



Blue the Brave

ISBN 978-1-78849-332-1
eBook ISBN 978-1-78849-426-7

Alma Jordan, Illustrated by Margaret Suggs

Teaching Guide

By Nicola Heaney

RATIONALE AND THEMES

This guide has been designed to complement a class reading of *Blue the Brave* in a way that brings the text alive while also enriching the students' critical abilities. The activities aim to inspire young readers by encouraging them to question the characters' motivations and the overall themes.

The guide aims to develop empathy skills, stimulate discussion and encourage readers to dissect literary techniques in fresh and engaging ways.

We have included activities designed to hone communication, presentation and literacy skills.

The key themes of this novel include:

- Courage
- Family
- Community
- Ambitions and Dreams
- Animal Welfare

SUMMARY

The story opens with ten-year-old Peter Farrelly dreaming about an invention called the Smart Cone, which makes the world's best ice-cream. He lives on Hazel Tree Farm with his parents and younger sister Kate. His dad works on the farm and his mum is a vet, so there is a strong focus on day-to-day life on a working farm in modern Ireland. Peter's best animal friend is a sheepdog called Blue, who he hopes will one day become a champion at sheepdog trials.

Next door live the Coopers, an older couple with grown-up children who keep a large collection of hens. Eamon Cooper has been helping Peter and Blue prepare for the trials – he's especially interested as Blue is the offspring of Eamon's best-ever sheepdog Peg.

The children are surrounded by animals and learn lessons about the fragility of life: First there's little Larry, the lamb rejected by his mother. Then there's Blue, who almost gives her life to protect the hens and lambs. And finally there's Hettie, Kate's pet hen who disappears when the vixen comes creeping around looking for food for her cubs.

The old grudge between Maggie Cooper and her rival Monica Reilly, both would-be champion bakers, threatens to boil over into the next generation, but everything comes right at the event of the season – the Ballynoe Autumn Fair. Will Maggie's baking come away with top prize? Who will win the Best Pet competition? And will Peter and Blue's hard work and incredible bond shine through at the sheepdog trials?

APPROACH

Blue the Brave is an engaging and entertaining read with lots of well-developed characters and sympathetic treatment of some deeper themes. There are many opportunities for discussion and learning around rural life, animal welfare, friendship and overcoming adversity. This guide has divided the story into three sections and the activities offer suggestions on developing the themes and examining the writer's craft in building characters and plot.

Section One: Life on the Farm Pages 7-71

SUMMARY

The story opens with ten-year-old Peter Farrelly dreaming that he has invented a magical ice-cream maker. He's having a great time, until he's woken by the licking of his sheepdog Blue. Downstairs at breakfast

we meet the rest of his family – his dad David, who works on their sheep farm, his mum Marian, who is a vet with a surgery at the back of the farmhouse, and his younger sister Kate, who's obsessed with animals.

Dad brings in Larry the lamb, a newborn who has been rejected by his mother and will have to be hand-reared by the family until they can find another ewe to adopt him. We also meet Hettie, Kate's little pet hen who visits every day, and of course Blue the sheepdog, Peter's best animal friend.

One of Peter's dreams is to train Blue to be a successful sheepdog – but their training isn't going so well. Their next-door neighbour Eamon Cooper is growing more and more frustrated with the young dog's energy, and Peter starts to worry that Blue hasn't got what it takes to be a champion. Even Maggie Cooper's delicious cakes can't make him feel any better.

DISCUSSION POINTS

- Re-read p.7.** Peter is having a wonderful dream about the Smart Cone, which can create amazing flavours and toppings. What would you have as your favourite ice-cream? Describe your choice to your partners, giving persuasive arguments as to why your choice is the best.
- Re-read p.10.** Blue wakes Peter by licking his face, and he responds that there are less gross ways to wake someone up. Do you think he's right? Why do you think this? What's your favourite way to be woken up? Why do you think this?
- Re-read p.16.** 'Grownups were always a bit weird about telling people their ages.' Do you think this is true? Why do you think this? Why do you think older people don't tell people their age?
- Re-read pp.20-21.** What do you think about Peter licking Kate's toast? Do you

think this is a funny prank? Why do you think this? What would you have done if you were Kate? Why?

- **Re-read p.35.** Kate and Peter's mam remembers something her dad, also a farmer, used to say: 'Where there is livestock, there is dead stock.' What does this mean? What do you think about this statement? Do you think it's cruel or realistic? Why do you think this?
- **Re-read p.44.** The secret narrator is revealed to be a vixen looking for food to feed her cubs – and she's got her eye on the hens and lambs. What do you think about this? Do you see the vixen as a villain? Why do you think this?
- **Re-read p.48.** In their training, Eamon doesn't allow Peter to have a whistle until he can whistle himself. Do you think this is fair? Why do you think this? Were you ever not allowed to take the easy way out? What happened? How did it make you feel?
- **Re-read pp.49–51.** Sheepdog training with Blue isn't going well, and Eamon soon loses patience. He doesn't think Blue will ever be a success, and he tells Peter this. Do you think he's right, or do you think he's being too hard on Blue? What would you say to him and Peter?
- **Re-read p.62.** In discussing Blue's lack of progress, Peter's dad says, 'Sometimes the best flowers bloom last.' What do you think he means by this? Do you think this is a good piece of advice? Why do you think this?

ACTIVITIES

1. WRITER'S CRAFT

On pages 7–9, Peter's dream becomes very dramatic, and the writer builds a strong sense of tension. But how is this done? Take another read through these pages and see if you can detect the tricks the writer has used. What verbs has she chosen to create drama? Has she used particular types of punctuation to build tension? How do the sentence lengths create a sense of tension?

Find two or three examples and write a short essay outlining how tension is built. Each paragraph should say what technique is being used to create tension and explain how the chosen quote (example) explains your point.

2. BACK IN MY DAY

On page 11, Peter's dad tells him some of the things he liked to do when he was

Peter's age.

Interview the adults at home and find out what they did for fun when they were your age. Make a list and ask them to give you as much detail as they can.

Share your findings with your small group. Are there any similarities? Are there any activities you'd like to try yourselves? Were things very different back then? Why do you think this?

In your groups, present your findings to the rest of the class. This can be through a presentation or a piece of scripted drama.

3. FIRST IMPRESSIONS

Re-read Chapter One. What are your first impressions of Peter and Kate and their lives at Hazel Tree Farm? Decide upon two adjectives to describe Peter, two to describe Kate, and two to describe life at Hazel Tree. Choose examples from the text that prove your point about each adjective.

Write up your findings. Each paragraph should say what your impression is and explain how the chosen quote (example) explains your point.

4. OLD-SCHOOL EATING

On pages 18–19, Eamon tells the children about the sorts of things he used to eat when he was a child – some of which Peter and Kate find disgusting. What do you think about these foods?

In small groups, do some research into the eating habits of Irish children in and around the 1950s. What sorts of things would they have eaten? Were they healthy?

In your groups, create a menu for a week of school lunches using these old traditions and ingredients and present it to the rest of the class. You should also explain the nutritional value of your choice. As a class, vote on which is your favourite.

Extension: Can you write a persuasive letter to the headteacher asking for one or two of the meals to be introduced into the canteen? If your school doesn't have a canteen, write a persuasive letter to parents to encourage them to include one or two of these meals into their children's lunchboxes.

5. COLLECTIVE NOUNS

On page 23, Kate explains about the names for groupings of animals. These are known as 'collective nouns'.

What other collective nouns are there? Do

some research into collective nouns and choose your favourite six.

Once you've chosen your six real collective nouns, see if you can make up your own two or three imaginary ones. Work with a partner and see if they can guess which are real and which are from your imagination. As a class, create a wall display of some of your favourites.

6. HAUNTED HOUSE

On pages 29–31, Peter explains how there are lots of noises in the old farmhouse. Do you think old buildings can be creepy? Why do you think this?

Imagine you are lying in bed in an unfamiliar old building listening to the creaks and groans. Let your imagination run wild. Write a piece of description that really sets the scene and creates a sense of uneasiness. Use all the senses: what you can hear, see, etc.

Section Two: An Unwelcome Guest Pages 72-112

SUMMARY

Blue is woken by the smell of something strange and sinister outside. She wakes Peter, and soon he and Kate are outside checking the hens are safe, disturbing the young vixen in the process. But all is still not well, and Blue dashes off to protect the sheep and lambs.

Despite their best efforts at keeping quiet, Kate and Peter still disturb Mam, who panics when she finds the children are not in their beds. Dad is soon outside looking for them and comes across Eamon from next door, who is out with his shotgun investigating the noise.

Things become more tense as everyone heads towards the sheep field – first the vixen, then Blue, then the children and finally the adults. The vixen knows she is cornered and fights her way out, seriously injuring Blue in the process. She manages to get away, but things aren't looking good for Blue, who ends up on the operating table. Peter has an anxious wait as Mam does her best to help Blue to survive. Kate, too, is worried about Hettie, who has disappeared.

While Blue recovers from her surgery, the time has come to try and get Larry adopted by another ewe who has just given birth. Peter's dad takes advice from Eamon and

with some handy tricks and a good deal of luck, the men are relieved when the ewe begins to suckle Larry.

Blue is recovering well, but she's weak and needs a lot of rest. There's some excitement when the Reillys are spotted buying Maggie's eggs, but there's only one hen Kate's thinking about, and that's Hettie. She's distraught when a cluster of Hettie's feathers are found – it seems like the fox got a victim after all.

DISCUSSION POINTS

- **Re-read p.74.** Rodney the rooster is terrified and calls for help. But how does the writer build tension in this part? Can you spot any of the devices you saw earlier? What do you think is going to happen next?
- **Re-read p.76.** Kate and Peter are worried about the animals and sneak outside to check on them. But are they putting themselves in danger? Do you think they should wait and waken their parents? Why do you think this? Why do you think they didn't choose to do that?
- **Re-read pp.84–85.** The young vixen is desperate for food for her cubs and sees the lambs as easy targets. What do you think of this? Do you have any sympathy for the fox? Why do you think this?
- **Re-read pp. 94–95.** Kate is very worried about Hettie, and her dad tells her the little hen will probably be fine – even though he isn't sure. Why do you think he does this? Do you think he is lying? Do you think he's doing the right thing? Why do you think this?
- **Re-read p.100.** David is struggling to make sure that Larry is successfully adopted, and he's pleased to see Eamon appear. What do you think of the comment, 'Dad had spent his whole life on a farm, but there was always more to learn.' Do you agree with the statement? Why do you think this?
- **Re-read p.101.** Eamon thinks that using his own dad's farming methods helps him feel close to him. Is there anything you do that makes you feel close to someone you don't see very often? How does it make you feel?
- **Re-read pp.111–112.** Maggie and Marian try their best to help Kate feel better, but nothing seems to be working. Do you think that Maggie's comment that 'Our lives will be full of new life' is helpful? Why do you think this? How do you think it makes Kate feel? What advice would you give Kate?

ACTIVITIES

1. DOGGY DREAMING

After her surgery, Blue is twitching in her sleep. But what do you think a dog dreams about? In small groups, create either a piece of drama or some freeze-frames to illustrate what you think might be going through Blue's mind as she sleeps. Think about the sorts of things dogs love doing. Do you have a dog of your own, or does a family member or friend have one? When do they seem to be at their happiest?

2. PROTECT THE HENS

On page 81 we get a detailed description of the henhouse Eamon has built to protect the hens and their chicks. Can you design your own? Create a design for your own henhouse – you can make it as luxurious as you like, but make sure it properly protects the hens from foxes and other predators.

Create a pitch selling your invention, persuading your classmates that your design is the best. Include a number of persuasive devices such as emotive language, facts and statistics, and rhetorical questions.

3. POLICE REPORT

In his panic trying to find the children, Peter's dad thinks they may have to call the police. But what do you think the police would say? Has a crime been committed?

Imagine you're a police officer called to the farm. Create a report on the scene, making sure to include factual language and interviews with witnesses.

4. PETER'S DIARY

Peter is terrified when he sees how hurt Blue is after the vixen attack. Imagine you are Peter. What's going through your head? Write a diary entry or script a video explaining your thoughts and feelings. What would you say to Blue at this point?

5. KEEPING INFECTION-FREE

Mam is worried about an infection in Blue's wound – especially with all the germs on a farm. Do you think this is a legitimate concern? Why is it so important to keep our hands and faces clean?

Work in small groups to create a health and hygiene campaign for your school. Think about the risks associated with germs and how children can avoid these. Will your campaign include posters, leaflets, maybe an assembly?

6. BEING DOG SAFE

On page 107, we're told that the children's strokes are 'slow and careful', as Blue is still very delicate. But did you know that dogs actually prefer gentle strokes to harder pats? Why do you think it's important to know about what makes a dog happy?

Have a look at the resources on the Dogs Trust website (especially the Be Safe Be Kind information sheets).

learnwithdogstrust.ie/resources/

What information have you discovered? Using the information on these sheets and your own personal experience, create an educational video for younger children on being safe around dogs.

7. MAM'S DIARY

Kate and Peter are overcome with joy when it becomes clear that Blue is going to survive. On page 107 we see them hug Mam tight, thanking her for saving their beloved dog. Mam is very touched, even though the children don't notice.

Imagine you are Kate and Peter's mam. Write either a diary entry or a script for a vlog, outlining what's happened and how it makes you feel. Think about what your fears were for Blue and your children.

Section Three: New Arrivals Pages 114-155

SUMMARY

Time passes and, as Maggie predicted, Hazel Tree Farm is filled with new life. Blue is making a good recovery, but Kate is still heartbroken about the loss of her little hen Hettie. A few weeks after the drama of the vixen's visit, there's a surprise group of visitors to the house. Summer arrives and everyone is busy, with long days spent outside tending to lambs and chicks and dogs.

Blue's training for the competitive sheepdog trials resumes. Things are going well until Peter makes a basic error – but Eamon still has faith. The day of the Ballynoe Autumn Fair arrives, and everyone is fussing around getting ready. Kate and Maggie bury the hatchet with the Reillys and there's success all round – but will Blue and Peter manage to break records in the sheepherding trials?

DISCUSSION POINTS

- **Re-read p.116.** Blue is ready to have

her stitches removed, but she will need her bandages changed daily and Peter is adamant that will be his job. What do you think told Kate ‘not to argue with her brother on this one’? Why do you think this? How do you think Kate feels at this point? Why?

- **Re-read pp.125–126.** Peter is given his first ever herding whistle – but he’s nervous about being able to use it properly. Have you ever been in a situation where you were nervous about doing something for the first time? What happened? What did you do? How did it make you feel? What advice would you give to Peter in this situation?
- **Re-read p.132.** As the family are preparing for the fair, Kate is upset because she ‘has nothing to show off’. Do you think this is the right attitude? Why do you think this?
- **Re-read p.138.** It doesn’t take much for Maggie and Monica Reilly to become friends again. Does it surprise you at how easily they bury the hatchet? Why do you think this? Has this ever happened to you? What happened? How did it make you feel? Do you think it’s important to always try and forgive and forget? Why do you think this?
- **Re-read p.145.** Just before Peter and Blue take to the arena, Eamon gives them this advice: ‘You have nothing to prove here today, just experience to gain.’ What do you think he means by this? Do you think this is good advice? Why do you think this?
- **Re-read p.152.** Once everything is over, Peter realises that he’s absolutely starving. But why hasn’t he eaten anything yet? Have you ever been so nervous you couldn’t eat? Why do you think this is? How did the food taste in the end? Can you research the impact of adrenaline on the body?

ACTIVITIES

1. BUSINESS AS USUAL

One of the most exciting things about Hettie’s re-appearance is that soon Kate will have her own eggs to sell. But how should she do it?

Draw up a business plan for Kate to help her sell her eggs. Think about how much it costs to feed the hens and keep them warm and safe, and how much you should sell their eggs for.

If you’re going to use an honesty box, how would you describe your eggs to encourage people to stop and buy them? Where will your honesty box be? If it’s on a road, how will you let passing motorists know there are eggs available (without distracting the drivers and causing an accident!)?

2. ANALYSIS OF KATE

On page 139, we see Kate helping to judge the pets, tapping her clipboard with her pen. Why do you think Mam is trying to hide her smile?

Think of five or six adjectives to describe Kate’s personality based on what you’ve learned about her through the whole book. For each adjective, see if you can find a short quote in the book that matches your description.

Write an essay analysing Kate’s personality. Each paragraph should make a statement about an element of her personality, point out the quote that illustrates this element, and then explain exactly how the chosen quote proves she has this personality.

3. COMMENTARY

On pages 141–142, we are given a glimpse of some of the other competitors in the sheepdog trials. Things seem to have gone a little awry, with some dogs misbehaving. Do you think this would have been funny to watch? Why do you think this?

In pairs, write a script commentating on the antics of the misbehaving dogs. Use your imagination and add another couple of funny dogs into the event. Your commentary should try and be as calm and factual as possible – the comedy will come from you trying to be serious when there’s so much mayhem going on.

For inspiration, take a look at BBC Golf commentator Andrew Cotter commentating on the actions of his two Labradors, Mabel and Olive: [youtube.com/user/admcotter](https://www.youtube.com/user/admcotter)

4. ANALYSING THE TENSION

Re-read through pages 145–149 as Peter tries to guide Blue through the course. How does the writer make this a really tense piece of writing?

Either:

- Write a short essay analysing the creation of tension in this piece. Think about techniques used like choice of verbs and other language, how Peter acts and feels, how the crowd acts and feels and how

the writer uses punctuation and sentence structure to build a sense of drama. You should make four or five points and each should be supported both by a quote and an explanation of how the quote proves your point.

- Create your own news bulletin about the success of Peter and Blue in the trials. Outline what happened: the build-up on the day, the event itself, and the outcome. Make sure you include a number of interviews – with Peter, onlookers, and maybe some of the others involved like Eamon or Malachy.

5. DOG’S-EYE VIEW

At the end of the story we see Blue enjoying the children’s ice-cream when they aren’t looking. How much of what’s gone on do you think she has understood?

Recreate parts of the story from Blue’s point of view. Choose three or four scenes from the novel and imagine them through Blue’s eyes. In small groups, create a series of freeze-frames to tell the story. Once you’ve performed your freeze-frames, choose one of the scenes and rewrite it as a story from Blue’s narrative viewpoint.

Visit obrien.ie to find out more about the Hazel Tree Farm series and many other exciting Irish books for young people