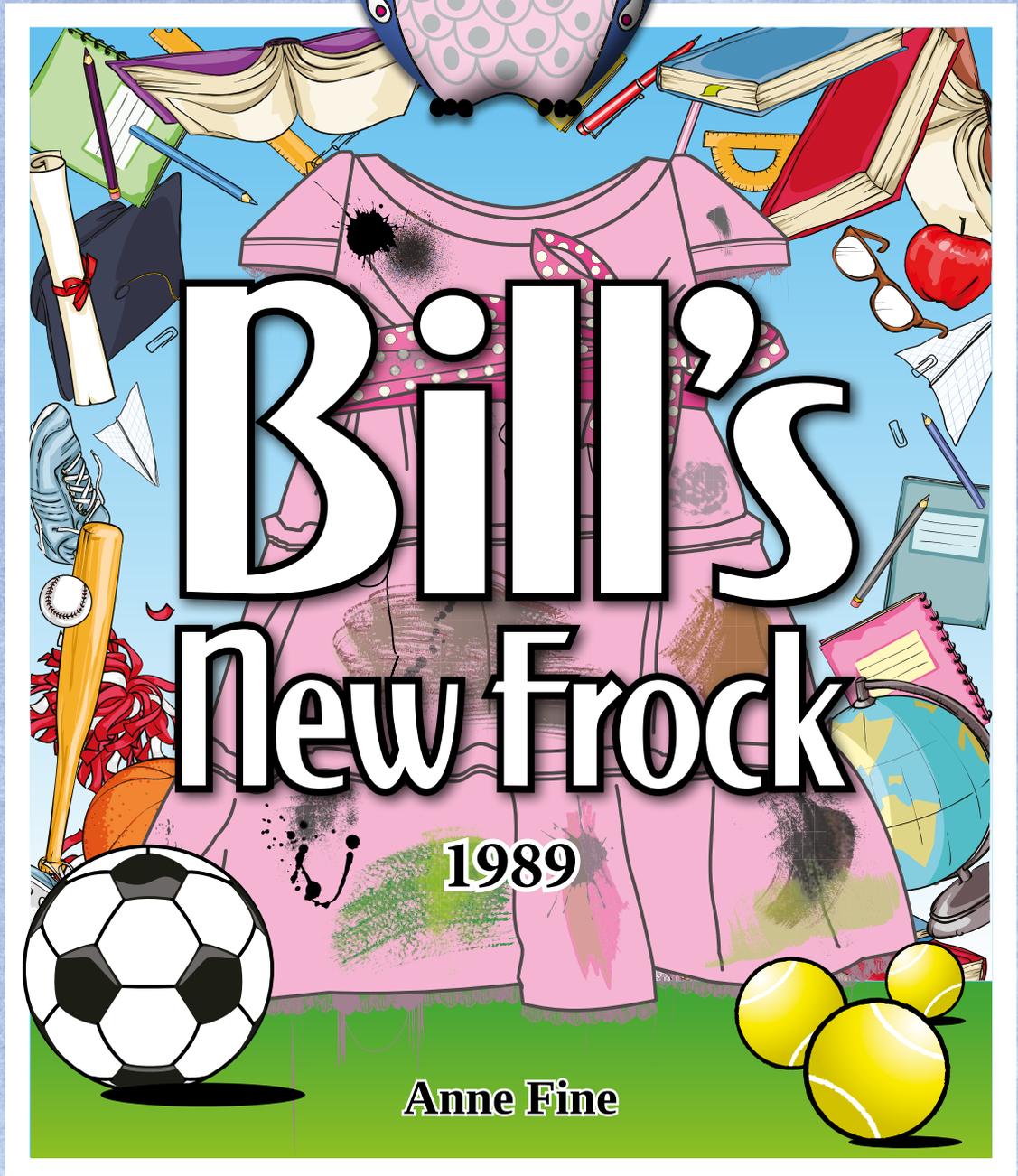


# Love to Read



*Anne Fine explores attitudes to gender as she chronicles an extraordinary day in the life of young Bill, a typical boy, who wakes up to find himself experiencing life from the other side: as a typical girl...in a pink frock! An easy, short, entertaining read with lots of springboards for discussion, this story will be enjoyed by both genders equally!*



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*When Bill Simpson woke up one morning,  
he found he was a girl.*



# Overview for teachers

## Context

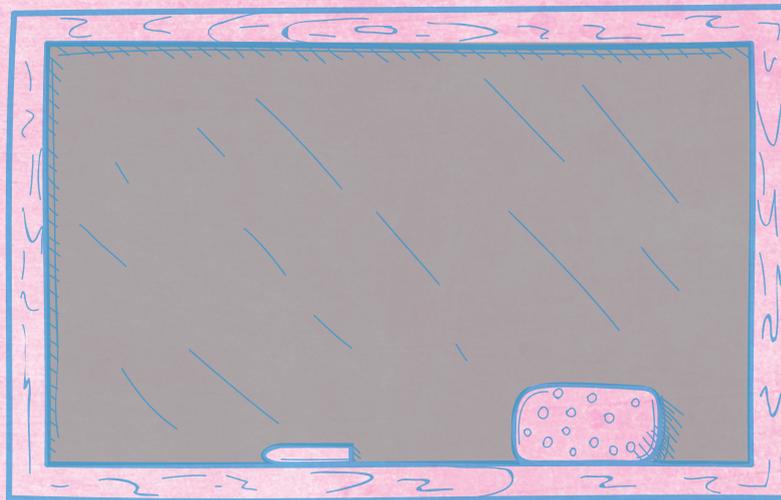
### *About the author*

Anne Fine, the prolific and highly acclaimed second Children's Laureate began writing professionally in the late 1970s. Much influenced by her study of politics at Warwick University and a brief stint working at Oxfam, her stories contain pertinent social and political issues accessible to, and experienced by, many children.

*Bill's New Frock* is one such story. Returning to Britain after living in progressive California for a period of time, Fine was shocked by schools' outdated sexist treatment of children: they were spoken to differently, accorded different curriculum activities; given different musical instruments or PE equipment and a different set of expectations. Published in the late 1980s, when politically correct behaviour was beginning to be recognised in Britain, *Bill's New Frock* was her comic response. It was a success and was winner of the Smarties Award in 1990 as well as runner-up in the Carnegie Medal the same year.

Fine has won many other awards for her children's stories including the Carnegie Medal (*Goggle Eyes* 1990 and *Flour Babies* 1993) and the Whitbread Children's Book Award in 1996 with *The Tulip Touch*. In the same years as winning the Carnegie Medal she was also named in the British Book Awards as Children's Author of the Year. In 2003 she was made a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature and became the recipient of an OBE. As well as countless awards, she had a successful Hollywood film made of *Madam Doubtfire*.

Anne Fine now lives in County Durham and continues to write stories while overlooking her garden.



## *What's the story about?*

Bill Simpson wakes up one morning and discovers he is now a girl. To make matters worse, his mum makes him wear a frock: 'feminine', delicate, pretty, frothy and pink. He is not amused. To his bewildered amazement, people start treating him differently: his father now calls him 'poppet' and 'sweet'; Mean Malcolm, the local bully, wolf whistles him as he goes to school and an old lady, feeling he needs assistance, seizes his hand to help him cross the road calling him 'little girl'.

Things at school are equally puzzling for Bill. Arriving late, the headteacher treats him kindly and sympathetically; he is a 'dear', while the three late boys receive growls, grizzles and barking orders. As the day progresses, Bill continues to experience the different treatment of girls: they are expected to behave better, write neater and not dawdle; to remain on the sidelines of the playground while the boys commandeer the rest of it playing football; they are expected to be passive; to put others first; not to win and to read comics such as *June* and *Judy* rather than *Thunder*. All this while wearing an inhibiting dress which doesn't even have pockets! For him, the only good thing about being a girl is that you don't get blamed for things.

Bill's emotions move from bewilderment to embarrassment, misery, anger and exasperation, culminating in a final show down with Mean Malcolm on his way home. Feeling the ignominy of experiencing another set of wolf whistles, Bill explodes and charges him into a pile of rubbish declaring, 'That will teach you! Whistle at dogs in future - not at people'.

Returning home, his frock in tatters, he is relieved to find himself a boy again...while the cat shows itself to be the only character in the story not to discriminate.

## *Themes to look out for*

- Gender politics



## Literary techniques

### *Presentation of character is achieved through*

- What the character says
- What the character does
- What other characters say about them
- How other characters react to them
- How they are described in the narrative



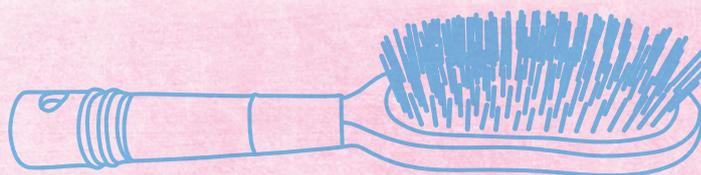
## Characters

### *Bill Simpson*

The author uses Bill as a comical tool with a serious sharp edge to alert, explore, question and highlight the different treatment meted out to boys and girls, particularly within a school situation. Bill appears to be a stereotypical boy who likes stereotypical boys' things, but happens to wake up one day as a girl and is forced to wear a frock, the symbol of female disadvantage in the story (it doesn't even have any pockets!). Though outwardly a girl, he none-the-less retains the viewpoint of a boy as the day unfolds, enabling him to tell the reader about all the differences he is encountering. We see his outrage when the teacher expects his handwriting to be neater than a boy's; his anger at the inhibiting dress and his pleasant surprise when he finds that, against stereotypical norms, he is enjoying reading *Bunty* - a magazine that boys would not be expected or encouraged to read. His innocent questions and naive observations comically scratch the surface of attitudes towards gender and the negative impact it can have on children. He ends the novel with more empathy for girls, but relieved and glad to be a boy!

### *Mean Malcolm*

Bookending the story, Mean Malcolm's role is to show how Bill changes during the course of the day. Wolf-whistled on his way to school, Bill is massively embarrassed and crosses the road to avoid him. Wolf-whistled after school, Bill pushes him into a pile of rubbish, completely annoyed and exasperated by the treatment he has received as a girl.



## *The teachers*

While Mean Malcolm may wolf-whistle, in the eyes of Fine, the teachers are the real sexist culprits, whether they are aware of it or not. The headteacher roars at the boys who are late, but encourages Bill to 'hurry up', patronising him in the process by calling him 'dear'... as do other members of staff, including the caretaker. The inspection of books by Mrs Collins highlights a double-standard in neatness depending whether you are a boy or a girl and stereotypically dishes out character roles to the children leaving a horrified Bill to play Rapunzel. When Bill begins to question the passive portrayal of Rapunzel, the teacher dismisses his remarks rather than exploring his ideas. Bill is perplexed by all this, never having had the luxury of seeing things from both sides before!

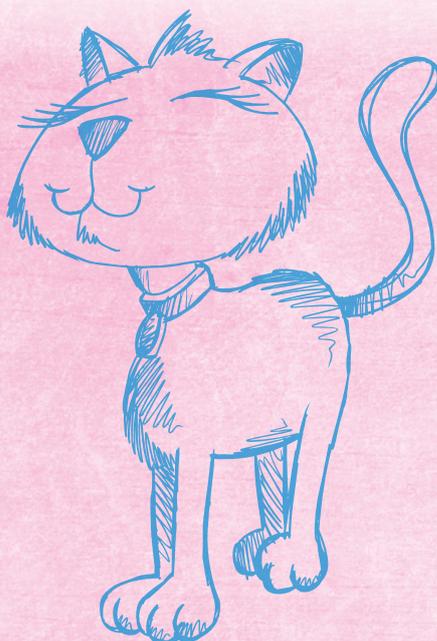
## *The other children*

Although the children get treated differently by the adults, Fine shows that the children themselves don't always necessarily fit the gender stereotypes. Although she never gets picked to carry tables, it is Astrid who is the strongest in the class while Kirsty is the fastest runner. During comic time, the girls enjoy reading *The Beano* and *The Dandy* as much as the boys do; though the boys do not seem to reciprocate with *June* and *Judy*, refusing even to try. Fine highlights what can get missed when having a limiting view of gender.

However, the big divide in the children's presentation is shown in the verbs Fine uses during their playtime. The boys' verbs are active and rambunctious: 'kicking', 'charge in' and 'ran out', whereas the girls' verbs are sedentary - 'perched', 'chatting', 'stood', 'huddled' and 'giggled'. They are not without physical capabilities since one of them gives the football a 'hefty boot back into the game', but it is clear that the boys are in charge of the playground and, during their game of football, as Bill finds out, girls are not invited.

## *Bella the cat*

A comic, yet somewhat revealing bookend to the story as only the cat treats him the same whether he is a boy or a girl rubbing '...her soft furry body around his ankles in the usual way. She didn't seem to notice any difference'.



# Setting

## *The setting can*

- Be a backdrop to the action
- Reflect characters' experiences
- Symbolise ideas the author wishes to convey
- Have its own culture and values
- Cause conflict and distress

## *Home*

Philippe Dupasquier's illustration of Bill's bedroom paints a stereotypical portrait of a boy: there are footballs, cars, planes, a rocket and a robot...and it is a mess. These are Bill's experiences thus far and they start the discussion of gender expectations that follow through the rest of the story. It could be argued that Bill had to be stereotypically male in order to make the contrast of his experiences and treatment as a stereotypical girl all the more dramatic.

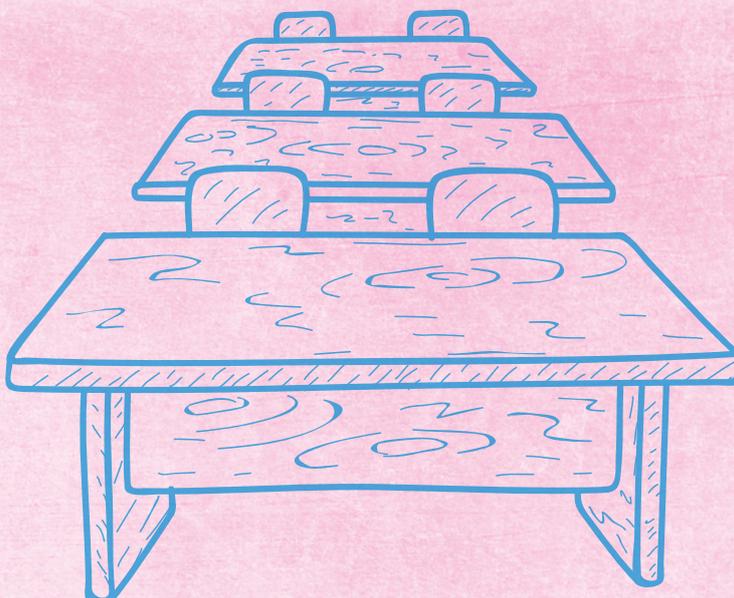


## *School*

Setting the majority of the story in a school allowed Fine not only to humorously expose unequal treatment of boys and girls within British schools, but also to write a fable for teachers, gently warning them not to be sexist. A school is also a contained micro-world in which to explore attitudes to gender, not only from those in charge of educating children, but also ones that exist between children. This school calls girls 'dear', expects them to be neater and better behaved than boys - while the boys are shouted at, considered less reliable and are expected to move tables.

# Narrative techniques

Written in the third person narrative, the narrator tells the story completely through Bill's point of view, showing his shock, his thoughts and feelings and, as there are no formal interruptions from the narrator when Bill delivers his reactions, the reader can identify with his point of view.



# Structure

**Structure is the order or pattern in which a novel is put together and should**

- Maintain the interest of the reader
- Move the action from one episode to the next
- Arouse a reader's interest in character or situation
- Create a moment of crisis
- Create expectation or surprise



The story is structured so as to allow the reader to explore an idea: how you are treated according to gender. The way Fine does this is through following the character Bill, as a girl, for a day. The structure of the story is a circular one, told in one day and bookended by Bill in his bedroom, looking at himself. This allows Bill and the reader to reflect upon what they have seen and experienced during that day and to decide whether it has changed them in anyway or whether they have learnt anything. For Bill, he is glad to be a boy rather than girl.

The story is fast-paced with an outrageous and immediate hook of an opening sentence, 'When Bill Simpson woke up on Monday morning, he found he was a girl'. We see how his parents treat him differently and on his way to school, we see how the bully, Mean Malcolm, treats him differently too. Then it's a 'typical' day at school, using as many contentious situations as possible to allow comment on the treatment of and attitudes towards gender: being late, writing, reading a fairy-tale, in the playground, art, on an errand, a wet break and finally, games. And then home again.

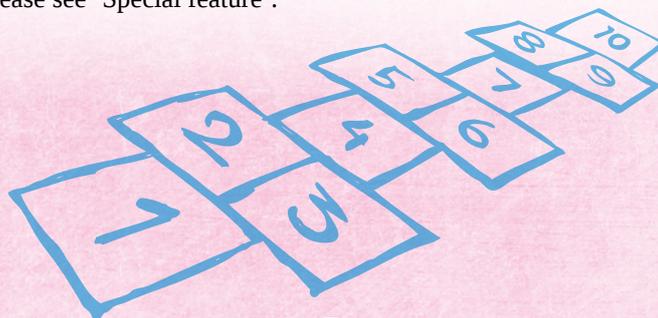
## Language

When Bill discovers he is a girl, he is perplexed. At breakfast, he found himself '...spooning up his cornflakes as usual' and leaving '...the house at the usual time' while at school '...everyone was told to sit on the floor, as usual'. The repetition of the phrase 'as usual' highlights Bill's bewilderment as he tries to navigate himself in a world where everything around him is as it always been, only he is different.

Fine uses repetition again with the recurring reference to the 'pretty pink frock with shell buttons'. This time she is stressing the incongruity of a boy wearing the 'typical' symbol of a girl for comic effect.

Though adjectives are evident in the story, *Bill's New Frock* is not a particularly descriptive novel preferring instead to focus on what people do, say or how they react. Fine makes a distinct difference between the boys and girls with the verbs she chooses to describe them during playtime. The boys verbs are active: 'kicking', 'charge in' and 'ran out'; the girls verbs are sedentary, 'perched', 'chatting', 'stood', 'huddled' and 'giggled'.

For adverbs please see 'Special feature'.



Exclamation marks abound in this story to show a variety of emotions within Bill. He is shocked and surprised by Mean Malcolm's wolf-whistle: 'Bill heard the most piercing whistle...Mean Malcolm was whistling at him!'. He is dismayed, when he arrives at school, to find he is the only person wearing a frock: 'Oh, this was awful!' and desperate as he tries to avoid being picked to play Rapunzel, 'Oh no! Oh no!'.

## Special feature

### *Adverbs*

*An adverb gives more information about a verb such as how, when or where the action took place.*



There is no debate or reflection about gender in *Bill's New Frock*, instead the reader is presented with a set of events, actions and reactions, allowing the reader to make their own mind up. The main clues as to how Bill is feeling about his day as a girl is shown through the use of adverbs.

At the beginning of the novel when Bill has put on his frock he looks in the mirror and a girl '...was staring back at him in equal dismay,' his unhappiness is evident in this adverbial phrase and no skills of inference are needed. His unhappiness is further revealed when he mutters 'savagely' under his breath in response to his father's frock comment and his embarrassment is shown when he blushes 'so pink'. He complains 'bitterly' at the unfair expectations of neat handwriting and replies 'coldly', affronted by being offered a *June* or a *Mandy* magazine by the teacher because he is a 'girl'. There is no further insight into his feelings, but that is not the point. The reader gets the gist while the pace of the novel is allowed to shoot along.





# Activities for children

## Before reading

### Ideas for getting started

Engaging with the world of the novel

#### Boys and girls

*How do you think the roles of women and men have changed over the last 100 years?*

*Research the feminist movement.*

*Traditionally, why do women wear dresses and men don't?*

*How equal are men and women in society today?*

#### Debate

*Are boys and girls treated equally?*

*Do you feel you are expected to behave in a certain way because you are a girl or a boy?*

*What do you like about being a girl or a boy?*

*How do you view the opposite sex?*

*What are the advantages and disadvantages of being a girl or a boy? Do you think it is better to be boy or a girl?*

*How and why are girls and boys stereotyped? Do you think gender stereotypes still exist?*

#### Pictures and objects

*Look at a dress from a box of costumes and imagine the life of the person who might wear it. Who are they? What might they be interested in? What would you expect them to do/not do in it? What manners would you expect the person to have? How might they behave? Repeat the exercise with a pair of jeans. Where do our ideas come from?*

*Explore a series of objects and decide if they are meant for boys, girls or both, explaining your reasons. Items could include a football, a mobile phone, a doll, a cuddly toy, an apple or a tennis ball.*

#### Facts

*What does gender mean?*

*What is a frock?*

*What does the word 'stereotype' mean?*

*What is sexism?*



## During reading

# Stopping places

Developing understanding of narrative and literary techniques

# 1

## Read to the end of Chapter 1

### *A really awful start*

Focus on...

- Presentation of 'boys' and 'girls'
- Bill's experiences
- The use of adverbs



### *Things to discuss*

**Character:** We see Bill as a 'girl', but what kind of boy do you think he is? How is he presented? Describe how he is feeling about his new situation. What might be Bill's role in the novel?

**Setting:** How does the school treat boys and girls differently? How does your school compare?

**Narrative:** Why do you think the narrator asks so many questions? The narrator has described events 'as in a dream'. Do you think Bill is dreaming? What evidence do you have to support your ideas?

**Language:** What do the adverbs tell you about Bill's situation? Compare the adverbs the headteacher uses when talking to the boys who are late and then to Bill, as a girl, when he is late. What do they reveal about the headteacher, the way boys and girls are treated and the different expectations society has towards the behaviours of boys and girls? The narrator uses the phrase 'as usual' a few times in this chapter. Why do you think the writer has chosen to repeat this phrase? What does it suggest about Bill's experience?

**Themes:** What themes do you think are beginning to emerge?

**Story:** What intrigues you about the opening sentence of the novel? Has anything surprised or shocked you so far? What has made you laugh in the story so far? What kind of story do you think it is going to be?

**Graphics:** Look at the picture of Bill looking at himself in the mirror. What objects are there in his bedroom that are associated with boys? Why do you think the artist included so many associations?

### *You could...*

Select and read 3-5 traditional fairy stories and discuss the way men and women are portrayed. What typical roles do they have? How passive or active are they? Bill questions Rapunzel's actions and attitude. How do you feel about the heroes and heroines of the stories you have selected? What does or doesn't make sense to you? What would you have done in their position?



# 2

## Read to the end of Chapter 3 *Pink, pink, nothing but pink*

Focus on...

- Verbs associated with gender
- The changes in Bill



### *Things to discuss*

**Character:** How are the girls and boys presented in Chapter 2?

Why do you think Bill felt like crying at the end of Chapter 2?

How is Bill's attitude towards girls changing?

How is Bill presented as becoming more like a 'girl'? What do you think of this?

Bill is really miserable at the end of Chapter 3. What do you think he is miserable about? What is it about being a girl that is making him so unhappy?

Who do you like/dislike so far?

**Setting:** How is the playground presented? Is it like the playground at your school? How would you describe the way girls and boys act in your playground?

How is Mrs Collins' classroom different to what we have seen so far in the way boys and girls are treated in other classrooms?



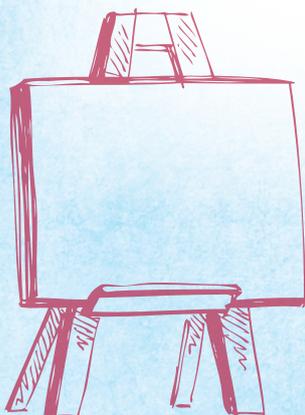
*Both boys and girls do the heavy work, 'Everyone helped to unfold the large plastic sheets..' and Leila, a girl and unafraid, is sent into the 'dark' room to collect supplies and 'dragged the heavy cardboard box' out without assistance.*

**Language:** Read the first two paragraphs of Chapter 2 and identify and underline the verbs used to describe the boys and the girls. Using the heading 'The Language of Boys and Girls', create two columns and write your examples under the proper heading. What do the words show about the way boys and girls behave? It is a true reflection?

**Symbolism:** Why do you think the author makes such an issue over the colour 'pink'?

### **You could...**

Consider whether language is gender-biased. Look through boys and girls magazines and comics or adverts. What differences in language are there? Perhaps add your examples to 'The Language of Boys and Girls' chart. Do you think there is a different language used for boys and girls?



# 3

## Read to the end of Chapter 5 *The big fight*

### Focus on...

- Stereotypes
- Attitudes in the story
- Symbolism of the 'frock'



### *Things to discuss*

**Character:** How are the adults and their attitudes to gender presented in the story? Do you know any adults like this? Have you ever been treated in a particular way because you are a boy or a girl?

How are the other boys and girls in Bill's class presented? How is his relationship different with them now that he is a girl?

How do you feel about Bill and the way he is handling the situation? How would you feel in his place?

**Narrative Viewpoint:** What do you think are the narrator's views on the adults' attitudes, on being a girl and on frocks?

Whose side is the narrator on? Who do you think the narrator is?

**Structure:** What techniques did Anne Fine use at the beginning of Chapter 5 to let you know something dramatic was going to happen later on?

At the end of the last few chapters Bill has been bemused, felt stupid, been miserable, furious and 'upset'. Can you blame him? How do you think you would feel in his place?

**Language:** How is the language used to describe Bill changing?

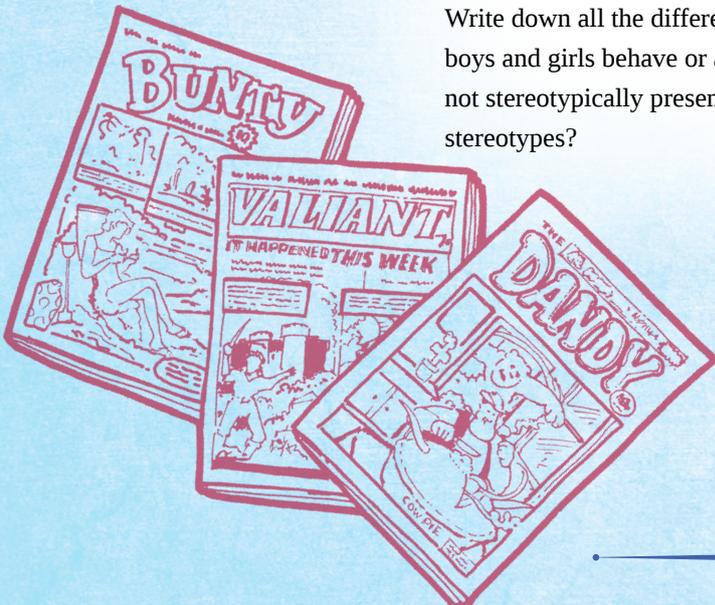
At the end of Chapter 5, why are the words 'angry' and 'upset' written in italics? What's the difference between the two words? Is it ever okay for boys to be upset or girls to be angry?

**Tone:** How would you describe the tone of the novel? How does the change in the weather at the beginning of Chapter 5 affect everyone's mood?

**Symbolism:** What does the 'frock' symbolise? How does wearing it affect Bill's behaviour? What are the advantages and disadvantages to wearing one?

### *You could...*

Write down all the differences you have come across so far in the story in the way boys and girls behave or are treated. Then note down the ways in which they are not stereotypically presented. What do you think Anne Fine is trying to say about stereotypes?



# 4

## Read to the end of the novel

### Focus on...

- How the novel ends
- Your response to the novel as a whole



## Things to discuss

**Character:** What did you think of the girls' plan to let Paul win the race? Do you think Bill was right to win it?

Did Mean Malcolm get what he deserved?

How did you feel about Bill at the end of the story?

**Setting:** Why was school a good place to set the story?

**Structure:** The story goes full circle and ends where it began: with Bill back home in his bedroom. But what are the differences between the beginning and the end and how has Bill changed as a result of his experiences in a frock? Has reading this book changed you in anyway?

**Tone:** Why do you think Anne Fine decided to write about gender differences in a humorous way?

How did the writer want you to feel reading the story? How do you know?

**Theme:** Why do you think the author chose to have a boy experiencing life as a girl rather than the other way round?

How successful would Anne Fine's message have been had it been told by a girl about the unfair treatment of girls?

Do you think Fine stereotypes anyone in the story?

**Story:** How would you describe the change in Bill?

Did you like the way the story ended?

What did you like/dislike about the story?

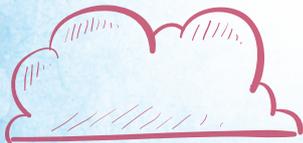
Is the story what you expected?

Which part of the story was most memorable for you?

Which part of the story was the funniest?

How does this story compare to other stories you have read?

*Bill's New Frock* was written in 1989. Is this story still relevant today?



## After reading

### Create & imagine

Developing a personal response to the novel

### From the other side

Think of a memorable time in your life or an activity that you do or enjoy. Write about it from your own point of view thinking about how others spoke to you, treated you or reacted to things you did or said. Include how you felt too, using adverbs. Now re-write the story, but imagine you are now a person of the opposite sex. What's different?

Your piece could be serious or humorous.



Each pupil could cover all the events in the story or the events could be shared around the class.

### Video diary

Imagine you are Bill and create a monologue reflecting upon your day in more detail. You could film it and turn it into a video diary. Alternatively, you could imagine you are one of the teachers explaining why you treated the boys and girls differently.

### Why I'm glad to be a boy/girl!

Although Bill was glad to be a boy again, he did see some virtues in being a girl. Write a humorous and entertaining article for a children's magazine explaining what is really good about being the gender you are. If you prefer, you could do this activity as a comic strip instead.

### Dress to impress

'Bill was *amazed*. How was a person in a frock like this supposed to *survive*? How were they expected to get along without any pockets?'

Design an item of clothing or outfit that is practical as well as attractive – suitable for playing outside. Consider fabrics and practical features as well as current fashion trends.

### Fairytale rewrite

Rewrite a well-known fairytale with a modern twist, giving the central character some non-typical qualities.



# Memorable quotes

*'Why don't you wear this pretty pink dress?' she said.*

*'I never wear dresses,' Bill burst out.*

*'I know,' his mother said. 'It's such a pity.'*

*'This can't be true,' Bill Simpson said to himself. 'This cannot be true!'*

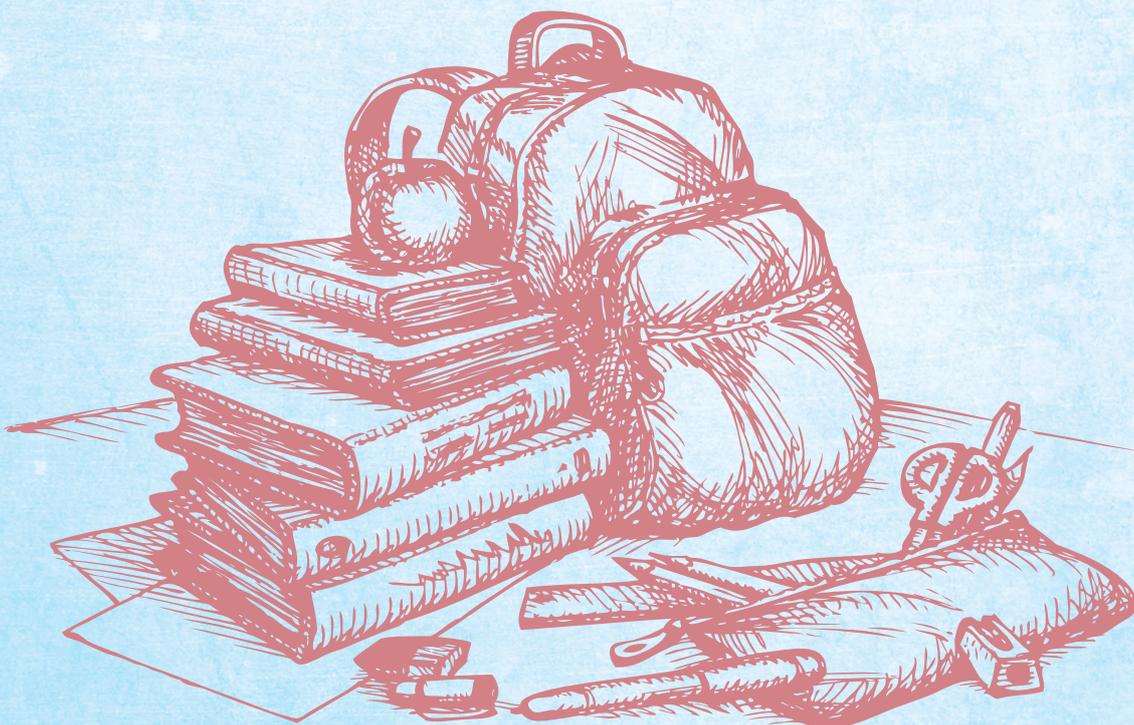
*'That's such a pretty frock!' she said. 'You mind you keep it nice and clean.'*

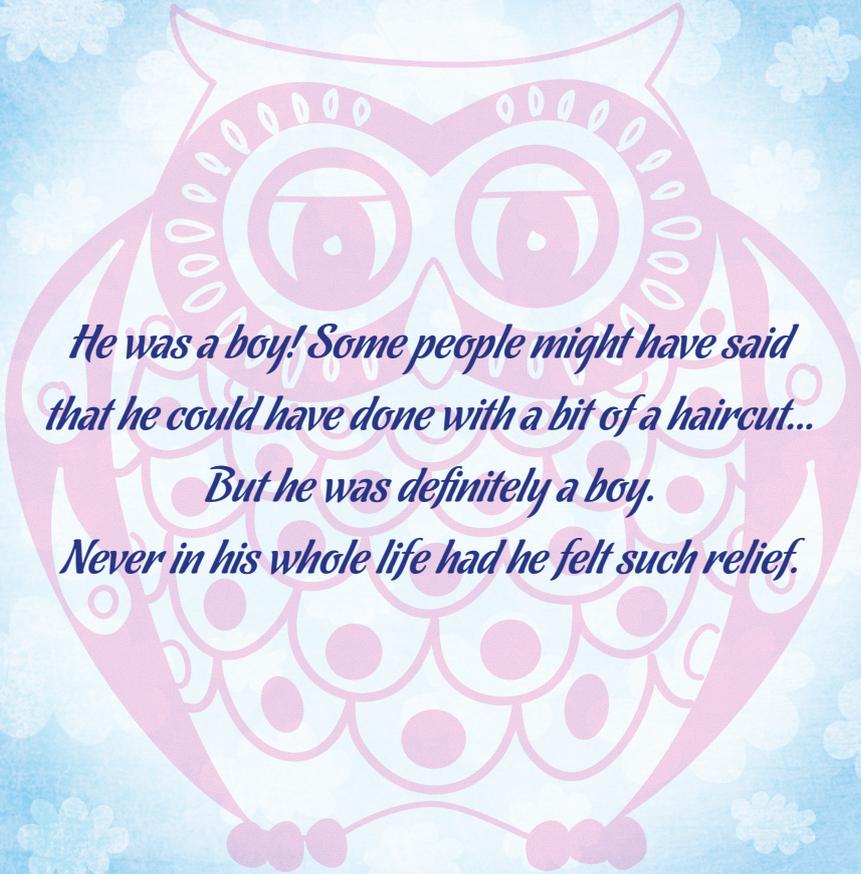
*'I don't see why Rapunzel just has to sit and wait for the Prince to come along and rescue her,' Bill explained. 'Why couldn't she plan her own escape?'*

*...He couldn't slow down. He just couldn't do it.*

*He couldn't let Paul win.*

*'This is the last time I ever send you to school in a frock!'*





*He was a boy! Some people might have said  
that he could have done with a bit of a haircut...*

*But he was definitely a boy.  
Never in his whole life had he felt such relief.*

