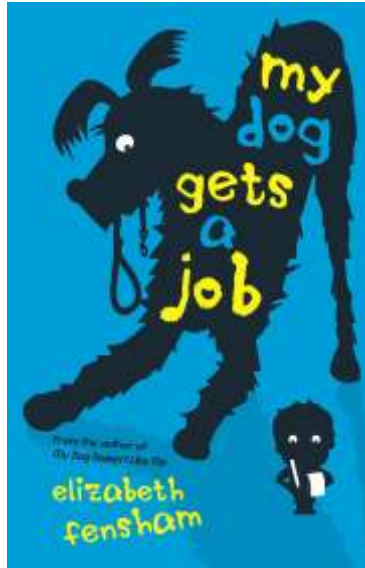


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# MY DOG GETS A JOB

## Elizabeth Fensham



### Teachers' Notes

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

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**SYNOPSIS**

When Eric's dog, Ugly, gets into endless trouble at home, Eric decides there's only one solution – to find Ugly a job. But what kind of job would suit a dog?

With the help of his grandad and friends, Milly and Hugh, Eric embarks on a mission that challenges his resilience, and with very surprising results.

Endearing and humorous, *My Dog Gets a Job* is the companion to *My Dog Doesn't Like Me*, and will appeal to pet lovers everywhere.

**THEMES**

- Friendship
- Resilience
- Perseverance
- Acceptance/Inclusion
- Autism
- Dogs

**WRITING STYLE**

*My Dog Gets a Job* is written in first person, past tense. Eric's voice is honest and unfiltered, making the text both humorous and clever. The inclusion of a new boy at school who has autism, coupled with the behavioural issues of Eric's dog, Ugly, offers nuanced insight into the themes of resilience, acceptance and inclusion. It is 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. How does the complication build over the first chapter, even though we don't quite know exactly what Eric's problem is? Why is it engaging for readers to have the room to speculate as they read?
- Why does Eric like the fact that Miss Jolly calls him a writer? What influence does this positive comment have on Eric?
- Eric uses writing as a way of expressing himself when feeling sad and angry. How does his purpose for writing change slightly during *My Dog Gets a Job*?
- How do you express yourself when feeling sad and angry? As you are reading the text, keep a journal that allows you to share your feelings about various things. Reflect on the process of writing about your concerns and joys. How does this make you feel once you've finished writing?

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- What lessons does Eric have to learn about looking after a dog? Share some lessons you have learnt about yourself from owning a pet.
- Why does Grandad call Eric's failure to write a 'dog information book' a 'sin of omission' (p5)? Why does Eric feel so bad about not writing this book?
- Why does Eric say, 'It's amazing how talking with another person about something that is getting you down makes it easier after that to open up to other people' (p5)? What is the connection between Eric sharing his feelings and his willingness to start writing again? Share a time when talking with someone about a problem has helped you.
- Eric learns about alliteration and idioms at school. Create a Word Wall, adding idioms and examples of alliteration from *My Dog Gets a Job*.
- Examine the use of figurative language in *My Dog Gets a Job* and the contribution it makes to the text. Examples include:
  - Gretchen's rage usually fizzles out like a balloon that's lost its air (p2)
  - She let out a long *aaaagh!* that sounded like a cave-woman with a wooden club going into battle (p14)
  - The hens were like kids in the schoolyard ... On the other hand, the ducks were like soldiers (p18)
  - Bits of dog dribble were dangling down like those stalactite things that hang down from the ceilings of caves (p19)
  - The ducks waddled in like really old people with bad hips (p19)
  - I saw Mrs Manchester's cat, Penelope, crouching like a ginger tiger in the grass (p21)
  - She flipped over the fence like an Olympic high-jump champion (p22)
  - The hallway was as dark and as quiet as a shadowy night (p23)
  - I could hear Grandad snoring like an out-of-tune trumpet (p23)
  - He was like one of the Queen's guards at Buckingham Palace (p24)
  - I became like a boiling hot volcano ... The volcano erupted and I yelled, 'My dog would never, ever like you!' (p45)
  - The tops of your arms are starting to flap like chicken wings (pp51-52)
  - He looked like a confused sheep who was about to be sheared (p56)
  - 'What?!' she yelled, her eyes blazing like killer laser beams (p72)
  - 'My business will be a disaster – like a party where hardly anyone turns up' (p75)
  - He was as bald as an egg (p76)
  - Digging her heels into the grass like tent pegs (p80)
  - Her face was like one big question mark (p82)
  - Ugly ... wags his tail like a windmill (p111)
  - Like birds sing just before sunset, humans seem to get active, too (p115)
  - He says Ugly is like a herd of bulls in a china shop (p125)

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- Re-read the description of Ugly on p9, taking note of the way in which Eric describes Ugly both physically and with regards to his personality. Using similar techniques, write a description of your own pet, or of someone else's pet if you don't own one.
- What does Eric mean when he says, 'grown-ups expect you to behave better than shorter, younger-looking kids who are the same age' (pp9-10)? Discuss any experiences you have had that support Eric's observation.
- In what ways is Grandad like Sir Winston Churchill? How does Sir Winston Churchill's mantra help Eric? How could this help you in your life?
- Describe the relationship between Eric and his grandad. How does Grandad help Eric? In what ways does Grandad allow Eric the space to learn from his mistakes?
- Select an episode from *My Dog Gets a Job* such as 'the vanishing chook' or 'the missing USB' to dramatise.
- Eric says 'I know Ugly feels guilty, sad and lonely when he gets into trouble – just like I do. And just like me, he often does something naughty because he's bored' (p17). Create a mind map that compares the behaviour of dogs and children.
- How is Ugly like Albert Einstein (p27)?
- Devise a list of your own potential 'dog careers' for Ugly in addition to those already suggested by the students at Eric's school.
- Eric comments that Barnaby needs to learn how to be a good friend. In small groups, discuss what it takes to be a good friend. What does Eric also need to learn about being a good friend? How are Milly and Hugh good friends to both Eric and Barnaby?
- When Barnaby has a meltdown, Miss Jolly explains that Eric, too, has had a small meltdown of his own. How does this conversation help Eric to eventually understand and accept Barnaby more easily?
- Create some flyers to advertise Eric's and Ugly's 'Personal Trainer' and 'Expert Dog Trainer' businesses.
- Write a persuasive speech to persuade Grandad as to why he should agree to help Eric with his 'Expert Dog Training' business.
- Discuss the tips on p68 about treating dogs well. Which of these tips suit humans as well as dogs? Give reasons for your choices.
- In what ways is *My Dog Gets a Job* a book about problem solving, perseverance and resilience? What can you learn from Eric about persistence and not giving up?
- Why does Eric give his \$20 to Courtney? Why was this the 'right thing' (p91)?

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- Discuss Eric's statement that 'I need to remind myself that the down feeling you get after you lose at something doesn't last forever' (p93). Write a reflection that shares your experiences of this sentiment.
- Why does Grandad say that it's 'better to be poor and honest than rich and a rascal' (p94)?
- In the role of Eric, write a recount of the afternoon you and Grandad spent visiting Granny's grave. Discuss Eric's discovery about 'being really, really quiet; it's when ideas float in from nowhere' (p96). Share a time when this has happened to you.
- How does Granny's way of treating animals – *they could just be themselves* (p96) – help Eric deal better with both Ugly and Barnaby?
- When Eric sees how important Charlie is to Alex McCaw and his family, Ugly's job becomes more about the McCaw family than about Eric's problem. How is this a turning point for both Eric and the plot of *My Dog Gets a Job*?
- Why does Eric get so upset about the ripped photo of Ugly? Why does he later say that 'if I couldn't get over a photo being wrecked, how could I expect people to forgive each other for truly enormous things?' (p105) How does this passage help to anchor the message in *My Dog Gets a Job*?
- How does Eric's character grow and change throughout *My Dog Gets a Job*?
- What lessons about problem solving and keeping calm can you learn from Eric? How does Eric learn such lessons from Miss Jolly's approach to helping Barnaby?
- To help Barnaby feel welcome into his new class, Miss Jolly asks her students to create an 'About Me' book. How does this help the class to better understand and accept one another, especially Barnaby? Write your own 'About Me' book to help others understand you better.
- Discuss the way in which the children take turns being Barnaby's buddies at lunchtime. How is this an example of taking action?
- Discuss the ending of *My Dog Gets a Job*. Why is this such a satisfying and suitable way in which to end the text? How did the author plan for this ending? What threads were used throughout the story's structure to lead to this ending? What can you learn about planning stories from this?
- To help students better understand differences, read *All Cats Have Asperger Syndrome* and *All Dogs Have ADHD* by Kathy Hoopmann.
- Re-create Eric's 'Inventions of the 21st Century' poster that Ugly ruined.

## AUTHOR MOTIVATION

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*My Dog Gets a Job* is mainly intended for younger readers, but I like to think my stories appeal to all ages. Coming from a 'doggy' family, I have great love for these loyal companions. In *My Dog Doesn't Like Me*, I gained pleasure in light-heartedly writing about the challenges and rewards of responsible dog ownership. By seeking the wisdom of a professional dog trainer, I also learnt a great deal more about dogs and obedience training.

As I wrote, I realised that there was much more to be said about the doggy protagonist, Ugly. What about all those fascinating areas of work that dogs can be involved in? I could see that Ugly's young master, Eric, could have lots of interesting times and amusing adventures seeking a suitable vocation for his dog. However, without wishing to give away too much about *My Dog Gets a Job*, this story also pays respect to the transforming work a dog can do in the life of the disabled.

With the stories about Ugly, I read as widely as possible and sought expert information and advice from dog trainers. For *My Dog Gets a Job*, I also researched the positive role a dog can play in the life of people with disabilities. It's not all serious work, however. I have had a lot of fun doing surveys with children from the school where I teach and among my younger relatives. The survey ideas you will read in *My Dog Doesn't Like Me* and *My Dog Gets a Job* came from real-life children!

**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, *Goodbye Jamie Boyd*, shortlisted for the 2009 Bologna Book Fair's White Ravens Award, and *The Invisible Hero*, winner of the 2012 Speech Pathology Book of the Year Award and listed as an IBBY Book. 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. Elizabeth lives in Victoria's Dandenong Ranges.