

Teacher Notes – Tracey Binns is Trouble

by Sherryl Clark

University of Queensland Press

May 2007

SYNOPSIS

Tracey Binns is trying her hardest to misbehave at school. Refusing to do any homework and intentionally making mistakes in her work, Tracey prefers to be the class clown rather than be teased by the other children for being the teacher's pet. She spends more time in detention than any other Year 6 student and has just received the worst report card imaginable. Instead of helping her to make friends however, this behaviour causes even more bullying from her peers. Nicknamed 'Rubbish Binns', Tracey is terribly lonely.

That is until new girl Isabella arrives. Isabella takes an instant liking to Tracey and realises immediately that she is actually a very clever girl who is trying dismally to appear naughty and unintelligent. When the opportunity arises for the school to enter a team into the *Best Brands Computer* competition, Isabella convinces Tracey to stop pretending and show her true abilities. Their friendship helps Tracey to accept and be herself.

As their friendship grows, Tracey appreciates how special best friends are and recognizes that Isabella too has her own issues. The strength of this new friendship is tested when Isabella's secrets are revealed.

THEMES

Relationships:

- Tracey's parents work seven days a week in their cleaning business in order to provide what they perceive to be the perfect life and the perfect house for their family. This means however that Tracey is often alone, especially as she is an only child. She would rather have an ordinary house and spend more time with her parents than live in the pristine mansion that she is too afraid she'll damage.
- Tracey's Year 6 teacher, Mrs Gallant, has a *soft spot* for Tracey. She refuses to give up on the student who misbehaves so much.
- Tracey develops a close friendship with the new girl, Isabella. She realises how wonderful it is to have a best friend, especially one who accepts her and encourages her to be herself.

Acceptance:

- Tracey learns to accept her abilities and to acknowledge how easier life is to just be herself
- Tracey accepts the secrets that Isabella reveals

Bullying:

- Tracey has moved schools a lot. At her newest school, she is teased for being a *big brain* and the *teacher's pet*. Her strategy to counteract this bullying is to misbehave and do badly at her school work.
- The other children eventually turn on the bullies and support Tracey.

WRITING STYLE

Tracey Binns is Trouble is a narrative told in the first person. Visual literacy is included through the collage illustrations interspersed throughout the text. These further enhance the story, helping the reader to gauge the emotions and qualities of the minor characters. The narration is realistic and contemporary, yet light and humorous.

AUTHOR MOTIVATION

When I first started writing about Tracey, I wanted to create a naughty character who did everything we're always too scared to – refuse to do homework, fail tests on purpose, be the class clown.

Then I started thinking about why someone would deliberately behave like this, and I remembered my daughter's experiences at school. She was bored and got into trouble for wanting to 'do her own thing', then later as a scholarship student, she was bullied for being smart. I did a lot of research back then, and discovered that bright kids were often the class clowns, and deliberately under-achieved to fit in.

I knew that it also often led to someone who was very lonely; having Tracey move schools added to her problem of having no friends. Gradually she became a more rounded, real character as I understood more about her. Enter Isabella! Through this character, I was able to explore the importance of friendship, but also that being a friend works both ways, giving and receiving. The Best Schools competition came from my own feelings about being in something similar when I was a kid, and failing miserably. I really wanted Tracey to win, and show everyone her true value, but also for Tracey to finally understand it for herself.

STUDY NOTES

- Before reading the text, look carefully at the inside back covers of the book (end covers).
 - Describe how Tracey might be feeling?
 - Examine the end covers again after reading the text. At what points during the story might Tracey have started feeling this way?
- Why do you think Tracey is trying so hard to hide her intelligence? Why does she want people to believe she's naughty?
- Tracey tells herself she doesn't care what her parents think about her report card. Is this true? Why?
- Tracey's idea of the perfect house and the perfect life is different from her parents. Describe what you think Tracey's perfect house and perfect life might be like?
- Do you think that Tracey's parents are exactly as she describes them? Could some of her ideas about her parents be a little inaccurate? Give some examples.
- Why do you think Tracey doesn't tell her parents about the good things she does, like looking after Mrs Sefton's cats?

- Explain the special role that Mrs Sefton's cats, Mouser and Millicent, play in Tracey's life.
- Even though Tracey is often in trouble, why do you think she is always the first to be in the classroom before school?
- Tracey doesn't seem to mind being in detention. Why do you think this is?
- Tracey is bullied by the other children at her school. Why do you think she gets bullied? Why do characters like Justin bully other students?
- Instead of acting like the class clown, what other strategies could Tracey use to stop being bullied?
- Tracey is a daydreamer. What do you think she's daydreaming about? Do you daydream? If so, what are some of your daydreams about?
- Why do you think Tracey is *Tracey Trouble* and not *Tracey Terrific*?
- Have you ever started at a new school? Describe what it was like to be *the new kid*.
- Mrs Gallant defends Tracey. Have you ever had a teacher who understands you? How has this helped you at school?
- Initially, Tracey doesn't seem to want a new friend in Isabella. Why do you think this is?
- It doesn't take long for Tracey to realise how nice it is to have a friend like Isabella. What makes a good friend?
- Isabella asks Tracey if the teachers ask nosy questions about your house and your family. Why does Tracey find this a strange question?
- Why does Isabella get cross with Tracey towards the end of the novel?
- Class assignment – Watch the evening news, taking note of the various reports. Compare different networks' coverage of the news on the same evening.
- Tracey is worried when Isabella first sees her bedroom. Draw a picture of Tracey's bedroom as it is described on p32/33. Try either describing or drawing your own bedroom.
- Examine some of the illustrations in the book. Discuss what can be learnt about the characters and the story from these illustrations.
- Using a digital camera, take some photos of you and your classmates. Create some collages of your own similar to those found in the novel.
- Try some of the algebra problems given by Mr Chomley on p69/70. Create some of your own.