



## Celebrating 20 years of the Branford Boase Award

*These talking point ideas have been designed to celebrate 20 years of the Branford Boase Award. The award – named after and in memory of Henrietta Branford and Wendy Boase - was set up to reward the most promising new writers and their editors, as well as to reward excellence in writing and in publishing. The Award is made annually to the most promising book for seven-year-olds and upwards by a first time novelist.*

*The ideas in the sequence of sessions will support teachers in reading aloud and talking about the selected texts with their children, allowing children to respond to and understand the text in greater depth.*

**Title: Fire, Bed and Bone**

**Author: Henrietta Branford**

**Publisher: Walker Books**

*Fire, Bed & Bone* is an outstanding and unusual historical novel which won the Guardian Children's Fiction Prize in 1998. It depicts life at the time of the Peasants' Revolt chronicled from the viewpoint of a dog. This device is amazingly powerful and the dog is able to make pertinent comments revealing much about the society of the time in language that conveys the atmosphere of the period.

### **Session 1: Chapters 1, 2 and 3, pages 7-31**

**Focus: Predicting, questioning and making intertextual connections.**

Without sharing any initial background or context to the novel, start by reading aloud and discussing their response to the first two paragraphs of Chapter 1 ("*The wolves came down to the farm last night...*" to "*...no time to think of freedom.*"). *How does it make them feel? What do they notice? What would they like to find out? What questions do they have?* As children discuss this opening, display the relevant section using a visualiser or similar so that children can reread at their own pace and refer specifically to words or phrases within these short paragraphs. You could suggest that the class begin to consider why they think the author may have chosen to start the novel in this way, with the wolves and their freedom. *What might this imply about the freedom of the narrator and how they feel about that?* The children may note the phrase '*my four feet*' and have questions or tentative predictions about what this may tell us about the narrator's identity.

Note down any questions that the discussion has prompted or have children jot them down in their reading journals or notebooks, then reread the opening and continue to read aloud all of Chapter 1. After hearing the rest of the chapter, the children will have further insights, predictions and questions to discuss. Give them time to share their initial ideas in small groups and as a whole class, then handout copies of the text so that the children can work in pairs to use text marking and close reading strategies to revisit the text at their own pace. Ask them to identify any words or phrases that support our understanding of how the writer makes us feel, clues to the narrator's identity and to other characters that are introduced, as well as what we understand of the setting and period at this early stage in the book. They should also mark any words that they are not sure of the meaning of. After sufficient time to explore and mark their copy of the chapter, ask each pair of children to join with another pair and compare what they have noted. They might start to support each other in suggesting possible definitions for unfamiliar vocabulary. Suggest that they



then summarise their discussion on post-it notes which can be collated on a class display under the following headings: *What do we know? What do we think we know? What do we want to find out?* Collect together a list of the unfamiliar vocabulary that has been identified by the class and start working together to explore definitions as well as investigating the etymology of these words. *What might we infer about period, setting, character, etc. from the use of words such as byre and medlars (which made their way into Middle English from Old English and Old French respectively)?*

Support the children in developing a visual image of the environment which the narrator knows so well. Reread Chapter 1 focussing on the words and phrases which support our understanding and visualisation of the setting. Using the text as a guide, children can draw maps of the village and how it sits within the landscape, labelling the human and physical geographical features. They could work collaboratively to create these in small groups, individually in their reading journals, or they could even work as a whole class to create a large scale wall map.

After reading aloud chapter 2 and 3, start building an initial discussion around their response to those final few sentences on page 31:

*“When the signal came, they passed it on to those they trusted in the village. Only to those few whom it was safe to tell. Or so they thought. The next knock at the door brought the priest and the soldiers and death.”*

Consider some of the choices that Henrietta Branford is making as she writes the end of this chapter. *How does it make you feel? What is the impact of separating the sentence ‘Or so they thought’ rather than the conventional use of the coordinating conjunction ‘or’ to join the clauses together as one sentence? You might also look at the decision to repeat ‘and’ in the list rather than a comma. What is the difference in impact between “...brought the priest, soldiers and death.” and “brought the priest and the soldiers and death.”?*

Discuss what they notice about the relationships between the characters we have met so far. *For example, what do Comfort’s actions towards the hunting dog - leaving the food out, leaving her to her devices, allowing her back to the warmth of the fire when she chooses – tell us about Comfort, Rufus and the dog? Are they surprised at the level of freedom that the narrator has, particularly when considering that opening paragraph? What is the difference between the wolves’ freedom and that of the narrator? How might this in turn be different from the freedom of other domesticated dogs at the time? Is she a wild animal or a domesticated one?* Support the children in tracking the myriad human characters by noting character names and initial responses to those characters up on the working wall or in the class reading journal, particularly Will Cudweed and the man dressed in rags. You could write all of the character names on a large sheet of paper and then draw arrows between them noting their relationships and how they feel about one another.

Discuss the importance of names and naming; the giving and receiving of names has been a significant part of our culture for millennia. *Why might it be that we don’t know the name of the narrator? Her three puppies are all named for plants – Fleabane, Squill and Parsnip. Why do you think that might be? How do the name choices implicitly as well as explicitly inform the reader’s thoughts around character, setting and theme?* Children might investigate the etymology and meaning of other names from the text (for example, both Rufus and Comfort come from Latin originally, Rufus meaning red-haired and Comfort – as well as it’s



modern definition - which has evolved from the Latin term for strength). *Why might Henrietta Branford have chosen these names?*

It would be helpful for children to have some understanding of the period in which the story takes place, particularly the events and principle causes which led to the Peasant's Revolt. Start with what we can learn directly from the book and consider what we understand about the reasons for the rebellion from the preacher's speech in Chapter 3 and the response of different characters to it. What was serfdom and what did it mean to be a serf in the 14<sup>th</sup> Century? What impact would it have on Rufus and Comfort's life? In groups, children could write down what they know and understand about peasant village life within the 14<sup>th</sup> century or medieval Britain as well as what they would like to find out. These questions can be a prompt for independent reading and research opportunities using a range of non-fiction texts and sources.

Ask the children to discuss their responses to the text. The class can begin to explore their responses to it with the help of what Aidan Chambers calls 'the four basic questions'. These questions give children accessible starting points for discussion: *Tell me ... was there anything you liked about this text? Was there anything that you particularly disliked...? Was there anything that puzzled you? Were there any patterns...any connections that you noticed...?* As the book continues to be read, the children will benefit from regular opportunities to return to these questions and share their personal responses to the key events and character developments as they occur.

Ask the children if this book reminds them of anything else that they have read or heard or seen. *Do they know of other stories in which the characters are fictional but the events surrounding them and the world in which they live are based on real historical events?* Explore the concept and genre of historical fiction with the children and ask them to consider if they have read any books like this before or seen any TV programmes or films that explore the same ideas. The children may be familiar with the books; *The Eagle of the Ninth* by Rosemary Sutcliff (Roman Britain), *The Secrets of Vesuvius* by Caroline Lawrence (Ancient Rome), *Freedom* by Catherine Johnson (the Slave Trade in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century), *Street Child* by Berlie Doherty (Victorian workhouses and Dr Barnados), *Things a Bright Girl Can Do* by Sally Nicholls (the Suffrage movement in the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century), *The Skylarks' War* by Hilary McKay (World War 1), *Once* by Morris Gleitzman (World War 2), etc. They may make connections with films (such as the adaptation of Michael Morpurgo's *War Horse*) or television (e.g. there are many episodes of *Doctor Who* in which he/she interacts with real historical figures or events). Consider with the children if they enjoyed these books or films, what the impact of the genre was on them, why they think authors and filmmakers may decide to write in this way and what impact they think the authors and filmmakers want to have on their readers and audience members.

## **Session 2: Chapters 4-8, Pages 32-60**

### **Focus: Close reading, summarising and visualising**

Read chapter 4, in which we discover the outcome from the cliffhanger at the end of Chapter 3 and begin the tumultuous journey that will occupy our characters for the remainder of the narrative: soldiers break in and arrest Rufus and Comfort for their involvement in the early stages of the uprising. The hunting dog hides her young and then resolves to save the abandoned human children which leaves the puppies vulnerable. When she returns to the bracken stack, a wildcat has taken two of them – only Fleabane is left.



After reading the whole chapter through, allow the children some time in small groups or as a whole class to respond to the events that have taken place. *How did it make them feel? Were there any particular moments that stood out to them or that they visualised really clearly? If so, what were they and why do they think they found them so memorable? What did they like or not like about this chapter? Do they have any questions? Has it answered any questions that they already had? Did it remind them of anything?*

After this initial response to the events and the characters, reread sections of the text considering the impact of the language and language structures the author has used. You might start with any particular sections that children had reference during their previous discussion. For example, you might discuss the impact of the short, terse sentence structures, the matter-of-fact language choices e.g. *“Comfort looked back at me as they pulled her away... Rufus could not see. There was blood running into his eyes.”* – no adjectives, no adverbs, no figurative language. *What impact does this have? How could it have been written differently? How might this have changed the impact and our response to it?*

As we have already begun to explore, Branford’s language choices are carefully considered, so when she does add detail and description, what purpose do they serve? *How do they affect the reader’s potential knowledge of character, place and setting?* For example, before Ede leaves the cottage with the 3 children, she spends time taking as much as she can carry from Rufus and Comfort’s home. *Why is this list included? What conclusions can we draw about Ede or about the community or the period in which they are living?*

Spend some time responding to the moment on page 35 when the hunting dog discovers the sacrifice she has unwittingly made by helping Rufus and Comfort’s children. *What can we tell from the language choices made in this section? What impact does it have to start the paragraph with “Fleabane lay alone...” and then wait until the end of the paragraph to confirm the fate of Squill and Parsnip?* Discuss with the class the point at which they suspected that the puppies had been killed. *When did they know? How do they feel about the hunting dog’s response – “I put my nose down and ran... I knew I could not get them back. I just wanted to kill her.” Why might Henrietta Branford have followed these terse sentences with a reference to the wildcat’s own litter (“I heard her brats mewling...”)?* *Why does Branford, writing in role as the hunting dog, select the noun ‘brats’ and the verb ‘mewing’? What other options were available? How might the impact be changed?*

To summarise the events in the novel so far as well as their responses to it, it would be useful to begin a Role on the Wall for the hunting dog. This will be useful to make notes on or record ideas (either individually or as a larger group) as you move through the text. To create a Role on the Wall, draw an outline to represent the character on a large sheet of paper. Around the outside of the outline, record the character’s external characteristics – these might include actions taken by the character and words or phrases to describe their appearance. Inside the outline, the class can write words or phrases to describe the character’s internal characteristics – how they feel, what they might be thinking and words we might use to describe their personality. These Role on the Wall posters can be returned to repeatedly as the children gain new insights into her character. Using a different colour at key stopping points allows you to track changes in the character’s emotional journey. Later, the Role on the Wall could also be used to point out similarities and differences between characters as well as to explore their relationships.



Read Chapters 5, 6 and 7 in which the hunting dog is forced to create a new life in the wild for herself and Fleabane. She continues to return to the stables at the Great House where we learn a little about Rufus and Comfort's imprisonment. Although the reader remains with the hunting dog's viewpoint and narrative voice, the narrative itself diverges from Chapter 5 into two distinct paths which sometimes re-converge – the human narrative concerned with Rufus and Comfort alongside the dogs' narrative. It would be helpful to use the working wall to start tracking and comparing these two narrative timelines. Ask children to suggest and summarise what the key moments are that merit being placed on the timeline. *What are the key events that need to be recorded? How do those events affect the characters and our response to them?*

*What more do we know now about the hunting dog?* As the novel is being read aloud, some children may prefer to note down any significant words, phrases or moments in the story which they find to be significant or impactful to be able to share with their group later. Alternatively, groups could be given chapters to reread, text mark and discuss at a later date. They might consider the implications of her acknowledgment at the start of chapter 5 – *"We were not, nor would ever be, truly wild. I had known fireside, bed and bone, Rufus's pat and his soft look."* These self-acknowledged descriptions as well as what we might infer from them can be added to the Role on the Wall poster. The children might start to consider the implications of the title of the book and everything that it refers to. The following paragraph on page 39 might be displayed and discussed in terms of what it tells us about the hunting dog, about Rufus and about their relationship:

*"I wanted to run straight to Rufus, to hear his voice, to feel his hand on my head, to lick Comfort's brown hand. But I feared the soldiers.... Rufus did not see me. If he had seen me and called I would have run to him."*

Return to the description of the life of the hunting dog and Fleabane in the wild wood that summer (from page 49 to 52). Reread this section aloud and ask the children to imagine life in the woods in their mind's eye as you are reading aloud. Ask the children to close their eyes and picture the scene unfolding as if it were a scene in a film. Following this, ask the children to share what they pictured and to identify key vocabulary or phrases which supported their understanding or interpretation. Ask the children why these words or phrases in particular stood out to them; *what made them so vivid or memorable? What mood or sense of place is created by the author through these descriptions? How do these descriptions make them feel? What would you be thinking if you were the hunting dog? Is it different for Fleabane? What are the benefits and challenges of this change in environment? Do you feel hopeful or worried about what could happen next?*

Children may wish to add to their environmental maps that they started in response to Chapter 1.

Read Chapter 8 up to *"...dogs were lying by firesides waiting for scraps."* Pause at this point to debate whether or not they think the dogs should return to the village. In groups have them jot down their reasons for staying in the woods and the reasons for returning to the house. Consider the significance of the title. Do you think Fleabane would respond differently to the idea of 'fire, bed and bone'? Why? What are the differences between Fleabane and his mother? Discuss their reasoning and ask them to justify their responses based on their reading of the text so far.



Once children have discussed the merits of each option, use a decision line or conscience alley to reach a class decision. For conscience alley, have the class create two parallel lines with a narrow gap between them and select one child to walk between the two lines in role as the hunting dog. As he/she walks between the lines, each pupil should offer their advice as to what she and Fleabane should do – one line trying to persuade her that she should stay in the woods, the other line persuading her to return home. When the child in role gets to the end of the line, she/he can make their decision, explaining what it was that persuaded them.

After reading the end of the chapter, allow children to discuss their response to the discovery which the dogs have made and consider what this might mean for the dogs, as well as for Rufus and Comfort.

### Session 3: Chapters 9-12, Pages 61-97

#### Focus: Clarifying, summarising and questioning

Read aloud Chapters 9 and 10 in which the hunting dog is kept by Lupus and Vetchen and Fleabane is sent off to Will Cudweed. Pause when necessary to clarify the children's understanding and allow for discussion around what the children like, dislike, any patterns that they notice or any questions that it brings up. *As we read, from whose point of view do we visualise the story? Are we seeing things as if you were looking through the hunting dog's eyes? looking over her shoulder? looking down from above? How does this affect our responses/feelings towards the other characters? How do we feel about Vetchen and Lupus Cudweed (introduced in these two chapters)?* Begin to explore the Cudweed family as they become more central to the dogs' narrative. Either as a class or in small groups, you could sketch out a family tree and note down what we know about each of the family members so far, including further investigation of the meaning of names. For example, *is it ironic that the person who imprisons the dogs is named for the Latin term for wolf – the animal which spoke of freedom in the novel's opening?*

After the children have discussed and shared their responses to these two chapters they may wish to add to the class map of the village and the forest, the Role on the Wall poster and the two timelines of events.

As you read these chapters and those following, keep returning to the theme of freedom and what it means to the different characters. Rufus and Comfort – and, in these chapters, the hunting dog and Fleabane – are literally imprisoned and have their freedom taken away, but you might also discuss the extent to which Rufus and his peers lacked freedom due to circumstance; bounded to an estate and forced to work for the lord of that estate. They might also consider how Fleabane's response to his change of circumstance might be different from his mother's. *What might it feel like for Fleabane to be separated from his mother like this? What will his understanding be after only knowing life in the wild woods?* In their reading journals, they may want to write from Fleabane's point of view and compare this to the narration in the book. *How do they feel that the hunting dog reacts to 'belonging' to the Cudweeds now? What was the children's response to the hunting dog's reflections on why she is willing to hunt for Lupus (page 70) or to Fleabane's new life ("...his puppy days were over. He was a dog now. He was Will Cudweed's dog.")?*

As you move on to read aloud Chapters 11 and 12, ask children to continue to consider the hunting dogs' relationship and commitment to her 'human family'. *What sacrifices does she make to support Rufus and Comfort? Why do you think she follows them into the woods? What makes you think that?*



After reading allow children time to discuss the events in these chapters, including the dramatic rescue of Rufus and Comfort and a further description of the events in London. As well as discussing what they like and dislike, sharing their questions and connections, children will need to continue to be given space to explore and define words that are likely to be unfamiliar. Explore definitions as a class and display these words on the working wall. *What impact does the author's inclusion of this vocabulary have on the reader and/or the reading experience?* Some of the words children might be unfamiliar with include *gallows tree*, *pestilential*, *bailiff*, *heriot* and *merchet*.

Return to Ralf Sturdy's description of the revolt and the arrival of John Ball, Wat Tyler and the rebels in London (page 91-95). *How do they feel hearing his narration of the events? How do they think Ralf feels about his part in the actions of the rebels?* Discuss their response to the behaviours of the rebels compared with how they felt when they first learned about the intention of revolt in Chapter 3.

In the character's narration, he specifies certain people and groups that were attacked. *Why do you think certain groups were targeted? Does Ralf seem to know? What does it tell us about the mind set of those involved in the revolt?* Some historians believe that the Flemish weavers may have been targeted not because they were involved in any actions that promoted serfdom but rather that they were rivalling for business with another guild of weavers who took this as an opportunity to rid themselves of the competition.

*Is it possible for a group to have a worthy cause but still commit horrific acts in their drive to make changes? Does that change how we respond to the issue? Does that change how we respond to the participants? Does that change how we respond to the leaders of these groups?*

Ralf's use of the term '*foreign scum*' to describe those sought by the rebels will need unpicking with the class. Be aware that many children in the class may feel uncomfortable with use of a term of verbal abuse such as this. *How does that make them feel? How do we respond to that phrase? How do other characters, such as Comfort, seem to respond to it? Why might Henrietta Branford have included it in the story? What is the impact?* Repeatedly, particularly during this section, Comfort is made the moral centre of the narrative. *Why do you think the author may have made that decision?*

You might also compare Ralf's recount to historical records of the Peasants' Revolt. The main primary sources include four chronicles specifically revolving around the outbreak of the revolt and the attacks in London and the eastern counties (these four chronicles are the *Anonimale Chronicle*, *Chronicles of Henry Knighton*, *Chronicles of Thomas Walsingham*, and *the Chronicles of Jean Froissart*). Some of these chronicles include painting depicting some of the major London events. Many of these chronicles are biased towards the views of the lords rather than the rebels; you might discuss why this might be.

For your own information, the Encyclopaedia Britannica entry relating to the Peasants' Revolt can be found on their website here: <https://www.britannica.com/event/Peasants-Revolt>

By the end of chapter 12, Rufus and Comfort are encouraged to hear of the king's promises - he has sworn an end to serfdom and that no more will be punished. *What could this pronouncement mean for Rufus, Comfort and the dog?*



#### Session 4: Chapters 13-15, Pages 98-118

##### Focus: Visualising, predicting and empathising.

Read aloud Chapter 13, stopping at different points, to clarify the children's understanding and allow for discussion around what the children like, dislike, any patterns that they notice or any questions that it brings up. In the lengthy descriptions of the deep woodland and the dogs waiting outside the mill, you might discuss the amount of the imagery that is related to scent. *Do they picture these scenes in the same way? Why do you think this choice may have been made? Does it change how you view the narrative or feel about the character?*

In adding to their timelines of the narratives, children may comment on the mirroring of the 'human plot' with the rescuing of Fleabane in Chapter 13. *Are there any other aspects of the book in which the 'dog narrative' complements or contrasts with the 'human' one, or vice versa? Do these choices enhance your enjoyment of the book?*

After reading Chapter 14 return to the pages in which the location of their hideout is described. Reread this description from page 106-107 ("*In the end they agreed to leave the forest...*" to "*...between the fire and the valley.*"). As you read, ask them to close their eyes and picture the scene unfolding as if it were a movie in their mind. Read the short passage aloud two or three times and then ask them to describe to a partner what they pictured in their mind's eye. They might like to draw what they visualise before describing it. *Were there any particular words or phrases which the author used which were particularly evocative in helping to form the visualisation?* For children who struggle to visualise the ruins in which the remaining rebels choose to build their shelter, you could share images showing the remains of the towers at Nendrum Monastery or the one at Maghera.

Discuss the children's response to the appearance of the ghostly shadow people and the events that take place in their short narrative. *How do the visions of the shadow people affect the atmosphere of the story at this stage? Who/what might they be? Why do they unsettle the hunting dog? Why have they appeared? What is the effect of Henrietta Branford including this short recount or vision?* Rufus comments to Comfort that the dog doesn't have 'second sight'. Explore what this means and how the dog's ability to see these shadowy figures might prove portentous for Rufus' story.

After reading aloud Chapter 15, again allow the children time to respond to the text in small groups, noting their ideas and comments. Reflect on the events in this chapter. This chapter covers quite a lengthy period of time and after jotting down the key events in small groups, they can then share these to create a class summary which can be added to the timelines.

*How did they feel reading the events in this chapter? How do they think the different characters feel?* They could select a character such as Rufus, Comfort or the hunting dog and track the range of emotional response that they might have to the events in the chapter (deciding to leave the tower hideout, arriving at Ede's and seeing the children, finding out that word of the pardon has spread to the village, surviving winter but losing Ede, the arrival of spring and Comfort's pregnancy, etc.). This range of emotional responses could be recorded for discussion and comparison on a simple graph with the key events listed along the horizontal axis and the range of emotions from negative to positive listed on the vertical axis.



*How did they feel by the end of chapter 15? What has been the impact of the Peasant's Revolt on life in the village? Discuss the way different characters have responded to the king's pardon (Comfort: "Well then, there's an end to it"; Cudweed: "A serf's a serf and ever shall be..."; Rufus: "The Royal Pardon stands... King Richard lets us live"). Why might Rufus feel ashamed?*

*Where do you think the story might go from here? Allow the children to make predictions for the continuation of both the Rufus/comfort storyline and the hunting dog's storyline. Are their predictions different from their hopes?*

### **Session 5: Chapters 16-21, Pages 119-175**

#### **Focus: Summarising and noting the text structure**

Read aloud the rest of the novel, pausing after Chapters 16 and 17 to allow children time to respond, discuss and reflect on the tumultuous and harrowing events described, including the injustice of Rufus' trial and the final consequences of the rebellion. They might consider how the disparate feelings amongst the populace are reflected in the actions of the other characters, including the midwife and young John.

*After reading to the end, discuss children's responses to the ending of the book. How did they feel about how the book ended? Were they surprised by anything? Was it a satisfying ending? Has it left them wanting to find out more about the fates of different characters? Were they pleased that the hunting dog chose to stay with Comfort at the end or would they have preferred her to remain with Serlo in the woods?*

Ask the children to use the class notations, timelines, maps and role on the wall to consider the events that have unfolded, how the hunting dog has reacted to them and to infer what this tells us about her character as well as their opinions of the other characters. *Which character interested the class the most? Are there any 'minor' characters that the class would have liked to have spent more time with? Did any of the characters remind them of people they know or remind them of characters in other books? How did they feel about having a dog as the narrator of the book? Is this a narrative device that they've seen used before? Did they like it? Why/why not?* You might also discuss the choice that Henrietta Branford makes in never naming the narrator: *Why do they think the hunting dog is never named? How did they feel about that? Why?*

Discuss how the children felt about the book compared to their original expectations: *When you first saw this book, even before you read it, what kind of book did you think it was going to be? What made you think this? Now you've read it, is it as you expected? Have you read other books like it? How is this one the same? How is it different?* Look back at the cover of the book. *Does the content reflect the front cover and vice versa? Why do you think the title was chosen? How is the idea of 'fire, bed and bone' central to choices made by characters throughout the story?* During the 20+ years since the book was originally published, it has had a wide variety of front cover designs. You might share these for children to compare.

*A full teaching sequence, providing detailed planning for how to develop whole class learning in reading and writing over a series of sessions using this text, is available via subscription to CLPE's Power of Reading website at: <https://clpe.org.uk/powerofreading>*



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