



Spud Murphy Gets Kids Reading

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Anne Faundez on Eoin Colfer's new book for younger readers.

With its linear plot, good characterization, familiar experience, humour and lively dialogue, Eoin Colfer's new short novel for 7-9 year olds, <!--break-->**The Legend of Spud Murphy**, is a thoroughly enjoyable and very funny read. It also has just the right mix of ingredients to inspire young readers and especially reluctant boy readers ? for one of the things that its heroes discover is that reading is cool. **Anne Faundez** discusses classroom activities that will draw young readers further into the book and suggests themes for their own creative writing.

Will and his eldest brother Marty, part of a family of five boys, are typical nine- and ten-year-olds, for whom reading is not a pleasure. When their parents suggest that they should spend some of their holiday time in the local library, they are not amused. Not only is reading boring, but the library is run by a scary old lady, Mrs Murphy, aka Spud Murphy, who is rumoured to shoot spuds from a gun at young library users, or urchins, as she calls them, if they dare make a noise.

On the boys' first visit, Mrs Murphy sits, large and terrifying, at the desk. She issues them with pink-coloured cards, signifying junior library user, and directs them to the children's section, which only has four shelves of books. She orders them to sit on a tatty old carpet, in silence, and not move from there. After days of boredom, fooling about and pretending to read while familiarizing themselves with every inch of the carpet, Will finally opens a book and reads the first sentence. Instantly, he is drawn into the story ? a myth about giants, peopled by wizards, goblins, talking animals and princess. The transition into reading has been made, and Will is hooked, in spite of himself. So too, Will discovers, is Marty, who is engrossed in a book with a dragon on the cover.

Soon Will and Marty have read all the books in the children's section. Marty eggs Will on to venture into the adult section and select an adventure story, which they both read with delight. But Will's foray into the adult section does not go unnoticed. Spud Murphy catches him red-handed, whereupon he bravely tells her the truth ? he's read all the books in the children's section and wants to read more. Her reaction is surprising ? she unexpectedly confers on him the status of a fully-fledged, independent reader.

The Legend of Spud Murphy: the works

Structure The story is 90 pages long, divided into five chapters. The print is set large and surrounded by lots of white space. Sentences are short and simple, interspersed with lively dialogue that keeps the story moving. Description is used sparingly and effectively. There's plenty of humour, both in the situation described and in the choice of words. Large black and white drawings by Tony Ross add further comic detail.

Plot The plot is straightforward and chronological, perfect for exploring with children the main stages of narrative ? beginning, build-up, conflict, conflict resolution and ending. A simple storyboard could be used to set out the main stages of the story, either pictorially or in note form.

First person narrative The story is told in the first person, from Will's point of view, making the story more personal

and immediate. It allows the reader to see the unfolding events from his perspective, to empathize with him and to take for granted his appraisal of the other characters.

Characterisation As the title suggests, the most important character in the book is Spud Murphy, who provides the catalyst for change in the boys' attitude to reading. She is fierce and authoritarian, reigning supreme in a world of silence and card stamping. With her spud-gun at the ready to silence disruptive behaviour, she is every child's nightmare.

How does the author build this character? Typically, through exaggeration and humour, which allows the reader to build a picture of the way she looks, acts and speaks. She is wider than three people wrapped together, has knuckles bigger than acorns and a rusted metal voice. She can throw a rubber stamp with lightning speed at a young offender, and she doesn't just talk ? she ?grumbles', ?orders', ?warns', ?glares'. The use of similes adds further colour, bringing the character vividly alive: she swivels her head ?slowly like a tank gun', her eyes flit ?like an eagle's searching for a mouse' and her teeth look ?like a row of icicles'.

Mrs Murphy is the perfect model to inspire children's own creations of character. Once they've established a suitably intriguing name, they can then flesh out their character by describing the way he/she acts, looks and speaks, using a mix of description and dialogue, similes and speech verbs ? and, above all, exaggeration.

Encouraging speaking This story offers lots of opportunities for open-ended discussion in small groups. Having read the book, the children can reflect on their own attitudes to books and reading. Do they share Will and Marty's initial views on reading? Does Will's description of the library coincide with theirs? What turns Will into a reader? Why does Mrs Murphy treat him like an adult at the end of the story? Does she really change in appearance and demeanour or is it that Will sees her differently?

Anne Faundez is a freelance education and children's book consultant.

The Legend of Spud Murphy by Eoin Colfer is published by Puffin at £7.99 (0 14 138016 0).

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