

# KIRSTY MURRAY

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## tough Stuff

Tough Stuff  
by Kirsty Murray

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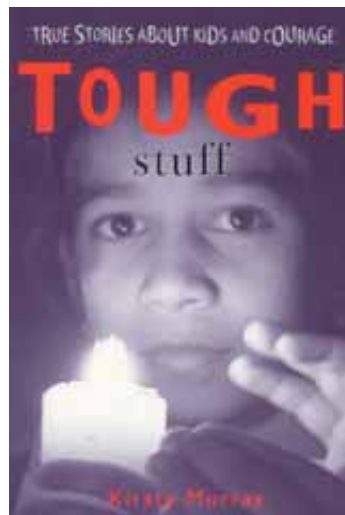
### Teachers' Notes by Eve Recht

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The aim of these notes is to enrich the experience of reading Tough Stuff by offering starting points for reflection and discussion, writing, research and action. Included are individual, group and class activities, and a range of writing tasks for different purposes and different audiences - extended narrative, news reports, dialogue scripts, and so on. Almost all the activities sit well in the English curriculum, but some are valuable for drama and art, SOSE (the research questions), religious education/ethics or personal development.

The notes fall into two parts:

- general ideas - activities which involve looking at various chapters or at the whole book;
- separate activities for each of the eight chapters.



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General ideas

### **Kids and courage**

'This book is about matters of the heart.'

Courage: the quality of mind that enables one to encounter difficulties and danger with firmness or without fear; bravery (Macquarie Dictionary) From the Latin word cor, meaning heart + the suffix -age, meaning that which belongs to or is related to

Courage can be facing a charging bull or surviving against all the odds, speaking out for what you believe in or doggedly putting one foot in front of the other when there seems to be nothing else possible.

'Courage is having the strength inside you to do the bravery and the action ... it's not about the actions themselves, the doing, the deeds ...'

- \* What does courage mean to you?
- \* Which kid in Tough Stuff touches your heart most? Do you know why?

### **Milo**

... as a connector of stories

- \* Re-read pages 5 and 6 to see how Milo introduces himself to us. What is Milo's role in the book? In what ways do you think Tough Stuff would be different without Milo's comments?

Do you like Milo?

... as a collector of stories

- \* Do you know anyone else who collects stories? Ask them to tell you a favourite.

### **Inspiring kids through books**

- \* Kirsty Murray wants to offer inspiration and hope to children through her telling of true stories about real kids around the world and through history.

Do you find Tough Stuff inspiring? Any stories in particular?

- \* Other writers choose to inspire their readers by inventing and telling fictional stories. Are there particular stories/books/novels that have especially inspired you? Inspired you in what way?
- \* Look at the way that different styles (genres) of book offer inspiration and challenge, ways of understanding our world. Compare historical novels (e.g. When Hitler Stole Pink Rabbit by Judith Kerr), humorous stories (e.g. Two Weeks with the Queen by Morris Gleitzman), books of reminiscences (such as Sun on the Stubble by Colin Thiele), 'science fiction' (e.g. Galax-Arena by Gillian Rubinstein, A Wizard of Earthsea by Ursula K. Le Guin), and re-creations of past events (e.g. Children on the Oregon Trail by A. Rutgers van der Loeff).

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**Don't judge a book by its cover?**

- \* Do you think the cover of Tough Stuff is a good one?
- \* What do these elements of the cover suggest to you?

the title  
the photo on the front cover  
the photo on the back cover  
the 'shout line': True stories about kids and courage  
the blurb  
the colour scheme

**Something to be proud of**

- \* Write about something that you have done which made you feel good about yourself.

It might be something that no-one else knows about or that seems like a small thing to other people, but is important to you. It might be something special that you did to help someone in your family or your street, something that you said to someone, or something you didn't say. It might be something that you have done lots of times, or something that you have only ever done once. It might have been physically really hard, or not physically demanding at all.

You could start with a sentence like I am really proud of the time when ...

- \* Make a class book of Proud stories

**Kids in the headlines****Collecting stories of kids and courage**

- \* Read today's newspaper carefully, looking for stories about kids, and especially kids doing something special or extraordinary or tough.

You could collect a range of stories over a period of time.

In what way are the stories similar to stories in Tough Stuff, and in what ways are they different - in both content (what they reporting) and style (the way that the pieces are written)? Are front-page news reports different from stories reported in other sections of the paper (e.g. lifestyle pages or education pages)? How are photographs used? Cartoons?

**In the kid's own words**

- \* Take one current newspaper story and re-write it from the child's perspective, in his or her own words. This will probably change the piece entirely, so that it no longer looks like a newspaper article. It will probably look much more like one of the pieces in Tough Stuff!
- \* You could make your own class collection: Tough Stuff for kids in the news.

**History as a news report...**

- \* Take one of the historical stories in Tough Stuff and rewrite it as a newspaper article (e.g. front page news: 'Genghis Khan reaches Beijing' ... or a feature/background article: 'Temujin the Ironsmith lives up to his birth-right' ... or even a 'soft news' piece: 'Family life in Genghis Khan's army').

**... or on TV**

Adapt any of the newspaper ideas above for TV - as the lead story on the six o'clock news, a feature on a current affairs program or as part of an infotainment program.

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**Imagining and acting the part**

- \* Work in groups to change some of the stories into short plays. Some already have a lot of dialogue and action (e.g. Billy and the bull, Colleen Cooke's story, or Helena and Stephania's story). You could perform your plays to another class, with possibly a narrator or linking character like Milo in the book.
- \* In your groups talk about what is special about the kids - and the adults - and what qualities you want to portray (quick reflexes, persistence, courage, brilliance ...). You might use props, or choose a particular location to perform your play, or you might like to dress in particular colours.
- \* Another challenge could be to act the same story, about the same kid, to different audiences, e.g. prep or kinder kids, parents, people in the local old folks' home.

**Poems and pictures**

- \* Choose one of the important attributes of the kids in Tough Stuff, and write a write a poem - it could be an acrostic poem about either one of the kids, or the quality itself.  
Choose from COURAGE, PERSISTENCE, BRAVERY, DOING IT TOUGH, SPIRIT.
- \* Use a large piece of paper as a window, and draw what one of the kids might see out of that window - e.g. looking out from the poorhouse, living behind the false wall in Helena and Stephania's house, the view from the Tower of London.
- \* Or draw the view looking in through a window.
- \* Use one colour only (or one colour and black) to draw or paint about one of the children's feelings e.g. Ruby Hunter living in the children's home, Eileen Joyce's joy at having piano lessons.

**Connections and contrasts**

- \* Compare how Ruby Hunter and Eileen Joyce left home as kids.
- \* Compare the life of Billy Sidis with the life of Victor, the wild boy of Aveyron. Both were famous for being 'different': how did that difference change people's behaviour towards them?
- \* Look at the deaths (assassinations) of Iqbal Masih, the Princes in the Tower, Kaspar Hauser, Hector Pieteron in Soweto. What do they have in common?
- \* The Dalai Lama and the children in the 'Survivors' chapter were also at risk of being killed — was it for the same reason?
- \* Discuss the idea of exile - the Dalai Lama lives in exile in India, Ruby Hunter was exiled from her family and home, Jews were exiled to concentration camps or Siberia during World War II. Write a poem called 'Exiled' or 'In exile'.

**Epitaphs**

- \* Read the inscription on Hector Pieteron's gravestone (page 109). Write the inscription for the gravestone of one of the other children e.g. Iqbal Masih or the young princes imprisoned in the Tower.

**Action research: networks and the web**

- \* At the end of Tough Stuff Milo says: 'Never underestimate the power of a kid'.

Link up with other kids around the world by contacting the organisations Milo lists on page 155. Send an e-mail expressing support for your chosen cause.

- \* Ask at your local scouts or church or youth group how you can become involved and be a kid with power.

## CHAPTER BY CHAPTER

**1. Rescuers**

- \* Children who win awards for bravery receive a certificate with a citation on it. This says what they have done for others that was so special and so brave. Imagine that the class is to give Helena and Stephania an award and has to draw up a citation. Work in groups to decide what the citation should say and what would be the best way to present it.
- \* Write or add a postscript or later episode for one or more of the stories. For example, how might baby Jenny's parents thank Joe for snatching her away from the train line, or how might Jenny herself feel about the episode in a few years time, and how might she thank Joe?
- \* How do you think the various 'saved people' felt about what was happening to them? Rewrite the Billy and the bull story from Billy's dad Greg's point of view. You could write a blow-by-blow account, or Greg's thoughts about it later.

**Words and concepts to explore:** bravery, persistence, safety, first aid, awards, citations, adrenaline, heroism.

**2. Brainboxes**

- \* Do you agree with Milo that being a genius is not always 'a bowl of cherries'?
- \* If you could choose, what one gift or talent would you like to have? (Would you like to have one at all?)
- \* Find out about the history of chess, and the origins of such terms as 'stalemate' and 'checkmate'.
- \* Have a go at the old how-many-grains of rice problem. (If you give me one grain of rice for the first square on the chessboard, two for the second, four for the third, eight for the fourth, 16 for the fifth, 32 for the sixth, and so on, do you have enough rice in your kingdom to pay me?)  
Can you solve the problem with a calculator? Do you think George Bidder or William Sidis could solve it?

NB Also look at the sports and arts brainboxes of Chapter 4, 'Superstars'.

**Words and concepts to explore:** genius, prodigy, intelligence, gender, freak, encouragement, talent, nature vs nurture

**3. Ferals**

- \* Do you think you could go bush and survive? What might you miss the most: a roof over your head? plentiful and easily obtained food? friends to talk to?
- \* Do you think the French villagers or the Reverend Singh believed they were 'saving' the feral children? Would Victor or Amala or Kamala have felt the same way as the people whose lives were saved in Chapter 1?
- \* These are stories of sadness and deprivation, absence of identity and lack of connection. They are also stories

of good intentions and sheer physical toughness.

Write a poem called 'Wild and Mysterious' that captures some of the qualities of these wild kids, or that expresses your feelings about them.

- \* Spend an hour (or a whole day if you can) without talking to anyone: family or friends or teachers. How does it feel? Can you make yourself understood?

**Words and concepts to explore:** communication, autism, feral, survival, protection, mental illness.

#### 4. Superstars

- \* Dream come true You are granted your wish to be a sports star or a famous film and television actor! Tell us about your particular gifts or talents and what you want to achieve with them.
- \* Interview of a lifetime What questions would you like to ask one of these superstars? Imagine that you are an ace reporter about to interview Yehudi Menuhin before one of his final concerts, or Shane Gould as she watches today's champion swimmers on TV.
- \* Watch an old Shirley Temple movie. Can you see the star quality behind the tight curls and the dimples and the cute songs? Do you think Shirley Temple would make it as a child star today?
- \* Write a play called 'Shirley, you're in Trouble!' You could write it in the burlesque style of her early comedies, or as a fan-mag style story about how poor Shirley Temple is locked inside her Hollywood mansion ...
- \* Find out about the other Picasso - Pablo Picasso - that Alexandra is compared to.
- \* Listen to a recording of Yehudi Menuhin playing classical music or jazz. Can you hear his love of music in his playing?

**Words and concepts to explore:** gifted, luck, celebrity, child prodigy, working conditions, family finances, the arts.

#### 5. Battlers

- \* Make a table of similarities and differences between the lives of Robert Blincoe (in nineteenth-century England) and Iqbal Masih (in modern-day Pakistan). Consider as many aspects of their lives as you can, and then compare the various aspects of their lives with your own life.
- \* Iqbal was 'a passionate speaker and a crusader for human rights'. Imagine what Iqbal might have said if he visited your school. How would you have responded to him? Write an article for your school newsletter about Iqbal and his beliefs.
- \* Can kids make a difference? What do you think it takes to make a difference? - look at Craig Kielburger and the students of Broad Meadows Middle School.
- \* What makes a persuasive speaker? Discuss this in groups, then practise speaking as persuasively as you can, on a topic you feel passionate about, to your friends, your class, or your family.

**Words and concepts to explore:** inhumanity, human rights, unions, persecution, cause, bonded labour, child labour, slavery.

#### 6. Rebels

- \* Listen to a recording of Archie Roach singing the song he wrote about the stolen generations: 'They took the children away'.
- \* 'You'd never get kids today to go on a crusade - or their parents either.' Do you agree? Why/Why not?

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What is it about Kirsty Murray's writing that makes the whole undertaking so believable and understandable?

- \* Research the Children's Crusades, and find out how they were different from the adult crusades. (You might like to read Pagan's Crusade by Catherine Jinks.)
- \* A French student slogan of the 1960s was 'Be realistic, demand the impossible.' In what ways did Hector Pieterse and other Soweto students live up to this slogan?
- \* Ask your parents and older friends about student protests in Australia in the 1960s and 1970s.
- \* Find out what has happened in South Africa since Hector Pieterse's death.

**Words and concepts to explore:** vision, quest, mission, reclaim, resistance, volunteer, conquer, crusade, passionate, oppression, apartheid, shrine.

### 7. Rulers

- \* On a map of the world, locate Mongolia, and the vast lands that Genghis Khan conquered and ruled.
- \* 'On balance, Temujin had it better than some of the other kid rulers we read about in Tough Stuff.' Do you agree?
- \* At the age of 12 (the age Prince Edward was in 1483), would you be able to tell if your relatives were plotting against you? How would it feel to be locked away by family that you had hoped you could trust?
- \* Watch the film *Seven Years in Tibet*, about a young Austrian man who meets the Dalai Lama in Tibet around the time of World War II, or *Kundun*, a recent film about the life of the Dalai Lama.
- \* Research what has happened in Tibet since the Dalai Lama went into exile. Present your findings to the class in writing or orally.

**Words and concepts to explore:** prophesy, tribe, empire, military, conquer, invade, exile, isolation, invasion, resolution, coronation, trust, regent, sanctuary, prayer, reincarnation

### 8. Survivors

- \* Milo says 'I like to think of myself as a fighter but not a soldier.' Do you think of yourself as a fighter? What do you think is worth fighting about? Write or talk about something that you have fought for.
- \* Some people think that children shouldn't be told, or don't need to know, about the horrors of war, and especially not the details of the Holocaust, the Nazi persecution and murder of six million Jews. What do you think?
- \* Many people now in their sixties, seventies and eighties have been directly affected by World War II, as victims of the Nazis or as soldiers fighting in Europe or Asia; as civilians left behind to manage the farms and keep the factories running while the soldiers were away fighting; or as children whose parents were killed in the war. Ask an older person that you know to tell you about their war.
- \* Different types of courage: re-read the scene on page 153 where Joseph, on behalf of the thirteen Jews, says, 'Run away, don't die with us,' and Helena replies, 'No, we can't go.' In what different ways were both Joseph and Helena being brave?
- \* Think about refugees - people who have been left homeless and stateless by wars or natural disasters. Refugees seek refuge - shelter and safety - first of all. What other needs might they have, once they have made it to safety?

**Words and concepts to explore:** holocaust, survival, hope, partisan, concentration camp, civilians, revenge, war, spirit.