

# Readers' Guide



## *Coop the Great*

a novel

by Larry Verstraete

5" x 8"

160 pages

Published by Great Plains Publications  
Yellow Dog Imprint

ISBN 978-1-77337-009-5 (softcover)

ISBN 978-1-77337-010-1 (EPUB)

ISBN 978-1-77337-011-8 (Kindle)

*An aging, cynical dachshund named Cooper figures his most recent adoption by a frail widower named Mike is doomed for failure. But life with Mike and his grandchildren, Zach and Emma, is different than Coop expects and when they run into trouble, Coop faces the ultimate test. Mike rescued him, but does Coop have what it takes to do the same? Drawing strength from the stories about great dogs that Mike shares with him, Coop charts a dangerous journey to save his new family.*

...

*"Perfect for young readers who love animals, as well as a classroom or bedtime read-aloud focusing on important themes of empathy, heroism, and the power of a positive mindset, this is a novel worthy of purchase and priority placement on bookshelves. Highly recommended."*

*CM Review*

*"Every now and then, I come across a book that hits me so hard that I can't stop thinking about it. This is one such book. I have to confess, I've read this book four, yes that's right, four times....I wish I could give this book 100 stars, but, I am forced to only give it a meager five out of five. Well done!"*

*Janet Slipak, My Book Abyss*

## Dear Reader,

Why write a story about a dog, told by a dog? Why a dachshund and not another breed? Why an older dog and not a younger one? Why call the dog Cooper and not another name?

So many questions. So many decisions for the writer to make. For *Coop the Great*, I asked myself these same questions and a lot of others, too. But let's start with the first one. Why a story about a dog, told by a dog?

*Coop the Great* started with a real dog. A dachshund in fact. One day while my wife and I were beginning a hike in Arizona, we spotted a small dachshund and his owner at the trailhead. The dog was wearing a green sweater and he looked eager to start. Because I had hiked the trail many times, I knew it was very rocky and steep, difficult enough for a fit person, let alone a small dog with short legs.

All the way up, I thought about the challenges the dog faced. I wondered how he was doing. When we stopped at the summit, we spotted the owner trudging up the steep grade. There was no sign of the dachshund, but when the young man passed us, we saw the dog in the man's backpack catching a ride, his ears swaying with every step. He looked quite comfortable and happy.

The idea for a story about a small, determined dog who faces challenges was born that day. It seemed only fitting that the dog should tell the story since he was the main character. And why not make him a dachshund? After all, it was a dachshund that gave me the idea.

To write from the point of view of a small dog, I had to think in dog terms and imagine what a dog might see, hear, taste, feel and smell. I had to put myself into the mind of a dog and wonder what a dog might think about the human activity around him. To appreciate a small dog's perspective, I crawled on the floor and noticed things I'd missed before – crumbs on the carpet, scratches on table legs, smelly socks on sweaty feet.

My research took me to many places. I visited shelters. I talked to dog owners. It helped that I had dogs as pets. Each one had a unique personality and I thought of them often as I wrote the first draft of the book. My research also brought to the Weiner Dog Races in Phoenix, Arizona. It's an annual fund-raising event where dachshunds race against each other for charity.

The dachshund I spotted on the trail seemed to have a feisty attitude and a personality all his own. I figured my fictional dog should, too. I wanted a character who was a down-and-out dog who was a bit sour on life, one who had something to prove to himself and the rest of the world. I decided an older dog with a long history and a few handicaps would work better than a younger one.

When I started writing the story, I didn't have a name for my character. I didn't have a suitable title for the book either. For a while, I thought the dog's name should be Finn and the book should be called *Finn's Rescue*. But as I wrote the story, it became clear to me that the story was not so much about rescues as it was about a dog on a quest to be the best he could be. The name Coop seemed to suit such a dog. It also paired well with word 'great'. A title that combined the two words had a snappy ring to it.

Writing *Coop the Great* was a challenge, but also a lot of fun. I hope you enjoy reading it as much as I enjoyed writing it.

Larry

## Discussion Questions

1. The front and back covers show Coop. What does the illustration tell you about him? What does it lead you to expect from the story?
2. The first chapter begins at Derby Animal Shelter. What makes an animal shelter 'good'? What makes an animal shelter 'bad'? Where does Derby belong on the scale of good or bad?
3. Why do you think Mike adopted Coop and not another dog at Derby?
4. What is Coop's inner most desire – the thing he most wants in life? Can you find a passage in one of the chapters to back up your opinion?
5. What is Coop's greatest fear? How does this affect his behaviour in the story?
6. Mike's stories are a big part of Coop the Great. What is their role in the story? What do they show about Mike?
7. Why do you think Zach behaves the way he does? Can you see his point of view? Do you feel sorry for him?
8. In what ways is Rick abusive? Why do you suppose he acts this way? Have you ever been abusive or acted like a bully? Why?
9. Could Jess have handled the situation with Rick differently? Is there an effective way to handle abuse or bullying? If you have been bullied, how did you handle it?
10. Everyone probably feels like 'punching a hole in a wall' from time to time like Mike does. Is it okay to destroy our own property to express our anger? Are there healthy and unhealthy ways to handle anger?
11. What is the message behind Mike's quote: "We can't change the past. We can only move forward"? Is it really possible to leave the past in the past?
12. The word 'great' appears in the title and throughout the book. What is your definition of 'great'? In what ways is Coop 'great'?
13. What questions, if any, does the story leave unanswered?
14. If you could ask the author a question, what would it be?

## Writer's Craft

1. The author starts with a prologue instead of a first chapter. Why do you suppose he begins the book that way? Would the story be the same if the prologue was removed and the story started with Chapter 1 instead?
2. The story is told by Coop from his point of view. Why do you suppose the author chose to write it that way? Find a section in the story. Rewrite it from the point of view of Zach, Mike or another character. What does that do?
3. Telling a story from a dog's perspective is tricky. After all, dogs don't speak or write. To make the story credible, the author had to convince readers that they should buy into the concept. Was he successful? How did he do that?
4. Coop's personality is revealed through his speech, actions and attitudes. What traits or characteristics does Coop have? What techniques does the author use to *show* the reader what kind of a character Coop is?
5. Pacing in fiction refers to the speed at which a story unfolds. It's how quickly or slowly events advance. Did the author maintain the same pace throughout the story? Is there a place where he slowed down the pace, and another where he sped it up? What is the author trying to achieve by changing the pace?
6. Minor characters often play important roles in stories. Sophie is a minor character who appears only twice in *Coop the Great*. Why did the author include Sophie? How would the story change if her character was eliminated?
7. It's the author's job to keep readers interested in the story so that they will keep turning pages at the end of every chapter. Was the author of *Coop the Great* successful here? What end-of-chapter techniques does he use to keep readers interested?
8. Authors of fiction like to keep secrets. They often hide information or reveal only small bits at a time. It's another way to keep readers interested in the story. Where does the author of *Coop the Great* do this? Find examples to demonstrate this technique.
9. Symbolism is the use of one thing to represent another. Symbols are one way an author brings life to a story, its characters and its ultimate message. In *Coop the Great* the hollow globe constructed of wire strands is a symbol. What is its role? What message is the author trying to deliver?

## About the Author

At nine years old, there were subtle signs that I might want to be a writer some day. While thumbing through a toy catalogue just before Christmas, I found, and then later received, the perfect gift - a small printing press. The summer after, a friend and I started an ambitious publishing project, aiming to become rich and famous with the printing press.

Our goal was to publish and sell a newsletter filled with stories gathered around the neighbourhood. For a week, we spied on neighbours, filling notepads with facts and observations. But when we began the task of setting the stories into type on the printing press, the project floundered. The work was too boring, too tedious, and we abandoned our dream in favour of more enjoyable summer pastimes like swimming and biking.

That was my earliest foray into writing, and although that venture was a gob-smacking failure, the drive to write simmered below the surface for years. One day, older now with a science degree under my belt and a teaching career already well in hand, fate intervened. While waiting for a haircut in a barber shop, a magazine ad for a correspondence writing course caught my eye, rekindling my desire to write and be published. I clipped out the ad, enrolled in the course and as the saying goes 'the rest is history'. That course led to my first book: *The Serendipity Effect*, published by Scholastic Canada.

Today, I still live in the same city - Winnipeg. I've published 17 books of fiction and non-fiction for youngsters. My books have been on recommended reading lists, and many have been nominated or have received awards such as the Silver Birch Award for Non-fiction, the McNally Robinson Book for Young People Award and B.C.'s Red Cedar Award. I often visit schools and libraries to share my enthusiasm for reading and writing, and I still write every day.

## Connect with Larry

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