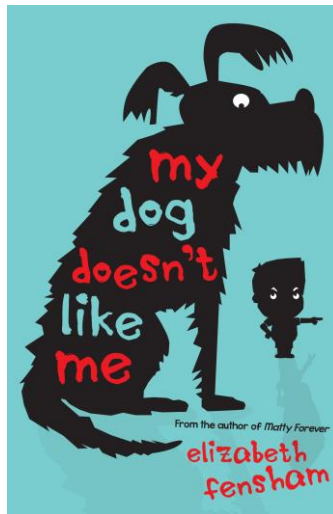


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# MY DOG DOESN'T LIKE ME

Elizabeth Fensham



## Teachers' Notes

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

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**SYNOPSIS**

Eric has a problem. His dog doesn't like him, and to be quite honest, Eric's not all that keen on Ugly either. In fact, he sees Ugly as – well – as a disappointment really. But when his family wonder if they should give the naughty dog away to a family who can look after him properly, Eric decides it's time to earn Ugly's affection and respect once and for all.

*My Dog Doesn't Like Me* is a humorous yet endearing story of a boy, a dog and a new training regime. But will Eric's efforts be enough to save Ugly from leaving forever?

**THEMES**

Relationships:

- Eric has always wanted a dog, but things with Ugly don't seem to be working as he had imagined they would.
- Eric shares a special bond with his Grandad; sometimes, Eric feels that his grandfather is the only one who has time for him.
- Eric's older sister, Gretchen, is bossy and puts him down. This stops when Eric stands up for himself.
- Eric's friends help him devise a plan to get Ugly to like him.

Loneliness:

- Eric's parents buy him a dog as they are worried he is lonely.

Dogs:

- Dogs need to be given firm boundaries by their owners.
- Pet owners need training as much as their pets do.
- Dogs and their owners share a special bond.

Responsibility:

- Eric learns that owning a pet comes with responsibility.
- Responsibility sometimes means putting others before yourself.
- Responsibility relies on perseverance.

**WRITING STYLE**

*My Dog Doesn't Like Me* is written in first person, past tense. The text is cleverly written and funny. Eric is honest and believable and shares what a lot of people would think but perhaps never say. The narrative is fast-paced and is suitable for middle readers aged 8+ years. The themes and messages in the text are very age appropriate.

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## STUDY NOTES

- In the opening scene, we learn that Eric is running away. What can we learn about Eric from this scene? Discuss what he has chosen to pack and the way in which he is going about running away. What can we infer about Eric and his family?
- After reading the first few pages, what can be presumed about his relationship with his sister, Gretchen? Can you make predictions about this relationship?
- When Eric realises that the old man in the park is actually his grandfather, how does he feel? Why? What does this tell us about Eric?
- When Eric is sent to his room for being rude to Gretchen, he begins writing, saying it feels good to get things off his chest. As you read *My Dog Doesn't Like Me*, keep your own daily journal to share how you are feeling about certain things in your own life.
- Why does Eric's comment to Gretchen that she is 'the sister of a dog' get him into trouble?
- Eric feels that no one takes him seriously. Have you ever felt like this? Write a reflection to share a time when you too felt that no one took you seriously.
- Why is Eric disappointed with Ugly? What behaviours of Ugly's has Eric perhaps misinterpreted?
- Gretchen often teases Eric and then throws the words 'just joking' at him after saying something mean. Eric says, 'I know it's unfair to say mean things and then pretend it was a joke' (p14). Discuss.
- Examine the use of figurative language in *My Dog Doesn't Like Me* and the contribution it makes to the text. Examples include:
  - Her ginger cat, Penelope, was draped over her lap like a rug. (p2)
  - The sun was sinking lower and lower in the sky. (p3)
  - Spooky fingers of shadow were sliding across the grass towards me. (p3)
  - My heart started leaping about in my chest; it was going in all directions like a terrified wild bird trapped in a room. (p5)
  - ...he follows her around like a bad smell. (p9)
  - Tears were leaking from my eyes... (p11)
  - Gretchen's mouth went the shape of a squashed strawberry. (p14)
  - Mum looked red in the face like a volcano about to spew lava. (p26)
  - ...pouncing on it like a lion attacking its prey. (p44)
  - Slower than a snail, mind you. (p74)
  - It looked like blood and guts all over the kitchen floor. (p85)

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- Eric describes building the dog kennel as one of the best times he's ever spent with his grandfather. Why does he enjoy this so much?
- When Eric goes to the dog shelter to choose a puppy, he describes this as 'one of the best but saddest days of my life – both at once' (p18). Why does he feel like this?
- Write a poem from Eric's point of view about the dog shelter.
- Why does Eric choose Ugly? Why does he decide to call him Ugly?
- Discuss the importance of names. Does Ugly's behaviour reflect his name? What is your pet's name? How did your family come to choose that name? Discuss.
- Idioms feature in *My Dog Doesn't Like Me*. Discuss idioms and their meanings. Add your own to the list below:
  - Crocodile tears
  - Snake in the grass
  - Washing hands
  - Indian giver
  - Proof is in the pudding
  - Cupboard love
  - As easy as pie
- Eric is jealous of the attention Ugly gets from his mum and begins to interpret things that happen in ways not intended, for example, 'So Mum thought I was a lazy lump as well as a whinger and a creep. Now I knew for sure. Mum didn't love me.' (p27) Discuss the mistake that Eric is making by confusing his mum's frustration with his behaviour with the way she feels about him.
- Discuss Dad's idea that 'we should be grateful for the kindness people show us and we shouldn't use and abuse their friendship' (p31). How can this idea be applied to your own relationships?
- How do Milly and Hugh help Eric? Why is he lucky to have these friends? Why does Eric comment that 'sharing my problems with High and Milly was a sensible thing to do' (p38)? Write a reflection about the importance of friendship, giving examples from *My Dog Doesn't Like Me* to support your ideas.
- Create and conduct your own questionnaire/survey about getting your dog to like you (p35). Collate the results and present to the class.
- Slowly, Eric begins to realise that many of Ugly's habits and behaviours aren't all Ugly's fault. He also sees that he is in the habit of only noticing what Ugly does wrong, rather than what he does right. Discuss the importance of looking for positives when facing problems.
- What clues do we get that Ugly actually does like Eric?
- Create a timetable that demonstrates your responsibilities with your own pet. Reflect on this timetable. Are you 'pulling your weight' when it comes to being a responsible pet owner? What changes could you make?

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- Why does Gretchen stop teasing Eric so much? What does this tell us about being bossed around by others?
- Create a comic strip or drawing that depicts the scene in which Ugly chases Mrs Manchester's cat, Penelope (pp 71, 72).
- Eric thinks that Ugly is emotionally bullying him (p72). What does this mean? Is this what Ugly is doing? Discuss.
- Why does Dad think that 'forgetful' is an excuse for 'don't want to' (73)?
- Write a report card for either Ugly or your own pet.
- Why does Eric like the word 'potential' (p75)?
- What is it that makes Eric finally realise he's beginning to like his dog?
- Why does Maggie, the dog trainer, think that Eric is the 'main part of the problem' (p81)?
- Explain what Eric means when he says, 'I felt like someone drowning because they were trying to rescue someone else who was drowning – hopeless.' (p84)
- Grandad tells Eric, 'you're blaming everyone but yourself. If you keep doing that, you'll never grow up. Show some character, Ec. Like I've said before: face up to yourself.' (p86) Why is it important for Eric to hear this? Why might it have meant more coming from Grandad? Why does Eric think that it's not fair to use Ugly to teach him to be a man?
- How has Eric changed by the end of *My Dog Doesn't Like Me*?
- Write a list of the life lessons that Eric has learnt in *My Dog Doesn't Like Me*. Of these, which are the most important 'take-away' lessons for you personally? Why?
- Create a Venn diagram that compares the behaviour of humans and dogs.
- Select a scene from *My Dog Doesn't Like Me* to dramatise in a Reader's Theatre.
- Write an article suitable for the school newsletter entitled 'How to make your dog un-bored'.
- Create a character profile of Grandad. What are his personality traits? How does he help Eric in *My Dog Doesn't Like Me*?
- Grandad shares stories of his childhood with Eric. Reflect on a time when a relative or family friend has shared stories with you. Why is this important?
- Explore the importance of relationships with grandparents further by reading picture books such as *Grandfather* by Jeannie Baker, *Me, Oliver Bright* by Megan de Kantzow and Sally Rippin, and *Potato People* by Pamela Allen.
- Compare *My Dog Doesn't Like Me* with picture books such as *The Big Little Book of Happy Sadness* by Colin Thompson, *Fearless* by Colin

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Thompson, *The Ugliest Dog in the World* by Bruce Whatley, and *Dear Mrs LaRue: Letters from Obedience School* by Mark Teague.

- Create your own book such as that written by Eric about how to train your dog (or other types of pets) – *My Dog Loves Me!*

**AUTHOR MOTIVATION FROM ELIZABETH FENSHAM**

I once heard a boy claim that his dog didn't like him. It struck me as hilarious and, at the same time, probably indicative of how much care he gave his dog. I immediately thought that probably the mum in the family had shouldered the tough parts of caring for the dog. In this way, it came to me that I'd write a story about a boy whose dreams come true when he's given a dog for his birthday, but who has to learn that with this privilege comes responsibility.

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Elizabeth Fensham has been writing in earnest for the last twenty years. Her first novel, *The Helicopter Man*, won the 2006 CBCA Book of the Year for Younger Readers. Previous young adult novels include *Miss McAllister's Ghost*, winner of the 2009 Age 'Book of the Year', and *Goodbye Jamie Boyd*, which was shortlisted for the 2009 Bologna Book Fair's White Raven Award.

Fensham's first younger reader, *Matty Forever*, was shortlisted for the 2009 CBCA Book of the Year for Younger Reader. The companion, *Bill Rules*, was shortlisted for the 2011 Queensland Premier's Literary Awards. Her most recent book is the moving *The Invisible Hero*, which won the 2012 Speech Pathology, Book of the Year Award and is listed as an IBBY Book.

Elizabeth Fensham lives in Victoria's Dandenong Ranges. She is married to an artist and has two adult sons.