

McTavish was inspired by a dog you met – what was it about the dog that so impressed you?

McTavish looks like a big dog standing in a hole. He's got a huge head, tons of blond hair and very short legs. He just makes me laugh. I meet dogs at the park every day of my life, but McTavish was something special — starting with his name. I kept imagining him in a kilt. Although he turned into a rescue dog in the book, he's actually a Scottish Terrier with a very superior pedigree. And he knows it. He has attitude to spare, and as his owner recently confessed to me, "not everyone has the good taste to recognise McTavish's superiority."

Have you observed first-hand the effect dog-ownership can have on a family?

In real life, a dysfunctional family will usually have a dysfunctional dog. Dogs need order and exercise and love. They take up a lot of time when you might wish you were doing something else. It takes dedication and maturity to be a good dog owner, but the rewards are absolutely amazing

Betty says that having a dog is half way between having a friend and a baby. As a dog owner, is that your view?

I remember when I was pregnant with my daughter, asking a friend if I could leave the baby home alone "just for a few minutes, like when I run to the shops?" I was kind of shocked when she said no. You can leave dogs alone, but the responsibility is constant. They get lonely and bored, and really just want to spend all their time with you. I think having a dog is one of the first relationships many children have when they realise that they can't just be selfish. If a dog needs to go out, it needs to go out now, not in two hours. As for being a friend, a dog is the most loyal friend you'll ever have. No dog will want to see you less because they've got a new boyfriend or have too much homework.

Betty also wonders about the purpose of a mother. Did you set out to address this issue, or did it grow out of the story?

Speaking as an ex-child and a mother, I think it's very easy to assume that mothers do all the hard work of organising a family without requiring much in the way of help.

I think it's really important for kids to learn to cook and clear up after themselves and generally be responsible for their own lives. When everyone takes an active role in family life, it feels much more like a shared project — everyone has a stake in making it run smoothly without a lot of conflict and bickering.

McTavish's story is told – wonderfully – in less than one hundred pages. What was it like writing to such a short extent?

All my books are on the short side, so I was very happy to try an even shorter format. I think I may have something of a short attention span — I can't imagine writing an 800 page book. But for the first time ever, I did feel that there were more McTavish stories to come, so he'll definitely have a sequel or two.