

Chasing Shadows

About the Story

Beth is a young girl whose mother has recently died (evident only in the illustrations of photographs of her mother and a wreath hanging on the front door.)

Since her mother died, Beth has been sad and depressed and will not talk. Beth's father buys a puppy, thinking it will help, but from the time he brings Patches home, Beth seems disinterested. Sometimes she appears to be watching him, but her life is full of shadows, the memories of her mum and how life used to be, so she withdraws from life.

The story begins in summer when Patches is very small, and passes through the seasons. Patches is full of energy and because the father spends much time playing with him (to try and urge Beth's interest) Patches is a happy, full of beans young and then older puppy.

The text is full of movement (movement of the growing puppy) contrasting Beth's stillness, but when Patches becomes ill (bitten by a snake) – Beth immediately comes alive and steps from her silent world.

Generally people avoid facing or talking about mental illness and there are not enough books around on this subject, especially for children.

Readership age range is broad – for a younger child it could be simply interpreted that Beth is very sad, her father buys a puppy to cheer her up, and in the end she saves him. But if necessary, an older child could read more deeply or gain more from it. So, hospitals, health professionals, libraries, schools and anyone who is dealing with loss could find it helpful.

About the Author

Corinne Fenton loves writing picture books and although she can't explain it, her stories always have an animal as a central character or at least an animal in them. She loves the economy of words in picture book writing, telling powerful stories in as few words as possible and her favourite thing to do is finding the most perfect word for the perfect place. Corinne often uses memories of her childhood in her writing and her love of poetic language comes from writing poetry as a child. Ideas come from everywhere, at any time and sometimes she has to stop what she's doing and immediately begin to write.

Corinne is also the author of the CBCA Honour Book, *Queenie: One Elephant's Story*, *The Dog on the Tuckerbox* and *Flame Stands Waiting*, along with a series of books for under eights, beginning with *Hey Baby*. *Chasing Shadows* is her first picture book with Ford Street Publishing.

Story Inspiration

For Corinne stories begin in all sorts of ways, sometimes it's a vague story idea, sometimes the full storyline comes from nowhere, but in the case of *Chasing Shadows* it was the title that came first. For a few weeks that title danced about in her head and

then one afternoon when she was watching a puppy chase shadows in her back garden, the storyline to fit the title came and she started writing on her iPhone.

With a rough draft, temporary character names and a determination to make this story work, Corinne set out to research depression, loss and mental health in the hope that the book may help children suffering loss and depression or on a simpler level, this could be a story of the love shared between children and animals, something very important to the author.

About the Illustrations

Hannah used watercolour paints and pen on Arches Watercolour paper for the illustrations in *Chasing Shadows*. Her initial sketches were done with pencil and then, when they were completed; they were scanned and printed onto watercolour paper. The spontaneity and detail of the original drawings were preserved this way. Hannah then began her favourite part of the process, painting the illustrations with watercolours. The final stage of the illustration was the line work completed with a Faber-Castell Pitt artist pen.

It was important that Hannah communicated the complexities of *Chasing Shadows* through the illustrations, adding meaning to the subtle text. Conveying the intricacies of the story involved a great deal of planning and Hannah had much to consider. She created a detailed world for the characters to live in. Hannah imagined Beth to live in a rural environment, which added to the feelings of isolation that Beth experiences. As the story unfolds, Hannah uses changes in the natural environment to convey the passage of time. Seasons pass, Beth's hair changes and Patches grows.

Hannah carefully considered the use of colour in *Chasing Shadows*. Low saturation and soft greys towards the beginning create a melancholy mood and a dreamlike atmosphere allowing the shadows to encroach. The colour scheme develops throughout the story mimicking the changes in Beth's emotional state. High contrast is used to highlight certain things such as the use of red in the mother's necklace. The colour reinforces the journey from depression to the return of vitality.

Each character's feelings are also revealed through their expressive body language and facial expressions. Beth's closed body language and solemn face in the beginning of the book gives the reader a sense of her emotional distance and depression. The use of shadows is an integral part of the story telling. Through the shadows, the reader is able to see the world through Beth's eyes. Beth sees her past. Her mother's hug; a push on a swing. As Patches and Beth heal, the colours warm and the shadows fade away.

Questions based on the illustrations:

The illustrations on the front cover give us a clue as to what the book will be about. What do you think will happen in *Chasing Shadows*?

Look at the illustrations throughout the book. Choose a picture or page and write down a few words to describe how the pictures make you feel. What has the illustrator done to make you feel that way?

Are there any words or sentences that you did not understand? Do the pictures on that page help you to understand what is happening in the book?

Do the illustrations always match the text on each page? Would you have drawn any of the pages differently? How so? Try to illustrate a page of the book for yourself. (Class activity: Give a different page to each of the students in the class. Re-illustrate the book as a class. Have students include the text.)

What happens in the beginning, middle and end of *Chasing Shadows*? In groups of three, try to 'act out' the sequence of the story. Encourage the students to use facial expressions and body language to communicate to the audience what is happening. Students can add some dialogue to help tell the story.

Notice that the seasons change throughout the book. Have students create a timeline of Beth's journey.

Study Notes for Teachers

Discussion/research points themes:

Depression, loss, sadness and faithfulness of animals are the themes of *Chasing Shadows* and the book is perfect for older picture book readers, or for younger readers to enjoy the story at a different/simpler level. The book could also be a wonderful education tool for teachers, librarians, parents and psychologists.

The book uses gentle, poetic language to address depression in children, an illness that even many adults don't want to talk about. Most people can deal with a friend or loved-one who has a headache or broken leg, but depression, especially in children, is often difficult to face.

There are only a small number of books for children that deal with this illness and the book may be helpful to the child suffering and also to his/her friends and family who don't know how to help.

To a younger child, not old enough to understand/experience depression, the story can still be enjoyed at a different level – a father buys a puppy to cheer up his daughter and it takes her a while to learn how to love him.

The book illustrates simply, that a dog is a man's best friend.

The book would have an ideal home in doctors' waiting rooms, vet waiting rooms as well as the usual schools, libraries etc.

Classroom activities:

Creative writing:

- Write a poem or a piece of prose about something that made you feel sad.
- Write a poem or piece of prose about your pet or an animal you know that is loyal and loving to his/her owner.
- Do a drawing of someone looking sad. Think about how they might feel.
- Do a drawing of your pet or an animal you know.

- The next time you see someone looking sad, perhaps you can spend some time with them.

Extra activities:

Questions about the book and the characters

- The cover – how do you think Beth is feeling? What about Patches? What does the look on his face tell you?
- On the page when Dad brings home Patches, what is hanging on the door? What does this signify?
- When Patches pulls down the clothesline, do you think he has been naughty or just mischievous?
- The book is set over the four seasons. In what season do you think Patches has the most fun? (Chasing the autumn leaves perhaps?)
- You might like to go outside at home or in your schoolyard and find your own shadow. Wave your arms about or do a shadow dance. What other shadows can you find?
- Look at the page with Beth on the swing. There are two shadows here. What do you think they are?
- The story is set in the country. Think about the differences for city dogs and country dogs. If you have a dog is it a city dog or country dog? Has a vet visited your house?
- At first, what did you think about the tremor in the grass? Did you guess it was a snake or did you think something else?
- This is a story about sadness but it is also a story about loyalty and unconditional love. Pets are very devoted to their owners. Why do you think this is so?
- When do you think Beth really started loving Patches?
- Do you think dad did the right thing in bringing home a pet so soon after Beth's mother had died?
- Write a review of the book. Be sure to include:
 - information about the writer and illustrator
 - a brief outline of the story
 - a description of the illustrator
 - the target readership
 - your opinion, supported by evidence
- How many books has Corinne Fenton written? Use the internet to find out more about her. Just Google, Corinne Fenton, and see what comes up.

Other Books for children that deal with mental illness:

Big and Me David Miller (2008) Ford Street Publishing, Melbourne. Available from www.fordstreetpublishing.com or any good Australian book shop.

Big and Small are machines that work together as a team. 'But some days Big goes a bit wobbly, and I get a lot worried.' Big malfunctions in a variety of ways and Small tries to help with the assistance of The Boss and Mechanic. The story is a metaphor for a child living with an adult who suffers from mental illness. *Big and Me* is dramatically illustrated with paper sculpture.

Jake's Dinosaurs Sved Williams, A(1996), Helen Mayo House, Women's and Children's Hospital, Adelaide. Call Helen Mayo House on 08 8303 1183.

A picture book written for children aged 3-6, who have a mother with serious mental illness.

Robby Rose and Monkey Wilkinson, L (1996), Helen Mayo House, Women's and Children's Hospital, Adelaide. Call Helen Mayo House on 08 8303 1183.

A picture book written for children aged 3-6, about a boy whose mother develops post-natal depression after the birth of her second child.

Making Mummy Better Denise Scott (2001), Spectrum Publications. Email: spectpub@ozemail.com.au

A picture book about Sally, whose mum has had a new baby and is now suffering from post-natal depression. This book gives comfort and reassurance to 3-9 year olds in the same situation: that it is possible for their mums to get better with help, support and time.

A Terrible Thing Happened Margaret M. Holmes (2000), Magination Press. Email: www.maginationpress.com

A picture book for 4-8 year old children who have witnessed any kind of violent or traumatic episode. It uses friendly animal characters to tell the story, which centres around Sherman, who has had something terrible happen to him. The story explores the ways this made him feel and what helped him to feel better.

Something Has Happened: An activity book for young people Tricia Irving (2000), Skylight. Contact: Skylight, PO Box 7309 Wellington South, New Zealand 0800 299 100. Email: support@skylight-trust.org.nz. Web: <http://www.skylight.org.nz> .

An activity book for young children (aged 3-6 years old) who are facing difficult times. It is designed to be personalised by each child. There are guidelines on every page for a parent or carer as they help a child with the book.

Children's Books on Mental Illness/Schizophrenia

The following books are books written for younger audiences (Children between ages of approximately 7 to 13 years old) who are trying to understand mental illness in their family.

Helicopter Man – by Elizabeth Fensham. This is a new Children's book about a homeless young boy and his father who has schizophrenia. It sounds like it might be a valuable book to help educate children about schizophrenia. The publisher suggests that it is targeted at a reading level of Ages 9 to 12 years. (We have not reviewed this book). Learn more about the book.

Sometimes My Mommy Gets Angry by Bebe Moore Campbell. Publisher: Putnam Publishing Group; (September 1, 2003). ISBN: 0399239723.

Book Review, excerpted from Children's Literature:

Our appealing young narrator struggles to understand her mother's unpredictable behaviour. Sometimes she is smiling so Annie goes happily off to school with her friends. But then Annie may come home to find an angry face on a shouting, frightening mother. Fortunately she has a grandmother who helps her cope. From her and from her friends Annie can 'find sunshine' in her mind. Without being didactic, the story presents the all-too-common mentally ill parent in a way to help a child and her friends understand. Lewis [illustrator] visualizes this emotional drama with naturalistic watercolour portraits of the players in settings that begin bright and sunny but emphasize shadows when Mommy is upset . . . An introductory 'Author's Note' gives further details on mental illness and coping strategies. Ages 5 to 9
– Ken Marantz and Sylvia Marantz

Listen to a radio interview with author Bebe Moore Campbell

Catch a Falling Star, the first book in the 'Iris the Dragon' series for children with brain disorders. Available from the publisher's website (Iris the Dragon).

About the book (from publisher's website):

Catch a Falling Star is a children's illustrated book that attempts to bring the topic of mental illness to the general public through the non-threatening genre of the fairy tale . . . [it] has been endorsed by the National Alliance for the Mentally Ill (NAMI) and other renowned doctors in the field such as Simon Davison, Chief of Psychiatry at the Children's Hospital of Eastern Ontario (CHEO) and Dr. Peter S. Jensen, Director for the Centre for the Advancement of Children's Mental Health.

Edward the Crazy Man written and illustrated by Marie Day. Available from the publisher's website (Annick Press).

About the book (from publisher's website):

Edward the 'Crazy Man' is a touching, funny, and humane tale of one boy's efforts to help one man and change perceptions about homelessness and Bipolar Disorder ... Says the Canadian Mental Health Association, 'Parents and educators alike will be impressed by a new children's book that de-stigmatises mental illness.'

How to Be a Real Person (In Just One Day) by Sally Warner. Publisher: Knopf Books for Young Readers; 1st ed edition (February 13, 2001). ISBN: 0375904344

Editorial Review (excerpted from Booklist):

Every morning, Kara tries to look like a 'real' California sixth grader. With teeth brushed and clothes nearly matched, she just might pull it off – as long as Mr Benito doesn't notice her shattering grades. But homework is the least of Kara's worries. For months, she's been juggling dangerous secrets. Her father is gone and her mother is drowning in mental illness. Everything depends on Kara. Warner expertly captures the crippling side effects of mental illness in this brave, troubling novel that offers no simple solutions. Some children will see only a riveting, well-crafted story; others will find a glimmer of hope and the inspiration to reach out for help. For grades 5-8.

(The following two books are out of print, but still available as used books frequently – and if you know of any newer books like these, please let us know). Other sources for these books may be the local library.

Crazy Quilt by Jocelyn Riley, Publisher: Bantam Books; Reprint edition (April 1986)
ASIN: 0553256408

Only My Mouth Is Smiling by Jocelyn Riley, Publisher: William Morrow; (March 1982) ASIN: 0688010873

If you liked *Chasing Shadows*, write and tell Corinne Fenton or Hannah Sommerville why. Or if someone in your class comes up with a question about the book that no one can answer, write and ask about it! Don't forget to include a stamped, self-addressed envelope for your reply if you use snail mail. You can send your letter to the following address: Corinne Fenton or Hannah Sommerville c/- Ford St Publishing Pty Ltd, 2 Ford Street, Clifton Hill, VIC 3068, Australia.

Or you can send a message via Ford St Publishing info@fordstreetpublishing.com or via Corinne's website www.corinnefenton.com or Hannah's website <http://www.hannahsommerville.com/>