

TEACHER'S NOTES FOR CRANKY PAWS

First book in the 'Pet Vet' series

Written by Darrel and Sally Odgers

Illustrated by Janine Dawson

Published by Scholastic Press, 2008.

DARREL AND SALLY ODGERS both grew up in northern Tasmania. They first met when Darrel was driving a milk tanker that called regularly at the dairy farm where Sally lived. They married in 1979 and have two grown-up children.

In the 1990s they wrote the *Time Detectors* together and have since collaborated on several books. Sally has also written prolifically for children on her own. Her first book, *Her Kingdom for a Pony*, was written when she was nineteen years old. Since then she has had more than 250 books published. She doesn't try to teach her readers any particular lessons through her stories, but is guided by the principle that her characters never give up, don't complain and just get on with things.

The Odgers like to walk, look after their cockatoos and Jack Russell terriers, listen to music and work in their garden.

Learn more about them at: <http://sallyodgers.50megs.com>

JANINE DAWSON loved to draw as a child, even though she didn't think she was very good at it, and she kept at it because it felt good to her. She drew the people she saw on TV, on the street and the kids in her class.

After leaving school, Janine worked in animation and, as she puts it, got to do 'what I loved best . . . drawing every day'. She worked in Los Angeles, Canada and Taiwan before basing herself in Thailand for seven years. In 1991, Janine returned to Sydney and began illustrating children's books. Recently, she has illustrated the picture book *Alberta* (by Tania Cox), a page in the new *ABC Book of Lullabies*, and the latest Jack Russell: Dog Detective book, *Fowl Play*.

When Janine read novels as a child, she loved looking at the line drawings. They gave her a chance to take a breath as she read. She can't imagine some books like *Alice Through the Looking Glass* and Tove Jansson's Moomintroll books without drawings.

Learn more about Janine on the author pages at www.scholastic.com.au or at www.janinedawson.com.au

SYNOPSIS

When Trump and Dr Jeanie move into Cowfork House to take over the Pet Vet Clinic, Trump becomes the A.L.O., the Animal Liaison Officer. It's her job to give advice and comfort to Dr Jeanie's patients.

One day Davie, who helps out at the clinic on Saturdays, brings his aunt's injured cat in for Dr Jeanie to treat. But Thomasina the tortoiseshell hisses and spits, yowls and scratches at any cat, dog or human who comes near her. How can they help her? Dr Jeanie calls Thomasina 'Cranky Paws', a name that Trump thinks suits the crazy cat.

Dr Jeanie and Trump aren't really sure that Davie is telling the truth about Cranky Paws belonging to his aunt, or that the cat hurt herself falling off a fence. They go to his aunt's house to find out what is going on. Sure enough, Davie's aunt doesn't even own a

cat. Back at the clinic Dr Jeanie finally gets the truth out of Davie. He saw the cat get hit by a bicycle and brought her back to the Pet Vet Clinic.

Trump gives talking to Cranky Paws another shot, telling her that it will be possible to go to a new home if she can act nice when she's told. Then Trump runs to the house of Olivia Barnstormer, whose old cat, Pusskins, died a short time ago. Trump leads Olivia to the clinic and the cranky cat manages to act nice for once. When Olivia decides to give Thomasina a new home, Trump knows she has the best job in the world.

WRITING CRANKY PAWS

This new book by Darrel and Sally Odgers came about because Scholastic Press approached them to write a series that focussed on a vet's clinic. With their series on Jack Russell: Dog Detective already a success, Sally and Darrel were well known for their humorous but sensitive approach to writing about animals. Having enjoyed writing about Jack and his friends, the Odgers were definitely interested. They spent some time thinking about how they could create the series. Used to tossing ideas back and forth for their collaborative efforts, they talked about the angle they would take and wrote a proposal. Scholastic was delighted, and the writing of the first book in the series, *Cranky Paws*, began.

Darrel and Sally have created a book that has connections to the Dog Detective series – Trump, the narrator, is one of Jack's daughters – but it has quite a different feel. In part this is because the main characters are female. Instead of Jack and his owner, Sarge, being at the centre of the plot, we have Trump and her owner, Dr Jeanie.

Trump is a strong character. She is a steady dog who takes her job as Animal Liaison Officer at Pet Vet Clinic seriously, but she knows how to have fun doing things like chasing a frisbee and taking Dr Jeanie for a walk. Like all terriers, notably her father, Jack, Trump loves to chase things, to dig and bark, but once she takes on the role of A.L.O., she knows she has to control those terrier urges to do her job properly. As Sally and Darrel put it, 'Her desire to help Dr Jeanie is usually stronger than her desire to "go terrier".' The authors decided not to have her use doggy puns like Jack does to show that she can keep her terrier nature under control.

Once again, in creating a Jack Russell character Darrel and Sally have been inspired by their own beloved dogs. Trump is named after one of their dogs, and she looks like another. But they are adamant that Trump is her own dog. Being Dr Jeanie's assistant, they say that 'she is not a subordinate, but is aware of her responsible position. She is a nurturer and a carer.' They enjoyed creating a whole group of new characters, from a mistreated cat to a lady who needs a new companion to care for. Once again, they are all portrayed warmly, sensitively and yet without sentimentality.

The Odgers felt that setting stories about animals in a vet's clinic was ideal. They gave Dr Jeanie a practice in which she sees small animals and farm animals, which means that a wide variety of animals appear and many situations for interesting plot lines arise. As the Odgers have had numerous animals over the years, they have plenty of general animal experience. They found that 'telling the story through Trump's voice let us avoid the technicalities. Trump sees to the patients' emotional needs, so she doesn't need to describe difficult procedures.'

Snippets of information about caring for animals that are woven into the story are strongly in keeping with the setting of a vet's clinic. Trump is focussed on the wellbeing

of her human, Dr Jeanie, and the animals they care for. She often mentions things like telling Dodger that his human needs to wash him with flea soap and wash his bedding to get rid of his itching problem. The advice Trump gives him, to roll around on his back to show his owner the fleas and to scratch a lot in front of her, neatly tells readers the symptoms of a flea infestation.

More information is given in small definition boxes. Simple medical terms such as ‘injection’, ‘medication’ and ‘vaccination’ along with unusual words such as ‘clowder’ and ‘Liaison Officer’ are defined. In larger boxes headed ‘Trump’s Diagnosis’, pointers on understanding and looking after animals are given. Through Trump’s advice, young readers can learn what to do to make a puppy feel better when it is afraid and why people sometimes don’t want a new pet straight away when their pet has died. All of this information is given in small easy to digest amounts and in clear, simple language.

Cranky Paws deals with sensitive topics, such as the loss of a pet and the abandonment and mistreatment of animals. The authors are gentle and non-judgemental in their resolution of the problems the characters face. Thomasina is fierce, but it is plain that she is afraid and we come to understand why she is the way she is. The human characters who don’t know quite how best to look after their pets, such as Dodger’s owner who prefers rose-scented soap to medicated flea soap, aren’t condemned, just pointed in the right direction. Criticism is only meted out generally, not to individual characters that we actually see. Thomasina’s previous owners rightly come in for a blast for abandoning their cat but we don’t meet them. But even then their mistaken belief that cats can fend for themselves by catching mice is given as a reason for their cruelty. The problems are real, and the characters come across in this way, too.

Find out more about Sally and Darrel and their books at

www.jackrusselldogdetective.com

ILLUSTRATING CRANKY PAWS

Janine Dawson loves illustrating stories with animals in them. She is the illustrator of Darrel and Sally Odger’s Jack Russell: Dog Detective, series and was very excited when she heard that there was to be an offshoot series. She loves the way that they write with such warmth and humour, and the way they see animals, which she feels is very similar to the way she sees them.

Illustrating a new series, Janine has once again created pen and ink drawings full of action with distinctive animal and human characters. Working with new characters with different roles to those in the Dog Detective books, Janine found that her drawings naturally had a slightly different feel to them. She had to get to know the new characters and the layout of where they live. It took her some time to develop them visually and to get used to where everything is in their world. However, Janine didn’t find this an arduous task because she feels that the lovely characters Sally and Darrel create ‘are floating around somewhere just waiting to come out on a piece of paper.’

This story is set in a vet’s clinic and Janine is quite used to going to the vet as she has two cats. Illustrating a story set there made her pay even more attention to what was going on there so she could recreate a realistic clinic. Darrel and Sally were careful to be accurate in how they showed the vet’s clinic, and Janine was, too.

DISCUSSION POINTS AND ACTIVITIES

1. Look at the cover of *Cranky Paws*. Discuss what the story might be about. Then read the blurb. Predict what might happen in the story.
2. Trump and Dr Jeanie are very caring towards animals and people. What do they do that shows us this? What words do the authors use that show this? Do you think the authors like animals?
3. Why is Thomasina so wild? How is she different by the end of the story? What do Trump, Dr Jeanie and the other characters do to help gain Thomasina's trust?
4. Other points of view. The story is written from Trump's point of view. Have students think about how Thomasina might have felt when she woke up in the clinic. They can write a version of the scene from her point of view. Or they could write a short story about when Olivia Barnstormer takes Thomasina home.
5. Davie tells some lies when he brings Thomasina to Pet Vet Clinic. Why does he lie? Do his lies help the situation, or make it more complicated?
6. Look through the book to find some bits of advice about how to look after animals and design a poster to get this information across that might be suitable to put up in a pet shop or a vet's clinic.
7. Hold a brainstorming session to talk about the characters in the book. Write the names of the major characters on separate pieces of butcher's paper. List words that describe the character, then talk about how the authors tell us that the character has that trait. You could break the class up into smaller groups and give each one a character to think about then to present their ideas to the class.
8. The authors base their books loosely on their pets and animals they know. Think about your pet or an animal you know then create a character, making some things about him or her different to the animal you started with. Describe the animal, think about what it likes or doesn't like, what its favourite food is, and so on. Use a brainstorming technique similar to the one described above to do this.
9. Students can write and illustrate a short story based on the new characters they have created.