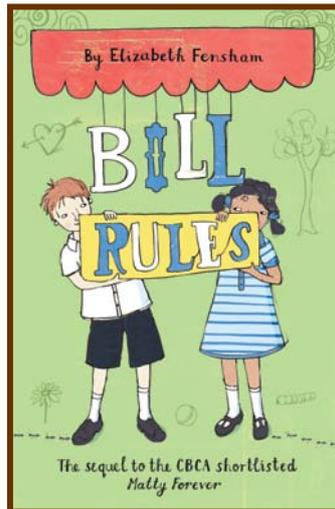


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BILL RULES

Elizabeth Fensham



Teachers' Notes

Written by a Practising Primary School Teacher

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SYNOPSIS

Bill Rules, the sequel to the 2010 CBCA short-listed book for younger readers *Matty Forever*, continues the story of Bill O'Connell and his best friend Matty Grub. Their friendship is one based on loyalty, adventure and trust.

With some guidance from Matty's Nan who imparts traditional Indigenous methods of survival in the bush, the pair embark on their first camping trip. Inspired by their adventure, Matty convinces a reluctant Bill to join the local Girl Guides. To Bill's relief, his application is unsuccessful.

A greater challenge arises however, when Bill's father is granted parole from prison. Unsure of how his dad's presence will affect the life that Bill and his mother have carved in the town, the family and its relationship is put under pressure.

This is a story of friendship, courage, acceptance and renewal.

THEMES

Relationships:

- Bill and Matty's friendship is one based on loyalty, honesty and genuine affection.
- Matty's family is extremely inclusive of Bill and his mum Pam, embracing them into their own extended family.
- Bill and Pam have a close bond. They have had to cope with the constant cycle of Bill's father being jailed and released, only to see him imprisoned again within a few months. In *Bill Rules*, the family tries to break this cycle.
- Bill confronts his father, Troy, about his inability to stay on the 'outside'. He tries to help him move forward.

Acceptance:

- Bill accepts that his father is an ex-prisoner, even though this is difficult. He openly admits this to his friends at school.
- Matty is accepting of Bill's dad. She helps Bill to circumvent the likely disintegration of Pam and Troy's marriage by holding a fundraising evening designed to send the couple on a second honeymoon.
- Matty accepts and embraces her Indigenous culture. She learns skills and tradition from her grandmother.

Family:

- Families come in different shapes and sizes.
- Families help each other, especially when challenges arise.
- Families are worth fighting for.

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Indigenous Culture:

- Nan teaches Bill and Matty aspects of her tribe's culture, such as bush skills.

WRITING STYLE

Bill Rules is written in third person, past tense. The narration, told from Bill's perspective, is realistic and simple, providing the text with an authentic and endearing voice.

STUDY NOTES

- Bill has many treasures hidden in his bedroom.
 - Bring one of your treasures to the classroom. Use a 'Show and Tell' format to share with the class the story behind this treasure. Why is it important to you?
 - Write a recount about this treasure, explaining its significance and the event or episode that made this object a treasure.
 - Is it essential to keep objects in order to keep the memory? Discuss.
 - Read picture books such as *Hidden Treasures* by Jeanette Rowe or *A Present from the Past* by Jennifer Beck.
- Bill and Matty have made a time capsule to give future generations an insight into their era.
 - Create a table that outlines each item Bill and Matty put into their time capsule, the reason for its inclusion and what it shows about their world.
 - What four things would you include in a time capsule? Why would you choose those certain objects?
 - In small groups, discuss what you consider are important features of society in the early 21st century that could be represented through objects in a time capsule. What objects would best represent such features?
 - Share as a class and decide on four objects to be included in a class time capsule. Retrieve in the students' final year at school.
 - Provide the class with four objects. In small groups, have students work backwards from the object to the feature of our society that it represents.
 - Write a note similar to that found on p3-4 that outlines your family members and their role in your family.

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- There are many clues throughout the novel that reveal Bill's true feelings about his father. Track these clues as you read *Bill Rules*.

Page	Example from text	What does this tell the reader?
5	People who steal things are mean, cowardly, lazy and very, very stupid – but he still loved him	Bill is ashamed of the fact Troy is a thief. He sees this as cowardly. Despite that, he still loves his dad.
9	You can't lean on someone whose dishonesty is always getting him into trouble	Bill feels his dad is unreliable
32		
35-37		
40		

- On p36, Bill tries to create a story of how he'd like his life to be.
 - Read this passage. Why do you think that Bill can't quite finish his story? How would you finish this story if you were Bill?
 - Brainstorm and discuss as a class what might make life the best it can be. Have students classify the suggestions. Discuss the difference between dreaming of material possessions (e.g. mansions, cars, gaming consoles, money etc.) and non-material things (good health, safe home, real friends, family etc.) Consider and evaluate which five things might be the most important in order to have the happiest life.
 - Create your own daydream of how you'd like your life to be. Represent your idea visually and share with others in the class.
- When Bill and Matty go camping for the weekend, they learn from Nan some local Indigenous stories and techniques for living in the bush. Make a list of the things they learn, including the following Koori terms:
 - *Djelwuck* – special sticks for making fire (p20)
 - *Hootchies* – shelter
 - Bush tucker – (p30)
 - *Tiddalick* - totem (p24)
 - Story about the Bunyip (p39)

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- Read p21.
 - Discuss Nan's comment when she says to Bill, 'Good boy. You understand.'
 - What is it that Bill has understood?
 - Do you think that non-Indigenous Australians have this same understanding? How might such an understanding be better achieved? Discuss as a class.
- On p24/25, Mat's family invites many people to paint something on their combi van.
 - What does the group painting of the combi van symbolise about Matty's family?
 - Use the description of the combi van artwork on p 24-25 to decorate a blank outline of a combi van. Add your own piece of artwork to the van. Display these combi vans around the classroom. Alternatively, students could create a design to contribute to one class-sized outline.
- The camping trip requires many survival skills. With a partner, create a survival kit for your own camping adventure. What would you include? Consider things such as food, first aid, shelter etc.
 - Give students a list of 20 objects such as water, tarps, a compass, chocolate, matches, cans of food etc. Play a survival simulation game in which groups prioritise these objects from 1-20 in order of importance in a survival situation.
 - After playing this game, analyse the process of deciding the order in a group situation.
 - Did everyone listen to one another?
 - Did different people in the group play different roles e.g. was there a natural leader? Someone who kept everyone on task? Someone who helped others to listen properly? Someone who had relevant knowledge?
 - What makes tasks like this difficult? What could make it easier?
- Invite a paramedic to conduct a first aid session that deals with things such as hypothermia (p52), bites, injured arms, legs, ankles etc.
- Make damper like Bill and Matty did while camping (p56-57).

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- Bill and Matty both daydream while out camping. Bill's daydream mentions 'The Man from Snowy River'.
 - Read Banjo Patterson's poem 'The Man from Snowy River'.
 - Time permitting, view the film version of this classic Australian poem.
 - Are there any similarities between the bush skills in the poem/film and those used by the Kooris in *Bill Rules*?

- Clichés are used in the early part of the text:
 - 'Walk in the park'
 - 'Think Tank'
 - 'Lost art of conversation'
 - Discuss these and other clichés. What do they mean? How might non-English speaking people interpret these clichés?
 - Read a non-fiction book such as *Has a Book Got a Spine?* by Erica Bentel that examines figurative vs literal language.

- There are some beautiful examples of figurative and descriptive language in *Bill Rules*. Take the time to discuss these passages and the way in which they are written:
 - p33 – *'They lay on their backs and gazed for so long into the blue-black sky that it stopped being a flat canvas with painted lights, and turned into what it was – a three-dimensional universe, a great, deep, starry sea that flowed into forever.'*
 - p33 – *'Thoughts about his father slithered into Bill's mind like an inky shadow. The old sadness worked its way down into his throat and chest; it smothered him and made him breathless.'*
 - p36 – *'Tonight, Bill pictured his dad lying on his narrow prison cell bed. He scooped up his dad and threw him high into the sky – like a beach ball being thrown at a shining, warm-hearted, summer sun.'*
 - p59 – *'Even the bird calls sounded especially chirpy – as fresh, energetic and noisy as kids mucking around in the playground before school starts.'*
 - Have students find more examples from the book to discuss.
 - Give students the opportunity to write some original, descriptive passages of their own. Brainstorm possible topics or scenes as a class or use images as a stimulus.

- When they come back from their camping trip, Matty and Bill retell their adventures.

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- Imagine that you are Bill or Matty. Write a recount of your camping weekend.
 - Discuss the importance of oral story-telling, particularly in the context of Indigenous culture.
- Read p66. Why does Tom quote Shakespeare? How does this quote relate to this part of the story?
- Once home from the camping trip, the novel changes direction as the prospect of Bill's father coming home arises. Not only that, Matty coerces Bill to join the Girl Guides.
 - Make an illustrated story map of *Bill Rules*, showing the events as they build to the story's climax.
 - Do you agree with Matty's reasoning behind the Girl Guide plan?
 - What do you think of Bill's reaction to Matty's plan?
- On p85, Bill reflects that 'even if someone was regarded by others as incredibly beautiful, if they were a horrible person, you could never see them as beautiful again.' Discuss.
- Chapter 12 begins with a newspaper article about equal rights and Bill's quest to join the Girl Guides. The article includes quotes from people who have been interviewed.
 - Choose a topic on which to write a newspaper article. Interview relevant people and include quotes.
 - Create a class newspaper by combining all of these articles.
- At the Girl Guides meeting, Marguerite Bell addresses the issue of bullying vs joking. 'If both parties think it's funny, then it might be a joke, but if only the joker thinks it's funny, I call that bullying.' (p97) Discuss this idea.
- Matty makes the observation that it was only after Mr Riley said sorry to Mrs Flint that he started to get nicer (p108).
 - Why do you think this is the case?
 - Discuss this in the context of Kevin Rudd's apology to the Stolen Generation. Has this apology resulted in improvements for Indigenous people?

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- At the fundraising event, Matty performs a rap based on the notion of name and identity inspired by the famous line from *Romeo and Juliet* – ‘What’s in a name? What we call a rose by any other name would smell as sweet’ (pp.177-178).
 - Write your own rap verse about yourself.
 - Discuss *Romeo and Juliet*. Read a young reader’s version of this story to set the quote above in context.
- Construct a diagram that illustrates the relationships between the various characters in *Bill Rules*.

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, *Matty Forever* was published in September 2009 and *Bill Rules* was published in August 2010.

AUTHOR MOTIVATION – WRITTEN BY ELIZABETH FENSHAM

I’m so fond of Matty and her friend, Bill. I’d like to be in their club because I love their company. There was no conscious decision to write a sequel, but I wasn’t ready to say goodbye to them. It was as if the voices of Matty and Bill were quietly speaking in the back of my mind.

Firstly, I wanted to know more about Nan and her influence on the family. As a child and young adult, I was haunted by the feeling that there was something missing in my life. Why didn’t I have an Indigenous friend? Why was the bush so empty? So this was the time for Bill to learn about Indigenous culture. Nan’s firestick demonstration is something I’ve had the privilege of witnessing. But I needed other reliable information, so I was given some valuable help by the Koori Heritage Trust in Melbourne.

I also felt Bill would eventually have to face the moment when his father came out of jail. I saw Bill’s father, Troy, as affectionate and well-intentioned, but weak. Some children have the sad burden of not being able to rely on or trust a parent. How do children cope? Just as importantly, how do such children have the wisdom, strength and courage to reject the negative example set by some parents? The encouraging fact is that there are plenty of people around who

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have, as children, managed to do this. It's important children know they can choose to be different from their parents.

Bill has already shown he could learn from his mistakes. He notices the way Mr Riley's apology to Mrs Flint has seemed to make him nicer. He has a steady, sensible, hardworking mother in Pam. However briefly, as a little boy, he had the wise and loving influence of Great-Uncle George. And now in the Grub family, he has a model of a truly happy, kind-hearted, inclusive family – a place where you are accepted for being yourself, encouraged and guided. Thus Bill is equipped to stand up to his father.

Naturally, I delight in the lighter moments that Matty brings to Bill's life. I can't help smiling as I write about the challenges that Matty keeps creating for Bill – burying a time capsule, the survival camp and, especially, joining Guides. Matty continues to come up with brilliant ideas like the fund-raiser performance. And yet again, I like to see the innocent way Matty and Bill express their special friendship by secretly holding hands at the very end.