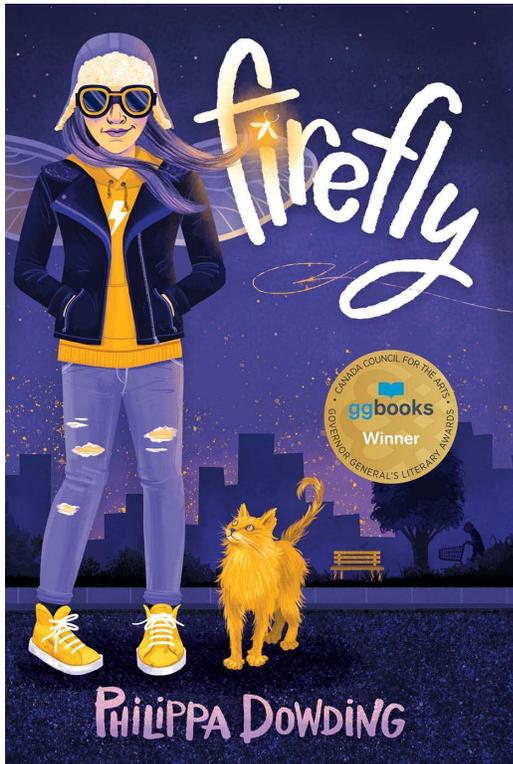


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***Firefly* by Philippa Dowding Teacher's Guide**

Created by Martha Brack Martin with support from Philippa Dowding and the Cormorant Team



Firefly's world is upside down. Social Services has learned that Firefly's been sleeping in the park across the street from her house most nights, and the police have arrested her mother. Firefly's Aunt has taken her in, though it's been years since they've connected. Aunt Gayle lives in The Corseted Lady, a film and television costume warehouse that offers Firefly not only a safe home but also some stellar costumes. As Firefly tries to adjust to a "normal life," she realizes costumes aren't the only things people use to reinvent themselves. If she's going to make peace with her traumatic past, Firefly must figure out who she wants to be, and step out from behind the walls she's created to protect herself. With the help of her new family and friends, Firefly discovers that even in the darkest times, fireflies can still glow.

Themes

Some key themes and "big ideas" in this book include:

- What do we hide behind to protect ourselves?
- What makes a place "home?"
- How do you define a family?
- When your family isn't healthy, how do you cope?
- Social justice and homelessness
- Mental health and well-being

The Plot

Firefly (born Fifi) has been trying to take care of herself and her mother for many of her thirteen years. Her mother's addiction and mental health issues have become more than Firefly can handle, so she's been "living rough" in the nearby park each night. After an incident that results in social services becoming aware of the situation, Firefly is sent to live with her Aunt Gayle in her immense costume shop warehouse, the Corseted Lady. The shop offers Firefly refuge – and some amazing outfits – as she begins to determine who she really is and what a "normal life" and "family" should look like.

The Setting

This story takes place in present-day Riverdale, in the East End of Toronto.

What Kind of Reader Will Love This Book? One who...

- Enjoys stories told in first-person narrative with a distinctive voice
- Likes deep themes revealed in an uplifting way
- Loves "dressing up"
- Is interested in fashion history
- Enjoys stories about non-traditional families
- Has a strong social conscience

Pre-Teaching Prep

Trigger Warning: This book deals with addiction, parental neglect, and mental health issues in both children and adults. Consider the life experiences of your students. To improve your own awareness and support your students, some resources are provided below.

Homelessness:

<https://yogaoutreach.com/2020/03/18/six-ways-to-talk-about-homelessness-with-kids/>
[What it's like to be homeless in Toronto](#)

Trauma and PTSD:

<https://www.stanfordchildrens.org/en/topic/default?id=post-traumatic-stress-disorder-in-children-90-P02579>
https://mentalhealthweek.ca/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/MHW19_School_Overview-ENG.pdf
<https://stanfield.com/teaching-mental-health/>
<https://www.camh.ca/-/media/files/guides-and-publications/tami-teachers-guide.pdf>
https://walkinourshoes.org/content/Classroom_Lesson_Plans.pdf

Chapter Questions (for Independent Work or Class Discussion)

Pick and choose the questions that work for *your* students in *your* classroom. Use as many or as few as you like.

Chapter 1

1. The first time we meet Firefly, she is correcting her aunt and explaining she no longer wants to be called Fifi. Right off the bat, what does this scene show us about Firefly's character? Why do you think she has chosen the name "Firefly?" Explain.
2. In chapter 1, the author uses italics for different purposes. Describe some of these purposes in your own words.
3. Why do you think Firefly refers to her mother as "Joanne-the-mother?" What does it tell us about their relationship?

Chapter 2

4. Why do you think it takes Firefly some time to remember her earlier visits to The Corseted Lady, like the time she and Amanda played with the Rolling Judys?
5. The author often uses short sentences, and even single words, when Firefly is narrating these first two chapters. Why do you think Firefly "speaks" like this?
6. What are some coping strategies we see Firefly using in the first two chapters? How do they seem to be working?

Chapter 3

7. The author shows us that Firefly and Aunt Gayle share a look as they notice Sharlene Baker is dressed in a "big-shouldered suit" like something "from the eighties" (pp. 24-25). What does this little detail tell us, not only about Sharlene Baker, but also about Firefly and Aunt Gayle?
8. In this chapter, we learn more about Firefly's life before she arrived at The Corseted Lady. Using jot notes, write down what you have noticed and learned so far about her past.
9. If you were Aunt Gayle in this chapter, how would you have handled Sharlene Baker? Why?

Chapter 4

10. In chapter four we explore The Corseted Lady with Firefly. Which section would you most want to investigate? Why?
11. As Firefly wanders through the whole warehouse, she is reminded of Moss Cart, some of the ladies from Jennie's, and her mother. It isn't until the end of the chapter, however, that she is triggered to rush through and head for a second bath of the day. What do you think triggers her and why?

Chapter 5

12. Firefly's AC/DC hoodie is almost like a security blanket for her. What do we learn was Moss Cart's special item? Explain.

Chapter 6

13. This chapter begins with Firefly having a flashback. What do you think has triggered this one?
14. Firefly states, "My aunt is a fire-breathing dragon" (p.47). Where do we see her "fire-breathing" in this chapter? In what ways does she show she is the perfect guardian for Firefly?

Chapter 7

15. Firefly meets a lot of people in this chapter. Create a graphic organizer of your choice (e.g., web, chart, etc.) to identify the various people she meets, and include what she learns about them.
16. When Firefly meets Not-So-Skinny Kid, they have quite an encounter. Write this scene from the point of view of Not-So-Skinny-Kid, using his character's "voice."
17. Why do you think the author chose to have Skinny-Kid have his shirt ripped off, instead of just being punched or knocked down? How does it fit with other elements of the story? Explain.

Chapter 8

18. There are similarities between Juggernaut the Cat and Firefly, and we are reminded of them in this chapter. How are they alike?
19. Firefly explores the warehouse at night and finds herself reflecting on the previous owners of the clothes. "Did someone own this coat? Did he love it? Who was he?" (p. 65). What does she decide to do?

Chapter 9

20. Firefly meets some other students in French class, including a boy named Charlie. How does he make Firefly comfortable right away? What does this tell us about his character?
21. In Library Support Class, Firefly recalls having a magazine subscription when she was younger, and then ends up having a panic attack. What prompts this attack? Use evidence from the text and your own ideas to explain your answer.

Chapter 10

22. Firefly is working to calm herself after her panic attack, focusing on things that she sees around her. How does the author write this section to help the reader understand this?

Chapter 11

23. The next three days are a blur for Firefly, yet she still manages to select some new costumes to wear. How does she feel about each of her choices? Which one would you like the best of the three, and why?
24. Despite “fading out and in” for three days, Firefly has also noticed that Not-So-Skinny Kid is still assaulting Skinny Kid every afternoon. Why do you think she can focus on this and her costume choices, but little else? Use details from the text to support your ideas.
25. While Aunt Gayle distracts Sharlene Baker, Firefly discovers Sadie is sewing a lobster costume. Why do you think Firefly is so excited about the idea of a lobster costume?

Chapter 12

26. We finally learn exactly what happened to Firefly on the night the police arrested Joanne-the-mother. Write a summary of the events.
27. Aunt Gayle tells Firefly that it wasn’t her job to take care of her mother, and others have told her this too. Why do you think this is so hard for Firefly to accept?
28. What would you have done if you were Firefly and had a mother like Joanne? Do you agree with Firefly’s choices? Explain.

Chapter 13

29. The Corseted Lady is a hive of activity in this chapter. How does the author use this passage to show us that Firefly is becoming more stable?
30. Which do you think is more amusing, the four ladies as a lobster quartet, or a kid in a carrot costume? Explain your rationale.

Chapter 14

31. Why do the drunk clowns upset Firefly? What more do we learn?

Chapter 15

32. When Firefly goes “off script” in French class, why does Charlie get tears in his eyes?
33. The motorcycle cop costume and the events in French class seem to inspire Firefly. Summarize what happens outside the coffee shop and Shopper’s Drug Mart.
34. Imagine you are Charlie watching these events unfold. Write an imaginary text to a friend describing your impression of these events.

Chapter 16

35. Firefly receives a letter written by Joanne-the-mother. Would you have read it if you were Firefly? Why or why not?
36. At the end of the chapter, the author writes, “And Firefly Warren is gone, gone, gone too” (p. 134). Predict what you think will happen next. Justify your prediction with details from the text and your own ideas.

Chapter 17

37. How does the author show us what happened to Firefly? How would you have shown this if you were the author?

Chapter 18

38. Again, the author uses a specific writing technique to show Firefly's recollections of her dissociative experience. How does this help the reader understand the story and the character better?
39. How does Juggernaut react to Firefly's state? Are you surprised by this? Why or why not?
40. Why is the letter such a catalyst for Firefly's emotions? Explain.

Chapter 19

41. What does the word *verklemt* on page 150 mean?
42. We learn more about why Firefly is so fond of fireflies in this chapter. What does the costume symbolize for her, besides her name?

Chapter 20

43. Why do you think Charlie is part of the Library Support Group?
44. Use your research skills to look up where fireflies can be found around the world. Try to find words for "firefly" in additional different languages.

Chapter 21

45. Charlie has been dealing with his own personal trauma since he was ten. What did he do to cope?
46. Firefly is "not a hugger" (p. 169), but she finds herself letting Charlie hug her when he falls apart. In your opinion, is it easier to deal with someone else's pain than your own? Does it help you heal when you help others? Explain.
47. If you were Firefly, what would you have "said" to Joanne-the-mother from the bridge? Why?

Chapter 22

48. When Aunt Gayle hands Scott Durkin a clean plaid shirt, why is it so meaningful for Firefly?
49. Truly skilled authors know how to weave humorous and serious elements together to really make a story pop. Show how Philippa Dowding does this in this chapter.

Chapter 23

50. Charlie understands right away why Firefly never told her mother about her name of choice. Why is a name important?
51. Do you think Firefly will ever let Joanne know that Fifi is her "dead name?" Why or why not?

52. What's the significance of Juggers sleeping beside Firefly on the bed, and of Firefly remembering the last line of the kitty-cat song in this chapter? Explain your ideas using evidence from the story and your own ideas.

Chapter 24

53. Why do you think the author chose not to have Moss Cart recognize Firefly?
54. Are you surprised Firefly hasn't yet visited her mom or written to her? Why or why not?
55. Do you believe Joanne-the-mother will truly get better? Would you advise Firefly to reunite with her if she does? Explain your reasoning.

Culminating Activities

Consider assigning an infographic about a topic introduced in the novel (e.g., fashion in a particular era, the extent of homelessness in your local urban centre, etc.), organizing a fundraiser for a local social justice cause, designing a playlist for the "soundtrack" the students would like to see for a movie made from the book, creating their own visual interpretation of a chapter or section of the book in the form of a graphic novel or dramatic performance, etc. Give students the opportunity to make connections between the world and themselves, and to choose their own way of demonstrating them.

Here are some other activities to consider when you finish the novel:

Costume Party:

You are left alone in *The Corseted Lady* with every costume at your disposal. Think about what you could find that would best reveal the real you. Why is it appropriate? What would you select for your best friend? Your sibling? An adult in your life?

Pick yourself and one other person to "dress" at the *Corseted Lady*. Explain in detail your rationale for each "look."

Costume Party Part 2:

Follow the Costume Party instructions (above), but instead of just writing your explanation, create a visual representation of you and your other person in your "costumes." You can do this by drawing, using technology, or creating a "paper doll" or model of yourselves in your outfits. You can even photoshop your head onto the representation! Be prepared to explain orally to the class why you selected your choices.

The Value of a Word

Firefly has a great interest in words. She notices when people use words she particularly likes, such as when Aunt Gayle refers to the school as being "not insufferably small" on page 19, or when Firefly debates which word that best describes her hunger on page 3. What value do you place on words? Why do you think they matter so much to Firefly?

Explain your thoughts in a one paragraph reflection. Then list five words you find particularly powerful and explain why you value them.

A Rose by Any Other Name

Again, consider how important words are to Firefly, and how much she works to select just the right words as she tells her story. Then select one of the following options:

- A) Write a poem about a word that has always fascinated you, or that you appreciate.
- B) Choose a word from the story that you really like and write a poem about this word.
- C) Choose a word that sums up your feelings about the book. Then write a free verse poem using images and phrases from the book and your own ideas, to put your feelings into words.

Connections

Watch the video *Umbrella*, found here:

http://www.umbrella.movie/?fbclid=IwAR2xuBJkRDRkKpP9dN4SYnf9jHaJiFEmq0HsdZOKv66EgVQ2xFn_wYeLd68 What connections can you make between it and the novel Firefly? Discuss with a friend or the class.

Exploring the Same Themes in Different Texts

After reading *Firefly*, consider reading *Elvis, Me, and the Lemonade Stand Summer* by Leslie Gentile (978-1770866157), *I'm Good and Other Lies* by Bev Katz Rosenbaum (978-1770866324), or *Elliot* by Julie Pearson (978-1927485859). How are some of the same themes repeated in these stories? How are they handled differently?

Take Action

We learn about some aspects of homelessness in this novel, as well as mental well-being and trauma. Continue to research more about these or other related social justice issues in your local community.

Now act. Share your learning with others in your school or community at large. Take it even farther by working actively to make a difference, perhaps by collecting toiletries for homeless youth, or offering to volunteer in a local shelter with your family and friends.

Interview with the Author

Interviewer: When you first started writing the novel, did you have any idea how successful it would be?

Philippa: The short answer is no. I don't think any author ever begins a novel thinking that they will win the Governor General Literary Award or be nominated for the Ontario Library Association Red Maple Award. Although it's a huge honour to be nominated and to win, awards are not the main reason we write for young people. If a reader connects with



Firefly and understands themselves and the world in a new way, that's the best success of all for me, and I think for any writer.

Interviewer: What is your writing process like? Are you an "outliner" or a "fly-by-the-seat-of-your-pants" kind of writer?

Philippa: I get asked about process a lot, and I can tell you that apart from starting with an idea and a notebook, my process is pretty scattered. It's not a streamlined, seamless process with a detailed outline and strict adherence to reams of ordered chapters in succession. But neither am I a "seat-of-the-pantser," because although it can be fun and very freeing to have an idea and just write whatever comes to mind (which I've done), those stories (unsurprisingly) don't often hang together very well.

In fact, I think I fall somewhere in between the two extremes. A "seat-of-the-outliner" maybe!

Interviewer: Love that! <laughing> So what does your process look like?

Philippa: Usually, by the time I come to write a story, I've thought about it for a year or two, and done a lot of background reading and researching. One writing truth for me is that I *always* know how a book will end before I can start writing. Often the idea for the ending of a book is the first flash of inspiration for the story.

Once I start seriously thinking about writing a book, I keep a notebook that outlines my first vision for the story in a few pages, kind of a thumbnail of the story. The notebook also usually has major themes and characters too, but this evolves. I go off-book all the time whenever the story opens up and presents new opportunities to me as I write. This is the main reason I'm not strictly an "outliner," because so much of the story comes to me as I write it, the outline is always changing.

Interviewer: Did you stick closely to your initial vision for this book, or did you find yourself making significant changes?

Philippa: This is an interesting question, because this is one of those books that was there almost fully formed, as soon as I started writing it. This book was a quick write, which doesn't happen very often, or at least it doesn't happen that way for me. Usually, a book takes a year or more, so I think this book was stewing slowly on the back burner for a long time, waiting for me to invite it in.

The costume shop setting is based on a real film and television costume shop. Thunder Thighs, in Toronto, which is run by my extended family, and it was a joy to write about since I know it so well. It was easy to set my character in such a magical setting, and a place that I love. And, I've said this book was in part a tribute to my late sister-in-law, who built the costume shop business, so I knew exactly who Aunt Gayle was going to be right from the start. But yes, there were a few things that changed significantly as I wrote.

Interviewer: Like what?

Philippa: In earlier versions of the story, Firefly and her mother had already been evicted and were living in a tent under the Gardiner Expressway in Toronto, but as I wrote that it didn't feel

real to me. I've never lived in a tent in an urban centre, and I didn't want to get that experience wrong. Also, there were several very good books already written about kids living in tents in Toronto.

So, as I thought about that, I realized that it might be more interesting to write a book that captures how a family could collapse, from the very beginning of that process. How does the loss of a parent's job affect a child? What are the stressors that send someone onto the street? How does poverty affect mental health and substance use? The loss of a job is often the beginning of a spiral, as it is for Firefly and her mother. According to the City of Toronto website, eviction is the number one reason for homelessness in the city.

Interviewer: It's fascinating to see how things changed as you got into the story.

Philippa: Well, a book is an evolution, material deepens and changes as you spend time with it. Another change in the final story takes place in the bridge scene with Firefly and Charlie, near the end of the book. In the earliest versions of the manuscript, I had Charlie's mother jump from the bridge; she committed suicide. But this made me uneasy right from the start; a mother's suicide deserves its own book, not just a chapter. Then one day driving on Bloor Street I saw a white bicycle covered with flowers chained to a post. This means that a bicycle rider had been struck and killed in the spot, a very sad sight that one sees all over the City. So I tried that, and the energy of the scene changed immediately when Charlie's mother died accidentally on her bike instead of by suicide. Charlie's crisis is different from Firefly's, but the resulting trauma is real. There are different kinds of crisis and ensuing trauma in the story, including the kids in Firefly's Library Support Group, the stepbrother subplot of bullying, and Charlie's is one more.

Interviewer: Speaking of your stepbrother subplot, you leave us with some unanswered questions about Norman Jakes and Scott Durkin. Are you planning on revisiting these characters in another book, by any chance?

Philippa: I'm usually the last person to think of writing a sequel! I think that part of the appeal of this story is that it is so quick, it happens in such a tight time frame, the ten days before Halloween, and in such a unique and high-interest setting like a costume shop. It would be really difficult to duplicate that intensity and interest in a sequel, so at the moment anyway, I'm not planning any immediate follow-up books on the characters in the story. Although, now I'm curious too ... what might happen to Scott and Norman? Or Moss Cart? Or Charlie? Or the social worker, for that matter? Stay tuned!

Interviewer: You mention at the end of the book about your family members who inspired some of the characters, as well as the setting inspiration. How did they respond to you weaving these family connections into your story?

Philippa: It IS a bit tricky writing a piece inspired by a family member, and about a place like a family-run costume shop. As a writer you absolutely do not want to offend anyone. Not if you want to keep getting invited to family functions, anyway.

Interviewer: I bet! <grinning>

Philippa: So, to write *Firefly*, I checked with everyone involved, before, during and after the writing process. I told everyone my idea for the book long before I started writing it and asked how they would feel about me setting *Firefly* in the costume shop. There were no objections; in fact, everyone was really excited for me. I've been really lucky, and incredibly grateful to my extended family for their continued support. They are artists, and they help create products used in the movie and television world every day. They know the business of creating to be one that does sometimes blur the lines of reality and fiction. There's no way you could write a book like *Firefly*, about a family-run business and with one main character, (in this case Aunt Gayle), inspired by the creator of that business, if anyone objected to it.

It's important to remember though, that this is fiction, and "inspired by" is not the same as "memoir." The book is a tribute to my late sister-in-law, and to the amazing costume company that she built (and which is now run by my nephew), but I also made sure it's very much a creative construct. It's not just reality, it's fiction inspired by reality.

Interviewer: What do you hope to inspire in your readers as they turn the last page?

Philippa: Oh, so many things! I would definitely want every reader to feel like they have been on a journey of resilience with *Firefly*. I would want them to feel her courage, curiosity, her humour and maybe through her, understand a little more about PTSD and trauma. I'd also want readers to feel inspired by Aunt Gayle's love for her, and to be moved by her aunt's kindness and celebration of *Firefly*'s unique character.

I'd also want any reader to feel at the end of the book that PTSD is not the only thing that defines someone. Also, it's not weak to ask for help. I hope that any child, whether in a difficult home situation or not, will be inspired by *Firefly*. We're all luminous, beautiful creatures, lit from within, and there are people who see that in us, too.

Find your crew and let them love you and help you. You're not alone.

(To see the full version of this interview, visit Philippa Dowding's website.)

About Philippa Dowding:

Philippa Dowding has won many marketing industry awards and has had poetry and short fiction published in journals across Canada. Her children's books have been nominated for numerous literary awards in Canada, the U.S., and Europe, including the SYRCA Diamond Willow, OLA Silver Birch, OLA Red Maple, and Hackmatack awards. In 2017, she won the OLA Silver Birch Express Honor Book award for *Myles and the Monster Outside*. She is also the winner of the Governor General's Literary Award 2021. Dowding currently lives in Toronto, ON.

Awards and Recognition for *Firefly*

WINNER, 2021 Governor General's Literary Award for Young People's Literature
Nominee, 2022 Red Maple Award, Ontario Forest of Reading

Related Weblinks and Resources for Further Learning

<https://pdowding.com/index.html>

[Philippa Dowding Reads From New Middle Grade Novel Firefly | Book Reading](#)

<https://canlitforlittlecanadians.blogspot.com/2021/03/interview-with-philippa-dowding-author.html>

[Virtual Launch: Firefly by Philippa Dowding](#)

<https://thunderhighscostumes.com/about-us/>