

Fearless Joe Dearborne

Lisa Whitney Mitchell

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This delightful book teaches the difference between fearlessness and bravery.

In *Fearless Joe Dearborne*, sixth-grader Joe has what seems like an amazing gift: he is unable to feel fear. But that has a downside too: without a healthy dose of fear, Joe is incapable of feeling brave, since there isn't any scary sense of danger to overcome.

Only a few short chapters into this delightful and educational book, however, author Lisa Whitney Mitchell cleverly gives the young protagonist plenty of chances to test his courage. First, Joe has a near-death experience with a poisonous snake and suddenly begins to feel fear for the first time. Second, a sinister woman with the apt name Mrs. Chill takes over his house and schemes to take down his family and his pet.

Unfortunately for Joe, his single father goes on a business trip, leaving him under the care of creepy Mrs. Chill and his eccentric aunt Persephone. Mrs. Chill is a dynamic variation of the classic evil stepmother character. She's vain to a comic degree, slathering herself with various tinctures and eating raw garlic to stay thin. Joe is convinced she could be a vampire if it weren't for her strict garlic diet.

Then there is crazy Aunt P, who gifts Joe a "lambdoodle" for his birthday. She believes the furry creature to be the latest dog craze out of England: a poodle bred to resemble a lamb. In fact, Aunt P has been taken by one of Mrs. Chill's cohorts who has sold her a sheep rather than a dog. The vampire-like housekeeper has designs on poisoning the sheep as part of an elaborate plan to get her hands on rich Aunt P's fortune.

Although Joe is now very often afraid, he conjures newfound bravery—which Mitchell depicts as a voice inside his head and places within the text in italics—to sneak his lambdoodle away, thereby thwarting Mrs. Chill's scheme.

Youngsters will enjoy villainous Mrs. Chill and the ridiculous but lovable pet lambdoodle, and teachers and parents will appreciate the book's pedagogy. Mitchell begins each chapter with a vocabulary word and a definition, so young readers can learn the meaning of "puny," for instance, and then read the word in the context of the alluring narrative.

In addition to increasing vocabulary, the author teaches the nuanced difference between fearlessness and bravery. As Joe battles Mrs. Chill and survives a night in the woods, Mitchell shows that having some fear is not only acceptable but sometimes even desirable.

Fearless Joe Dearborne concludes with Joe's letter to a friend, summarizing what happened to Mrs. Chill, his aunt, the lambdoodle, and a host of other characters. It's a satisfying end made all the more charming by the use of a child's awkward handwriting.

Young and old will root for Joe as he transforms from fearless to brave, and Mitchell should be applauded for an entertaining debut novel.

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