



Feather Brain

Maureen Bush

Interest level: ages 8–11

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136 pages

Consider the following question as you read *Feather Brain*:

Why do bullies behave the way they do?

Story

Lucas has dinosaurs on the brain, but he's a little short on friends. When he gets a new book on how to make model dinosaurs, he's inspired to make one immediately. He's not so inspired by his new dinosaur-making kit: all the box contains is a test tube of clear liquid and a few instructions. But when he mixes the liquid into his papier-mâché goop, he gets much more than he bargained for, including the most unlikely friend.

Author

Born in Edmonton, **Maureen Bush** was raised in Edmonton and Calgary. She has worked as a public involvement consultant and trained as a mediator. Her first book was *The Nexus Ring* (Coteau Books, 2007). Maureen lives in Calgary with her husband and two daughters.

Author Website

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Connecting to the Curriculum**Language Arts**

- Luke is being bullied by his classmate, Kyle. Keep a journal for a week as either Luke or Kyle, documenting your perspective on what goes on in your life according to what goes on in *Feather Brain*. Have a class discussion where each character's thoughts are shared.
- Dinosaurs are a fascinating group of creatures. Learn the names of their different parts or words that relate to them, and have students create their own "dino dictionary." Some examples are *predator*, *fossil*, *gastrolith*, *ichnites*, *ballux* and *mandible*.
- Have each student choose a different dinosaur to use as their model for poetry writing. Select five or six poetic forms for students to use as they create a book or poster highlighting their dinosaur. Some forms to choose from include: limerick, haiku, acrostic, tanka, free verse or rhyming couplets.
- Have students create their own dinosaur and bring it to life through their writing and drawing. Have them make a sort of character web that denotes the following about their dinosaur: key physical features, habitat, diet and behavior.

Science

- The Mesozoic Period in history is known as the "Period of the Dinosaur." Have students research the period in history when dinosaurs roamed the earth. Find out the types that lived in each era and the locations where their fossils have been excavated.
- Have students determine and explain the difference between herbivores, carnivores and omnivores. See how many species of each students can identify from the time of the dinosaurs. How many can they identify from the present day?
- Some unusual dinosaur names include: oviraptor, gigantosaur, centrosaurus, massospondylus and troodon. Find out how dinosaurs were or are given their names and what some of the more interesting ones mean.
- Scientists who study dinosaurs are called paleontologists. Find out why what they do is important. Consider arranging for a paleontologist to visit your classroom and share his or her work with students.
- Dinosaurs with feathers were plentiful during the Early Cretaceous Period. Have students research to find out which were the feathered dinosaurs. Where did they live?
- Lucas visits the dinosaur park at the Calgary Zoo. He knows they lived in what we now call Alberta, but he can't imagine that dinosaurs could have existed in a place where snow covered the ground for much of the year. Was the climate always like this in Alberta? Have students find out what the climate was like during the time of the dinosaurs, and write their findings in a well-organized paragraph.
- Make a fossil using plant materials as the pressing medium.

Health/Personal Planning

- Have students brainstorm various ways that students can be helpful and supportive of each other at school as well as in the community. Write short skits or public service announcements sharing the information with other members of your school.
- Luke gives an oral presentation at school about Stegy. Assign students to choose a topic to give a two-minute presentation about. Guide them in the steps to preparing an oral presentation:
 1. choosing a topic and creating an outline
 2. writing short phrases on index cards
 3. putting these cards in the order that the information will be presented
 4. practicing the speech, using the cards only to jog the memory (not to read from directly!)
 5. giving the speech, using loud and clear diction, and engaging the audience with eye contact

Art

- Have students draw in detail their new idea, innovation or invention described above in *Science*.
- Luke buys a dinosaur-making kit. Have students create their own models of actual dinosaur types using papier-mâché, modeling clay or stuffed paper. You may also have students use the same materials Lucas does in *Feather Brain*.
- Art cards or postcards are an exciting way to represent student art. Cut out card or heavy paper about 4 cm x 6 cm. Have students draw, sketch or paint images of the important or most descriptive parts as they read *Feather Brain*.
- As a class, create an illustrated alphabet book for the various types of dinosaurs. Assign each student a letter of the alphabet.
- As a follow-up to the skits and public announcements in *Health*, above, have students make posters that can be placed around the school or online.

Mathematics

- Sequences are a part of the study of mathematics. A sequence means doing something in order. Discuss with students the steps that Luke takes to create his stegosaurus. Ask students to think of something they have created that required a series of steps. Maybe it was making a cake, crafting an airplane model or suiting up for a hockey game. Assign students to record a sequence of steps that are required in order to accomplish a given task from start to finish.
- Drawing items to scale involves making careful measurements. Have students choose either a dinosaur or another object to draw to scale on grid paper.

- Tell students to imagine they have \$30 to buy two gifts: one for Kyle and one for Luke. What they would purchase for each character. Did they have trouble sticking to the budget? Providing examples and evidence from the story, students should explain why they think their choices make suitable gifts.

Connecting to the Text

- Kyle’s dad says, “What goes around comes around.” That’s an *idiom*—an expression that means more than just the words it’s made up of. Other examples of idioms include *kick the bucket* or *beat around the bush*. Have students find out what each of these idioms really means. In small groups, have students brainstorm a list of idioms to share with the class.
- Authors know they can move a story along with strong verbs. Briefly review verbs with your class. Introduce them to verbs that show action in a descriptive way, like in the following sentence when Lucas receives his dino-making kit from the postie: “I bolted down the stairs and skidded to a halt at the front door.” Discuss how the story’s action—and in this case, pacing—is enriched by using strong verbs. Have students find a dozen other sentences in *Feather Brain* where the author uses strong verbs.
- Make an overhead of the following list. Discuss with students some of the things that make a good story:
 1. a plot that is exciting, suspenseful, baffling or extraordinary
 2. interesting situations that are well explained and believable
 3. characters you care enough about to make you want to keep reading
 4. characters you can relate to and who change and grow as they make decisions to solve problems
 5. descriptions that make you feel like you’re there
 6. a variety of settings
 7. a fast start—action, danger, humor
 8. situations that provide an emotional response and give you something to think about
 9. a good ending with problems solved and characters getting what they deserve

Using these criteria, have students write a critical review of *Feather Brain*. Students should ensure their review touches on a number of the criteria with examples and reasons for their assessment. Share these reviews with the class.

- Introduce students to the importance of showing emotion and action in their writing. Good writers often will show the reader what is happening through a character’s actions instead of by simply telling the reader what’s going on. When Maureen Bush writes, “Kyle slumped further, his head in his hands,” we see a boy who is upset without the author actually telling us so. Have students go through *Feather Brain* with a partner, locating other examples of where the author shows her characters’ emotions in this way. Then, have them choose a few passages from

a different book and rewrite them using the technique of showing rather than telling.

- *Feather Brain* is written from Lucas's perspective. Have students rewrite one of the following scenes from Kyle's perspective:

1. the warm May afternoon when Kyle stole the sinornithosaurus (ch. 8)
2. when Luke first invites Kyle over to his house (ch. 9)
3. when Luke asks Kyle how much money he has to help purchase the dinosaur-freezing kit (ch. 11)

Have students share their responses. Guide students in a discussion of how two characters can have such different perceptions of a single event. How can this be so?

- Conflict is what keeps a story moving along. It's what makes things interesting! Typically, story plot follows one of four basic patterns of conflict:

1. *Person against nature*. Tension comes from the character's battle against strong forces of nature.
2. *Person against person*. Tension comes through the conflict between the protagonist and the antagonist.
3. *Person against society*. Tension comes from the main character's struggle against some societal factor that must be overcome.
4. *Person against self*. Tension is created as the protagonist faces internal conflict; the hero has two or more courses of action and must decide which course to take.

Guide students in a discussion of the kind of conflict pattern in *Feather Brain*. Are there more than one, depending on which part of the story you look at? Which one predominates?

Connecting to the Students—Discussion Questions

1. Luke doesn't want to confess to his mother that Kyle bullies him. He's afraid of what might happen if his mom intervenes at school. Why is it sometimes so hard to clue your parents in to what's going on in your world? Provide examples to support your answer.
2. As you see it, why does Kyle pick on other kids?
3. Why do we humans like the idea of getting revenge so much? How is craving revenge a dangerous thing? Is it ever a good thing?
4. Having your very own dinosaur sounds kind of cool. But imagine having it... forever? Think about the responsibility that entails. If you knew what Lucas knows at the end of the book, would you go ahead and create a dinosaur given the chance? What factors would make it difficult for you to look after a pet throughout your entire lifetime?
5. Luke and Kyle become friends because they're both faced with a common problem. Have you ever been in a situation where you made friends with someone because you had to tackle a problem together?

Author's Note

Dear Readers,

Browsing at the Glenbow Museum bookstore in Calgary, I found a book in the sale bin about building dinosaur models: *Make-a-Saurus, My Life with Raptors and Other Dinosaurs*, by Brian Cooley and Mary Ann Wilson.

Brian has made life-sized models for the Royal Tyrrell Museum in Drumheller. All the dinosaurs at the museum are amazing.

As I flipped through the book, marveling at how real his small model seemed, I thought, "What if it wasn't just life-like but actually came to life?" I bought the book and started working on *Feather Brain*.

"What if...?" is my favorite question. It leads me into all sorts of silliness and sometimes into a good story.

Luke developed very easily. We have a lot of obsessions in my family, so it seemed natural to create a boy obsessed with making dinosaur models.

Kyle was a little more difficult. I wanted a bully, but not one who was totally unlikable. From kindergarten to grade four, my older daughter was in the same class as a difficult boy. Although he didn't bother her, he did bully some of the kids and got into a lot of trouble. In spite of this, I liked him—I knew he was dealing with some really tough issues in his life, in the only way he knew how. We don't often hear sympathy or understanding for bullies, but I wanted to create a bully I could care about.

Luke and Kyle brought their own humor to the story. At least, I think they're funny. I hope you do too.

Sincerely,
Maureen

Resources**Books***Fiction*

- Clements, Andrew. *Jake Drake, Bully Buster*
 Edwards, Wallace. *The Extinct Files: My Science Project*
 Klein, Abby. *Talent Show Scaredy-pants*
 Kroll, Steven. *Jungle Bullies*
 Ludwig, Trudy. *Just Kidding; My Secret Bully*
 Maguire, Gregory. *Three Rotten Eggs*
 Most, Bernard. *ABC T-Rex*
 Nickle, John. *The Ant Bully*
 Osborne, Mary Pope. *Dinosaurs Before Dark*
 Pallotta, Jerry. *The Dinosaur Alphabet Book*
 Pearce, Jacqueline. *Dog House Blues*
 Saunders, Kate. *Cat and the Stinkwater War*
 Steinberg, Laya. *Thesaurus Rex*
 Van Draanen, Wendelin. *Shredderman series*

Nonfiction

- Allan, Tony. *Isaac Newton* (530)
 Brezina, Thomas. *Tips and Tricks for Junior Detectives* (363.2)
 Carroll, Colleen. *How Artists See the Elements: Earth, Air, Fire, Water* (760)
 Grambo, Rebecca. *Digging Canadian Dinosaurs* (567.9)
 Heywood, Rosie. *The Great Dinosaur Search* (567.9)
 Jenkins, Steve. *Prehistoric Actual Size* (590)
 Keiran, Monique. *Albertosaurus: Death of a Predator* (560);
 Ornithomimus: Pursuing the Bird-Mimic Dinosaur (560)
 Lessem, Don. *Dinosaurs A to Z: The Ultimate Dinosaur Encyclopedia* (567.9);
 Raptors: The Nastiest Dinosaurs (567.91)
 Levy, Barbara Soloff. *I Can Draw Dinosaurs* (743)
 Martin, Francesca. *Clever Tortoise: A Traditional African Tale* (398.2)
 Norman, David. *Dinosaur* (567.9)
 Thomas, Pat. *Stop Picking on me: A First Look at Bullying* (302.3)
 Wilhelm, Jeffrey D. *Improving Comprehension with Think-Aloud Strategies: Modeling What Good Readers Do* (372.47)

Online

Good Character
www.goodcharacter.com

Dinosaur Pictures
www.search4dinosaurs.com

Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History
www.paleobiology.si.edu/dinosaurs/index.html

Feathered Dinosaurs
www.geocities.com/dannsdinosaurs/featdino.html

The Dinosaur Museum
www.dinosaur-museum.org

Giant of the Skies: The Early Cretaceous Earth
www.bbc.co.uk/sn/prehistoric_life/dinosaurs/chronology/127mya1.shtml

Dinosaur Detectives
www.school.discoveryeducation.com/lessonplans/programs/dinosaurdetectives/index

Dinosaur Lesson Plans
www.teachersnetwork.org/miami/2002/tgarcia.html

Types of Poetry
www.shadowpoetry.com/resources/wip/types.html