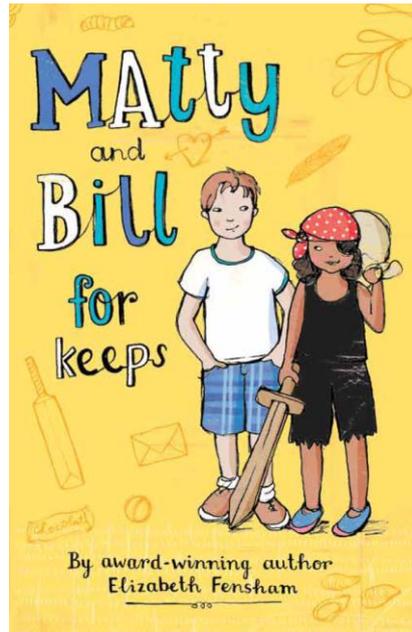


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MATTY AND BILL FOR KEEPS

Elizabeth Fensham



Teachers' Notes

Written by a practising Teacher Librarian
in context with the Australian Curriculum
(English)

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SYNOPSIS

Matty and Bill for Keeps is the third and final instalment of Elizabeth Fensham's adventurous series about best friends Matty Grub and Bill O'Connell. Continuing from *Matty Forever* and *Bill Rules*, the pair inducts the new boy at school, Crispin de Floriette, into their club. The trio embark on a mission to protect Bill's ex-jailbird dad, Troy, from the shady Maggot.

With some help from Matty's Nan, who imparts Koori traditions and knowledge to the three young friends, Maggot's plans are foiled. However, a different problem is about to affect Matty's and Bill's friendship.

Bill is close to finishing primary school and is approaching the start of puberty. This catches both he and Matty unawares. Unsure of how to deal with his recent mood swings and changes, he eventually realises that childhood can slip away without you noticing.

THEMES

Friendship:

- Bill and Matty welcome the new boy, Crispin, into their club.
- Friendships change over time.
- Bill and Matty's friendship changes as Bill approaches puberty.
- Friends make allowances for one another.

Growing Up:

- Bill is not expecting the changes he experiences towards the end of the book.
- He is unsure of how to handle the changes in his friendship with Matty.
- He realises that childhood can finish before you realise; he also finds that friendship is about more than just your own personal issues.

Indigenous Culture:

- Nan teaches Bill, Matty and Crispin aspects of the Koori culture.

Language Features:

- Euphemisms
- Pig Latin
- Rhyming Slang
- Personal Letters
- Personal Emails

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WRITING STYLE

Matty and Bill for Keeps is written in third person, past tense. Narrated from Bill's perspective, the voice is honest and shows the transition of Bill from child to emerging adolescent. The text is fast-paced and instantly engaging. Characters are well-drawn and tangible; the dialogue is genuine and realistic.

STUDY NOTES

- The story begins with Bill and Matty in their 'Think Tank' with Matty's dog, Uncle Len.
 - This chapter contains some 'backfill' information (also known as 'backstory') for the reader about the main characters of the series.
 - Make a table of the characters mentioned in this chapter and information the reader gains from this first chapter about each character.

- Chapter 2 introduces the reader to the new boy at school, Crispin de Floriette.
 - What clues does the author give about both Crispin's character and Bill's first impressions of Crispin?

- Write a recount of a time when you were new at school.
 - This might have been your very first day at school or an occasion when, like Crispin, you were the only new person.

- What does Bill mean when he says, 'the world could be a scary place for anyone who was a bit different' (p18)?
 - Have you ever experienced this, either first hand or as an observer?
 - Why does Bill empathise with Crispin and wish to rescue him?

- Matty decides to use Pig Latin to encode her messages (p23, p24).
 - Try writing a message to a friend in Pig Latin.
 - See p213/214 for an explanation of Pig Latin.
 - Swap with a friend and try to decode their message from Pig Latin into ordinary English.
 - Discuss the author's choice to include Pig Latin in the text.

- Matty considers writing her message in lemon juice (p24).
 - Try writing your own message in lemon juice.
 - Swap messages with a friend.
 - With an adult's help, use a hot iron to reveal the message.

- Crispin likes to knit and Nan loves to crochet.
 - Learn how to knit or crochet.

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- Your class could create a blanket made out of individually knitted or crocheted squares.
- On p34/35, Crispin explains to Aunt Victoria on the phone that Isabelle forced him to wear something and do something that he refused to do.
 - In small groups, brainstorm a range of things he might have had to wear and do.
 - Share these ideas with the class.
 - Discuss the author's technique of using a phone conversation to allude to these circumstances, while at the same time allowing the reader to use their imagination.
- Discuss Matty's comment that 'friendship needs space to grow, and it needs to be shared with others' (p49/50). Do you agree with Matty?
 - Write a reflection of a time that one of your friendships changed or a new friend joined your group. How did this affect your friendships?
- Trying to encourage Crispin, Matty quotes Winston Churchill and President Roosevelt (p54).
 - "Never, never, never, never give up." – Winston Churchill
 - "There's nothing to fear but fear itself." – President Roosevelt
 - Find other inspirational quotes and discuss the philosophies behind them.
 - Create a wall of these quotes.
 - Alternatively, share a famous quote that you find inspiring with your class, explaining why it encourages you. What were the circumstances surrounding those famous words?
- Sound is used as a weapon twice in *Matty and Bill for Keeps* – once when Crispin scares Freckles with his trumpet, and again when Nan sings to unnerve Maggot.
 - Crispin mentions the Old Testament story of Joshua using noise as a weapon. Read this story from the Bible (Joshua 6:1-27).
 - You could also investigate the science of sound vibration.
- Crispin's family has a Latin motto. What would your family's motto be?
- In Chapter 13, Matty defends Crispin against allegations from Isabelle's family.
 - Re-create this scene in a role play and present it to the class.
- Discuss Aunt Victoria's comment that 'luck is with the brave' (p93).

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- Aunt Victoria and Nan form a bond very quickly.
 - What do these two ladies have in common?
 - What can they learn from one another?
- As you are reading the novel, keep a list of the aspects of Koori culture that Nan imparts.
- Re-read the description of Maggot on p100.
 - Discuss the aspects of description and how effective descriptions add to the text.
 - Choose another character from *Matty and Bill for Keeps* and write your own literary description, remembering to 'show, not tell'.
- Maggot is a negative influence on Bill's father, Troy.
 - In small groups, discuss ways in which family and friends can influence us.
 - Include discussion of both positive and negative influences.
- Matty creates a list of skills that the three club members have.
 - Write a list of your skills and those of a few of your friends.
 - If you were in a similar situation to Bill, Matty and Crispin, how would your skills stop Maggot?
- Crispin introduces Bill and Matty to rhyming slang. See p214 for more examples of this.
 - Find examples of popular rhyming slang.
 - In addition, brainstorm a list of objects and invent your own rhyming slang for these.
- Matty and Crispin write an email to Maggot using rhyming slang.
 - Write your own email to a friend using rhyming slang.
- Maggot wants to dump toxic waste into a creek.
 - Create a short information report that explains why this is hazardous, and suggest some alternatives to disposing of such waste.
 - Include household substances that could be disposed of more carefully.
- Nan says that her Irish grandfather was a 'belt and braces' man.
 - What does she mean?
 - How might you apply this mantra to your life?

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- In order for her ancestors' gift of the song to be passed down, Matty has to earn their respect.
 - Towards the end of the novel, Nan says that Matty has earned this right.
 - Give examples from the text that show how Matty has earned respect.

- In Chapter 25, Bill starts to change. His body is maturing.
 - Discuss the ways in which this changes his relationship with Matty and his mother.
 - How do the characters, including Bill, deal with these changes?

- What does Bill mean when he realises 'that all amazing people must have their own odd weaknesses – even Matty' (p193)?
 - What are your weaknesses?
 - How do you deal with these weaknesses?

- Discuss the use of euphemisms in the text. (See p195.)

- Matty writes a beautiful letter to Bill on p196.
 - Re-read this letter and discuss how it captures the theme of growing up.
 - Matty also wishes to give Bill something to help him 'remember what it was like to be twelve'. Reflect on your current age. How will you remember what it is like being that age?
 - Write a letter to yourself that helps explain what you are like at your current age.

- Nan is a mentor and confidant to Matty but also to Bill. She is wise and gentle in her approach to nurturing the two young friends, particularly as their friendship dynamic is changing.
 - Write a reflection of someone you regard as a mentor.
 - How has this person helped you to grow?

- On p198, Bill feels 'sad and silly, both at once.' What does he mean?
 - Describe a time when you have felt like this.

- In small groups, discuss Bill's thought on p199 – 'Do you throw a good friend aside just because your own life is moving in another direction?'

- Write a response to Bill's realisation on p200 that 'normal, everyday people do repeat mistakes. You tell yourself that you've learnt your lesson, but you haven't.'

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- Consider in your response how this realisation helps Bill to better understand his father and the repeated mistakes that Troy too has made in his life.
- Discuss the author's choice to use the metaphor on p200 of the gumnut maturing into a tree to symbolise that Bill is growing into a young man.
- Although he is changing, Bill says that, 'the noble thing to do would be to pretend he still enjoyed her games.' (p204)
 - What does this realisation reveal about Bill?
 - When have you done this for a younger friend or relative?
 - Have others done this for you?
 - Discuss the importance of this theme in *Matty and Bill for Keeps*.

AUTHOR MOTIVATION

I never intended to write a series about dear Matty and Bill, but after the second book, I just knew the story needed finishing. Kids grow up, but they don't have to forget their friends or leave them behind. So *Matty and Bill for Keeps* is not just more fun and adventure, but also about the big, scary leap into being a grown-up.

My older son, Dr Alexander Fensham, inspired me to write about Bill's struggle with growing up. At the age of seventeen, my son wrote a poetic, heart-wrenching farewell to childhood. Through this piece, I could see how unknowingly we might play a special game or do something childlike for the very last time. He writes, 'If only we were aware of those last moments of childhood.'

I was also inspired by Aboriginal elder Aunty Lila Kirby. The scene in *Matty and Bill for Keeps* where Nan's singing causes a wombat to chase Maggot was inspired by a true story. In 2011 at Avoca Beach, NSW, a ship was due to be scuttled, which would pollute the ocean. To stop this from happening, lots of people linked arms along the seashore and kept up a repetitive chant. The lady who led the singing was Aunty Lila Kirby. I really wanted to join in, but I was too shy to ask if I could. I should have put my shyness behind me, because protecting the environment is more important.

In actual fact, Aunty Lila was singing in whales, but at that time of year, I think the whales were a long way away. Instead, an enormous pod of dolphins – maybe a couple of hundred – turned up and frolicked around the ship, which held up the scuttling for ages. TV news cameras showed stunning close-ups of the dolphins and no-one dared to shoo them away with the cameras around. Aunty Lila explained to me how the gift of singing is passed along and her beautifully expressed words are used in *Matty and Bill for Keeps*.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Elizabeth Fensham lives in Victoria's Dandenong Ranges. She is married and has two adult sons. Fensham has been writing in earnest for the last twenty years. Her first novel *The Helicopter Man* won the CBCA Book of the Year for Younger Readers in 2006. Previous young adult novels include *Miss McAllister's Ghost* and *Goodbye Jamie Boyd. Matty Forever*, the first book in the Bill and Matty series, was shortlisted for the CBCA Book of the Year for Younger Readers in 2009. The companion *Bill Rules* was published in 2010 and was shortlisted for the Queensland Premier's Literary Awards in 2011.