



# The Life and Times of Eddie McGrath

by Brigid Feehan

## About the author

Brigid Feehan was born, raised and educated in Wellington.

She studied law at Victoria University and travelled overseas for a few years before returning to Wellington. She now lives in Island Bay with her family and her probably not very bright, but definitely very handsome cat, Magnus. Brigid has worked for the government in a number of roles, none of which have involved meeting the Prime Minister.

*Stella Star*, Brigid's first novel, won the Tom Fitzgibbon Award and was included in the Storylines List of Notable Books in 2006. A sequel, *Maybe Stella*, was published in 2007.

## Synopsis of novel

This very 'Wellington' novel centres on the life and times of fifteen-year-old Eddie McGrath, her immediate family and her two best friends, 'permanently anxious Liam' and 'probably not anxious enough' Meri. The strength of the novel is its genuine warmth and authenticity. There are no earthshattering dramas or major moral dilemmas plaguing our characters, just the every-day pains, joys and dramas of early teen life – and this makes for a very real and engaging read.

At the start of the story we learn that bookworm Eddie is a regional winner in an essay writing competition based on a young person's vision for the future. The prize is to become an Member of Parliament for a day, and a month later to attend a glitzy award night at the Beehive where as well as meeting the PM they each have to give a speech on a project inspired by their day as a politician, followed by a TV interview. However, all this is the stuff of nightmares for introvert Eddie who loathes being the centre of attention and likes nothing more than curling up with a favourite book, yummy snacks, and Olaf the cat (and sometimes Liam and Meri) in her 'safe place' – a comfy turret in her family's rambling old Wellington villa.

Eddie initially turns down the prize, being willing to brazen out the vitriolic attacks of her shocked and publicity seeking older sister Beth, but the pride shown by her genuinely lovely parents lead her to reluctantly accept the prize. The day as a Member of Parliament, which involves sitting in with her local MP in his electorate and hearing the issues and problems of the public, and then picking up and running with one of those issues, turns out to be a bit of a disaster, as he is ill-prepared for her visit and is a particularly grumpy person. This leaves her with no real issue to base her dreaded speech on. Step forward Liam and Meri whose combined love for animals and respect for the elderly lead Eddie and her friends to become involved in a hot issue inside a local retirement village community. The resulting empowerment of the elderly residents forms the basis of her presentation and, as you can imagine, Eddie turns out to be a star (still very reluctantly) on the night. And then there is the blossoming friendship with an equally reluctant winner from Christchurch, Oscar, to add an intriguing hint of future romance. All's well the ends well.



## Themes / issues

Probably the main theme of the book is accepting and then facing your fears. Most of the readers of this novel will easily relate to Eddie's fear of the limelight, and the way she doggedly decides to plough ahead with the dreaded awards night will be inspirational to many similar aged readers.

Respecting and caring for the aged, be they animals or humans, is another theme many readers will relate to. The scenes inside the old persons' home will be an eye-opener to some young readers who may be surprised to learn that the old people's concerns aren't too dissimilar to their own, particularly over the issues of peer pressure and bullying.

Acceptance of differences inside families is another issue that will resonate with young readers. The sibling rivalry between Eddie and Beth rings so true, as does the remoteness of Eddie's university aged sister Claire. Both Eddie and Meri have 'interesting' aunts, for different reasons, but as in all families, acceptance and celebration of difference leads to stronger family units.

The strength and support gained from close friends is another worthwhile theme. Eddie is a naturally retiring and shy person but she has a genuine love for her two closest friends. They are all very accepting of each other's personalities and needs and always have each other's backs.

## Setting

The novel is set in the present time and is located in Wellington city – think Island Bay, Mount Cook, Brooklyn. Anyone who is familiar with the city can easily visualise Eddie's old villa house with its distinctive turret on top. Many Wellingtonians will also be familiar with the crumbling old nunnery building she describes so well. Feehan is probably basing it on the old Erskine College building which now has been demolished to make way for a new housing project. Necessary but a little sad.

## Characters

The novel has a relatively small cast of main characters, mainly due to the first person narration, and we focus mostly on Eddie and her two friends Meri and Liam. They are very representative of the type of friends a girl like Eddie would have – intelligent, environmentally aware, and empathetic. Liam is a committed conservationist and animal rights activist who is yet to learn to distance himself a little from his causes, and he becomes very stressed as a result. Meri is more outgoing than Eddie and her social skills tend to open doors that otherwise may stay shut. The three friends together form a powerful trio all of whom should have very bright futures.

Most other characters tend to be representative types, for example Eddie's aunt Ruth and Meri's aunt Eva are polar opposites but are great examples of family differences.

## Writing style

The novel is written in the first-person past tense, and we immediately feel comfortable in Eddie's sure hands. I love

the way Feehan slowly feeds us what we need to know, and the opening few pages are a master-class in the value of 'showing, not telling'. The opening dialogue exchanges between Eddie and Beth position us well to understand the dynamics of this very twenty-first century inner city family – as in the following opening exchange when Beth attacks Eddie for turning down the big prize:

*Beth was in the hallway when I straightened up.*

*"Do you have any idea how incredibly weird you are?"*

*"Is that a rhetorical question?" My glasses were smeared and Beth was all blurry, which was nice.*

Unlike some adult writers of YA fiction Feehan doesn't overdo the teen slang and it is refreshing to meet teens living in the real world, as opposed to the online world. The writer also doesn't overly describe her settings, preferring to allow us to see them through her characters' eyes – another good example of showing not telling.

The story is very well paced and it is easy to imagine hooked in readers, many of whom will be very like Eddie, carrying the book around with them and sneaking looks whenever they can fit it in.

## Year level suitability and application

This novel will suit year nine to eleven readers very well – and is probably more applicable to female readers. But like all well written books it has wide application – this reviewer enjoyed the book and he is male and well past the first flush of youth!

How refreshing for teachers to find a book aimed unashamedly at book-lovers, and slightly nerdy ones at that. Feehan is sure of her readership, possibly being rather like Eddie when she was a similar age, and has written a book to celebrate those wonderful people who like nothing more than to escape to the comfort and security of their favourite books.

## Learning opportunities

### Before reading: Setting the scene

#### Reading the cover for visual/verbal clues:

- Students work in pairs to study the verbal and visual clues given by front and back cover of the book. They make a set of predictions on plot, character and setting based on those clues alone. Younger students will need specific coaching in this skill.
- While doing this, students can also make a list of statements that identify how they are being 'positioned' by use of colour, contrast, images, layout, font style.

#### Prior knowledge discussion / activities:

- Students share any personal experience they have of having to do something way out of their comfort zones, focussing especially on what they had to do to overcome their fears.

- Get students to share any experiences they have of animal welfare/rights and any experiences they have of visiting elderly relations in retirement villages of special care facilities.
- Wider discussion on how we in New Zealand care for the elderly in general – what other elderly care models are they aware of?
- Class discussion on the how families can be strengthened by the acceptance of difference.
- Class discussion on the relationships Electorate MPs have (or should have) with their electorates.
- Discussion on the differences between electorate and list MPs

## During reading: Understanding the content

### Chapter one:

1. What tone or feeling does the opening sentence set?
2. What do the three things the narrator is carrying as she enters the kitchen say about her?
3. What do we find out about the narrator's family from pages six and seven?
4. What does Eddie think is the real reason for Beth's anger?
5. What specific reasons does Eddie give for turning down her prize?
6. What does the 'shy giraffes' simile say about Claire and her new boyfriend?

### Chapter two:

7. Why does Meri say her two friends have to come to the music competition?
8. What sort of person is Meri's Aunt Eva?
9. What is Liam's point when he keeps saying the event is a competition and not a concert?
10. Why did Liam rescue the chickens and why does he now want to return them?
11. From what you know so far what sort of person is Liam?

### Chapter three:

12. What is scary about the outside of the old building?
13. What two events seriously scare Eddie?

### Chapter four:

14. What is odd about Eddie's book club?
15. Why does Eddie keep a list of heroes and heroines?
16. Why is Eddie annoyed with Liam?
17. What tip does Eddie give to extraverts?
18. What is her father's deadline?

### Chapter five:

19. How does Aunt Ruth describe Druidry?
20. What is a 'quizzical' Look? (page 102)
21. What does Eddie find comforting about reading books set in other places and times?

22. What is your first impression of the MP?
23. How would you describe his way of dealing with people's problems?

### Chapter six:

24. What is Meri's drama?
25. How does Eddie's descriptive simile of the view of the convent on page 127 tie in with her previous experiences there?
26. What might 'boy-splaining' be?
27. How does Liam con Eddie into walking Russ?

### Chapter seven:

28. What is similar about Oscar and Eddie?
29. Who and what does Eddie find in the glasshouse?
30. Explain why Sylvia ended up living there.
31. What does Eddie like about Sylvia?

### Chapter eight:

32. Which of the family's suggestions for dealing with Sylvia do you favour?
33. What does Eddie say is 'somehow fabulous' about being young?
34. How do the two friends react to the good looking young guy working at the SPCA?
35. Why are the old cats called the Rolling Stones?

### Chapter nine:

36. In what ways does Briarlands go against some people's perceptions of old people's homes?
37. What does Rachel think of the cat plan?
38. What does Eddie's English teacher do when Eddie tells her how the MP for a day experience went?
39. What good suggestion does Ariel have?
40. How does Sylvia react to Eddie's project?

### Chapter ten:

41. What very good suggestion does Liam have?
42. How does Beth help with Eddie's presentation?
43. What objections does the grumpy old man have?
44. How does Eric ease the tension?

### Chapter eleven:

45. How does the cat vote turn out?
46. Who did the ghost face in the window turn out to be?
47. What is happening in Eddie's home when Oscar and Lucy arrive?
48. How does Irena dent Eddie's poise?
49. How does Lucy react to Irena's outbursts?
50. How do Oscar and Eddie bond?

### Chapter twelve:

51. How does Eddie eventually conquer her fears during her presentation?

52. What most impressed the Prime-Minister about Eddie's project?

### Epilogue:

53. What inner strength does Eddie gain through all her experiences?

## Post reading: Taking it further

### Theme analysis:

#### Activity one: Group work activity

Select two of the themes / issues listed earlier in these notes and get students to elaborate more on what the author may be commenting on **and how she may be positioning them think about these issues**. When considering the 'how' aspect students will need to closely consider character presentation.

A group spokesperson reports findings to the class.

#### Activity two: Individual work – NCEA level 1 Written Text essay questions.

Attempt one of these very typical level 1 Written Text external exam questions. Note that the first question works very well for this novel.

- Describe at least one challenge faced by a character in the written text. Explain how this challenge helped you understand the character.
- Describe at least one idea that changed your perspective or point of view in the written text. Explain how this idea changed your perspective.
- Describe a key moment in the written text that surprised or shocked you. Explain how this moment was important to the text as a whole.
- Describe a character that you disliked or admired in the written text. Explain how your feeling towards this character helped you understand the text as a whole.

#### Practical activity:

- Contact the office of your local Member of Parliament and ask if you would be able to pay her/him a visit when they are next having a day in their electorate office. Prepare a list of questions before you visit.
- Look up a Retirement Village near where you live, eg a Sommerset or a Ryman complex, and request permission to pay a visit. Most of the larger complexes hold regular open days – perhaps ask if one or more of your grandparents would like to accompany you. You are likely to get a positive response from the retirement village in this case!
- Research how different cultures look after their elderly citizens. Compare the New Zealand retirement village concept with alternative models. Keep an open mind and list the pros and cons of all the models.

- Design a poster or make a short film promoting your ideal Retirement Village complex.

#### Role play activities: (all role plays need to be handled with sensitivity and closely monitored by the teacher)

- Monologue – adopting the role of Eddie explain why you entered the essay competition, your reaction on winning and why you initially decided to turn the prize down.
- Monologue – adopting the role of Liam explain why you feel so passionate about animal welfare.
- Role play an interview between the Prime-Minister and Eddie after her project presentation.
- Role play the 'discussion' between Eddie and Beth early in the novel – feel free to adapt the dialogue from the novel.

Prepared by Denis Wright