Mr Peterson listens to Philip's ideas about addressing the bullying culture in the school. Thinking about the school in the book or your own school, invite students to write a script for a speech that they would give about making their school a better place.
- Invite students to read the afterword and acknowledgments pp 224-225. Having read about the author's personal heroes, invite students to consider who their personal heroes are and write about why these people inspire them.
- In her author motivation, Fensham suggests that there is a villain and a hero in each of us. Invite students to discuss this statement and consider whether they agree or not and explain their answer.