

Belle's Challenge

Connie Gotsch

John Cogan, Illustrator

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As if moving from Illinois to New Mexico wasn't challenge enough for Belle, a heeler that Darcy saved from abusive owners, she also discovers that there is no agility club in which she can compete.

Darcy, Belle and her lab, Buster, soon meet their neighbor, Susan, and her airedale terrier, Jazzy, and they become fast friends. Unfortunately, across their backyard, the mayor lives with his dog-hating daughter, Emily, and her younger sister, Katherine. To keep Belle busy, Darcy enrolls the dogs in Canine Good Citizen classes and begins teaching them how to work as Reading Therapy Dogs at the library.

Belle hates just lying there while kids read to her. When Katherine, Emily's sister, comes to read to the therapy dogs, Emily and her dog-fearing mother make things difficult for Darcy and her dogs. No one can deny Katherine's progress, however, and Belle learns that she can accomplish things, even if she finds them very difficult.

This book is the third, and last, in a trilogy about Darcy and Belle. Belle starts out as an abused puppy who has to learn to find her confidence. Each book is narrated by Belle, who has come a long way in learning to trust people and other animals. This book tests that trust by introducing Emily, a competitive, arrogant girl who challenges both Darcy and Belle with her lies and mean behavior.

While the book can be pedantic at times, it teaches the reader a powerful lesson about doing what is right, even if it might not be the most comfortable thing to do. Even though Darcy and Belle's confidence is tested, they believe in themselves and one another and are able to support a child who is less confident. The theme of bullying is addressed honestly, incorporating various methods to get Emily to stop being so cruel. Many of the methods don't work with her because she is in need of counseling, a concept that is addressed at the end.

Characters are very well-developed. Darcy is a young lady who has grown in confidence, along with Belle. Her new friend Susan also has the opportunity to demonstrate her patience, or lack thereof, with Emily. The plot is well-developed as well, and readers will be able to pick up the story line, even if they did not read the previous two books, *Belle's Star* and *Belle's Trial*.

Gotsch clearly knows dogs well. Belle's on-the-go heeler personality shines through, as does Buster's lackadaisical Labrador retriever attitude. The fact that the dog, Belle, narrates the story will appeal to the target audience of ages ten to fourteen. Belle often comments on new people to the scene by describing the scent they give off to her. Each person seems to have a signature scent, which changes as their mood changes. Along with that, each chapter is headed by an illustration which gives the reader an opportunity to make inferences about what will occur next.

This book comes with a downloadable activity guide, which can be used by teachers or counselors in tandem with the book.

LYNN EVARTS (April 17, 2013)

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