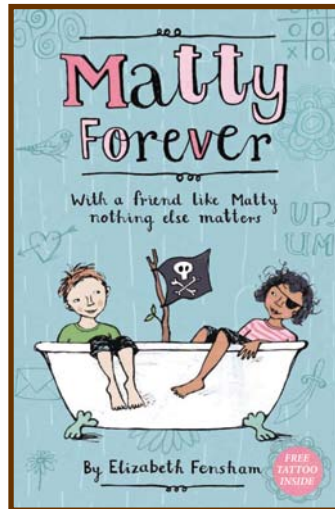


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MATTY FOREVER

Elizabeth Fensham



Teachers' Notes

Written by a Practising Teacher

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SYNOPSIS

Bill O'Connell and his mother are used to moving house. It's been that way ever since his dad has been in jail. However, the latest move, out of the suburbs into the semi-rural hills, proves to be a fortunate one. Bill meets his neighbor, Matty Grube, who turns out to be the most loyal friend a person could have.

Matty comes from a creative and rather alternative family. Her father makes garden furniture, her mother makes jam, her brother is completing a Fine Arts course at university, and her Nan makes crocheted rugs. The family sells their wares at craft markets. There is a close, affectionate bond in this family.

Soon after meeting each other, Matty invites Bill to join her club. In order to belong, Bill must pass three tests of courage and endurance. The tests are amusing for the reader, but very taxing on Bill! Once he has passed, he realises that there are only two club members – Matty and himself. He and his mum are quickly embraced by the Grube family. It turns out to be a happy and secure time for them both. Nevertheless, with the fear of attending a new school and all the associated challenges, Bill is persuaded by Matty to trade secrets in order to have Matty's support and protection.

Bill's secret is that his dad is in jail. Matty's secret is something to do with her name and her family. It is not Matty, but Matilda. And it is not Grube, but Grub. Matty faithfully keeps Bill's secret, but Bill betrays Matty's secret in a weak moment and to the very worst sort of person. The repercussions are publicly humiliating for Matty. Bill has a painful journey to make in order to achieve reconciliation. But he gets there.

THEMES

Friendship, betrayal, acceptance, belonging and reconciliation are the key themes of this novel. Not only are these seen in the unfolding dramas in Matty and Bill's friendship, they are also seen on other levels. There is Bill's need to hear certain truths from his mother about his father who has betrayed his family repeatedly. There is also a long running feud between two elderly neighbours, Mr. Riley and Mrs. Flint, that is resolved in the closing pages of the story. Matty and Bill also learn to accept their backgrounds.

Matty and Bill also learn, during the course of the book, to accept their backgrounds and the importance of finding people who 'get' you and your family. Forgiveness comes into play when Bill betrays Matty and then seeks her forgiveness.

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Family is another theme. Matty's family is happy and well-functioning. Bill's family has been fractured by his father's imprisonment. His mother is devoted and hard working, but she and Bill have some painful challenges. The new girl at school, Isabelle Farquay-Jones, is the only daughter of a very wealthy family, but her family life has its deprivations, too. Her father is frequently overseas on business and her mother seems distant and self-absorbed. Isabelle has been given material possessions instead of love, and she assumes that she can 'buy' friendship too.

WRITING STYLE

This story has been written in a deliberately simple style. This is not purely because the book is aimed for a young readership, but because it is written from Bill's point-of-view.

Even though the novel is in the third-person, one can believe that the events and feelings are described in a language Bill would choose. At certain moments, the simplicity is beguiling as there is something hidden from Bill's consciousness that only the older or adult reader can perceive. Some of the humour takes this form. For example, Bill might be deeply impressed with Matty's intensely dramatic dance and operatic performances, but the older or more sophisticated reader is amused, instead.

AUTHOR MOTIVATION

Having been briefly engaged to be married at the age of three years old and, as an adult, having watched my two primary-aged sons set off for school with bunches of flowers or cheap tin rings for sweethearts, I believe that children can have special friendships that verge on a very pure love.

Matty and Bill have such a friendship. Their love is expressed through a mutual respect and a delight in each other's company – and it is sealed on the last page of the novel when Matty gives Bill permission to kiss her. The reality of their youthfulness and unreadiness for anything more complex is expressed by Matty who actually gets Bill to kiss her foot. She is not ready for even a kiss on the cheek.

The kiss on the foot has a further significance, however. Matty is a strong young girl. She is the source of all information and the instigator of adventures and other enterprises. She is the hero of the novel. Matty's decision to get Bill to kiss her foot is a rather amusing way of asserting her dominance after he has just caused such anguish by betraying her. Nevertheless, even more important is the understanding of the process of reconciliation that must begin with forgiveness.

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THINKING AND DISCUSSING

- If you had a secret club, what tests of courage and endurance would you set for someone to gain membership and why? Are your ideas reasonable e.g. safe?
- Make a friendship chart listing the characteristics of a good friend.
- List your special friends and why they are important to you (e.g. you could list the traits – loyalty, kindness, generosity – that they have).
- Bill’s mum, Pam, quotes him a proverb, “A man of many companions may come to ruin. But there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother.”
 - a. What is a proverb?
 - b. What do you think this proverb means?
 - c. Make up your own proverb about friendship.
- In a group, make a list of the novels, poems, short stories and quotations about friendship. Share the best with the class.
- List the ways Matty is a good friend.
- List the ways Bill learns to be a better friend.
- Matty and her family have quite a lot of fun. How do they do this?
- Discuss with your group why keeping someone’s secret is important. Is there any situation where it is alright not to keep a secret?
- Discuss what you think of Bill giving away Matty’s secret. What should or could Bill have said to Isabelle instead?
- How does Isabelle make friends? What advice would you give Isabelle (e.g. about school and home life)?
- What are the best ways to be a friend to someone like Bill who has a really heavy, dark secret in their life?
 - a. Look up the meaning of the word “reconciliation” in the dictionary.
 - b. In Australia, “reconciliation” has a special importance to do with indigenous people. How did Australians recognise this in 2008?

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- c. Discuss how many examples of reconciliation you can find in this story.
- d. What first step has to happen before you can have reconciliation?
- How would you describe someone who is brave? How did Bill demonstrate bravery in the story?
- At the end of the story, Bill makes some big decisions about the sort of grown-up he wants to be. What are these decisions? How will they help Bill live a happier life?
- In a small group, discuss what sort of grown-up you want to be and do not want to be.

ACTIVITIES

- Find a bare external wall in the school where your class could make a mural that celebrates friendship.
- Have a look through some old-fashioned children's activity books. Here are some examples:
Boys' Own Annual;
Girls' Own Annual;
Cole's Funny Picture Book.
- Interview an elderly person about the games they used to play when they were children. Perhaps have an elderly volunteer to teach the class how to play an old-fashioned game like marbles or hopscotch!
- Discuss in your group the best ways you can make your own fun without any expensive toys or technology. Decide on an activity and do this with another group or the class.
- In small groups choose one of the following scenes from a container and do a drama representation (e.g. freeze frame):
 - a. Bill meeting Matty over the fence.
 - b. Bill and Matty in the bath on the day she invites him to be in the club.
 - c. Bill up the tree with family, friends and neighbours down below.
 - d. Bill standing up to Freckles and his gang.
 - e. Matty putting on one of her concerts with Bill as curtain puller.
 - f. Isabelle getting Bill to betray Matty.
 - g. Mr. Riley and Mrs. Flint making peace.
 - h. Bill saying 'sorry' to Mat – and the bath scene follows.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Elizabeth Fensham lives in Victoria's Dandenong Ranges, where she is Head of English at a local school. She is married to an artist and has two adult sons. Fensham has been writing in earnest for the last twenty years. Her first novel *Helicopter Man* won CBCA Book of the Year for Younger Readers. *Miss McAllister's Ghost* was published in March 2008, *Goodbye Jamie Boyd* was published in September 2008 and *Matty Forever* was published in September 2009 and was published in September 2009.