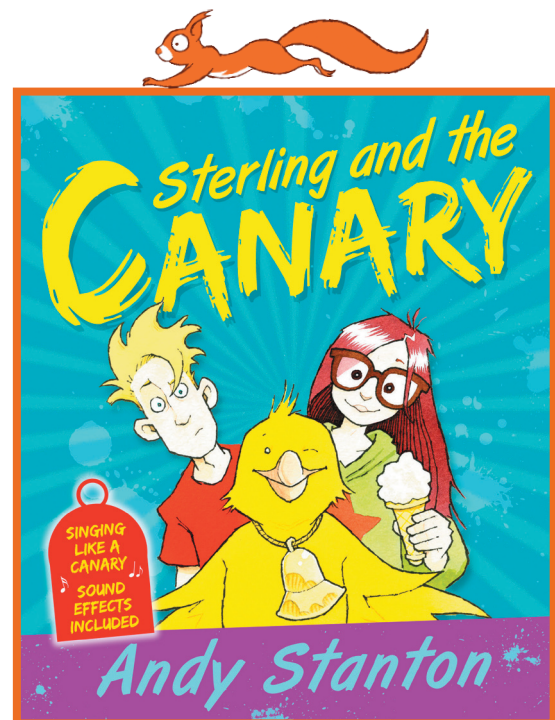


Barrington Stoke

CLASSROOM RESOURCES



ANDY STANTON

Sterling and the Canary

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PART I IDEAS FOR EXPLORING THE TEXT

Read and enjoy Andy Stanton's quirky and humourous *Sterling and the Canary*, a brilliant quick read accessible to mixed ability groups.

A silly hero, a brilliant best friend, and a stuck-up new girl

Sterling Thaxton is in love with beautiful new girl, Lizzie Harris, but Lizzie won't give him the time of day until he can measure up to her high standards for academic achievement. Embarrassed, Sterling rejects an offer of help from his best friend, a girl called Doctor Edward MacIntosh, and instead turns to a talking canary for help. There is a witty and positive ending about the importance of friendship.

Shorter and more gently paced than Andy Stanton's *Mr Gum* stories, *Sterling and the Canary* offers an ideal opportunity for mixed ability groups to explore the ways in which this popular author uses humour, character and word-play to create his off-beat world.

I. FUNNY STUFF

Sterling and the Canary is packed with gentle humour. When you have read the book, discuss the parts the children found funny.

There are several recurring patterns in *Sterling and the Canary* that you could discuss and track:

- Characters assume that they know what is happening or what will happen next and proceed for a few seconds on that basis, when in fact the reverse has happened. For example, on **P40** Sterling happily prattles on about where he will take Lizzie when she has actually said she will not go out with him. See also **P69**, **P76** and Doctor Edward MacIntosh's mum on **P20**. This is a comedy convention that crops up regularly in animated cartoons and films
- There is wild exaggeration. Andy Stanton says that Sterling 'could smash a tennis ball so far that it could win a tennis match in a different town'.



- Characters talk absolute nonsense. *'I like the way she sits on a box of potatoes under the sea,'* says Sterling of Lizzie Harris.
- Characters clarify things that absolutely do not require clarification. *'I want her to be my girlfriend. I would like to hold her hand. I don't mean I want to chop her hand off and hold it. That would be horrible'.*

If any one in the class knows the *Mr Gum* books, can they spot any similarities between *Sterling* and *Mr Gum*? Both Sterling and Mr Gum are fans of quite unusual TV programmes and films, for example, and all of the elements of Andy Stanton's style detailed above appear in both.

Take the opportunity to let the class share the other things they find funny on TV, in print and elsewhere. Watch recorded comedy like an episode of *The Simpsons* together and discuss what makes it funny – bearing in mind that different people find different things amusing.

2. READING ROCKS!

Like most authors, Andy Stanton loves books and reading. At two points in *Sterling and the Canary* he introduces reading material that shows us something about a character. Sterling reads *'The Big Book of Sums Sterling Will Never Be Any Good At'*, and Lizzie Harris reads a magazine article called *'10 Ways to Break A Boy's Heart'*.

The class could all make a drawing of *'One Thing I Will Never Be Good At'* which could be collated into a book called *'Things We Will Never Be Good At'*. Make the ideas wild and wacky – for example, they may never be good at 'riding a bicycle under the sea dressed as a dinosaur'.

Write Lizzie's *'10 Ways to Break A Boy's Heart'* article with the class and design it like an article in a girls' magazine, either with pens and pencils on paper or on the computer.



3. CRACKING CHARACTERS

Look back over the three main characters in *Sterling and the Canary*. Since the novel is so short, Andy Stanton doesn't have very many words to describe the characters. Do the children think he has done a good job?

You could ask the class to make up character profiles recording everything they know about Sterling, Doctor Edward MacIntosh and Lizzie Harris. Like all good writers, Andy Stanton doesn't just TELL us things - he SHOWS us things. For example, he TELLS us that Sterling is very good at football, but he SHOWS us that Doctor Edward MacIntosh is very kind. Make sure the class think about both the things he TELLS and the things he SHOWS.

The free educational software **Fakebook** is designed to create fake social media profiles (<http://classtools.net/fb/home/page>). Ask the class to make **Fakebook** homepages for Sterling, Lizzie and Doctor Edward MacIntosh. Work together to decide on the information for their profiles.

A good way to explore characters is to take them off the page. Lots of pages of *Sterling and the Canary* are dialogue-heavy and could easily be adapted into play scripts, then acted out by the class.

4. A VERY ODD NAME

Sterling is quite an unusual name, but it is not so unusual as the name Doctor Edward MacIntosh for a girl!

Read the explanation of 'How Doctor Edward MacIntosh got her name,' **P5-7**.

Make a list of all of the things Doctor Edward MacIntosh's mum might have seen in the hospital. Do the class like any of the options on the list as a name for a girl baby? Do they like the name Doctor Edward MacIntosh?

FACT!

Andy Stanton says that he started off planning to call Doctor Edward MacIntosh 'Hospital Wall' but that his brother and his friend made him change it as they said it would be too awful to call a little girl 'Hospital Wall'.

Do the class agree that he was right to change it?



5. WICKED WORD-PLAY

Andy Stanton loves to use unusual language and images. At one point he says that Sterling *'flopped around the house like a bored pancake'*.

Ask the class to flop about *'like bored pancakes'* on the floor. Does the image help them to imagine how they should flop?

Can the class think of any other foods that could be used as an image for people's moods? Here is a suggestion for a silly poem they could use as a starting point:

***Bored like a pancake,
And tired like spaghetti.
Angry like a strawberry,
And terrified like jelly.***

Think about textures, colours, smells and tastes. A meringue might be stand-offish because it is so pretty, or nervous because it could be broken so easily. Celery might be horrible because many people don't like it. Blackcurrants might be cheerful. Red fruits could suggest anger, or embarrassment.

Remember that Andy Stanton's images can be funny precisely because they make no sense at all!

6. FRIENDSHIP

The main themes of *Sterling and the Canary* are friendship and not judging people by appearances.

Read pages **24** and **25** again. Have the class ever experienced the situation Sterling finds himself in – where it is difficult to undo a silly thing because then you have to admit that you have done it and say sorry? You could use this as a jumping-off point for a piece of reflective writing, or for an imaginative story.

What do the class think of the ending of the book? Do they think Sterling ends up with the right girl? Is friendship more important than fancying someone because they are nice-looking?



PART 2 ABOUT ANDY STANTON



Andy Stanton was born and brought up in London. He always liked reading and writing stories. When he does events at book festivals he reads out some of the things he wrote in his jotters at school. His stories are probably better nowadays.

Andy's favourite children's book is *The Eighteenth Emergency* by Betsy Byars. He got it out of the library when he was eight because he liked the cover. He says it is 'funny and bittersweet'.

Andy was quite good at school but didn't like university so much. He went on to be a film script reader, a cartoonist, an NHS lackey and lots of other things before he became a full-time writer. He has many interests, but best of all he likes cartoons, books and music (he even plays some guitar).

Andy's favourite expression is 'Good evening' and his favourite word is 'captain'. He says he likes pizza and dislikes Robbie Williams.

ANDY'S TOP TIP FOR READING IS:

“Read whatever interests you. If cowboy books interest you, read cowboy books. If you like books about fairies, read those. If you like cowboy books and fairy books, read both types. Remember you can read anything you like. Don't worry about whether a book is 'meant for you' or not – try it and find out!”

HIS TOP TIP FOR WRITING IS:

“You only need one idea to begin writing. It can be something simple and small (e.g. a sunflower growing in a field) or it can be something huge and complicated (e.g. a war between aliens and hedgehogs). But it doesn't matter what it is – as soon as you have that one idea, sit down and start writing. You might be surprised where your idea takes you!”

You can read more about Andy on the Mr Gum website. You can even send him a question for the 'Ask Andy' page!



PART 3 OTHER ACTIVITIES

LUNCH FOR STERLING

Poor Sterling doesn't have much luck when he tries to make lunch for himself.

'Sterling made himself a sandwich for lunch. He put too much mustard in. It was revolting.'

Can you come up with four DISGUSTING lunches for Sterling? Try to think of the most revolting thing you could find in a packed lunch box!

Now...

Can you come up with four YUMMY lunches for Sterling? Each yummy lunch should have:

- A sandwich or a wrap with two fillings
- A drink
- Fruit or vegetables
- A snack like yoghurt or a cereal bar

Happy lunch-making!

DETECTIVES!

Sterling and Doctor Edward MacIntosh like to play a game in the park where they pretend that other people are crime suspects and then follow them like detectives.

Read pages **59** to **60** again and use the information to draw a map of the park. Use arrows to show the route Sterling and Doctor Edward MacIntosh take as they follow the 'suspect' around.

