

TEACHER'S GUIDE TO

The Nearly Calamitous Taming of PZ:  
A laboratory dog's search for love

By Martha Ritter  
Illustrated by Matt Ryan

*Sometimes it's hard to trust and love—especially for this dog and girl.  
Heartfelt and funny. A book for all ages.*

*Nearly Calamitous*   
**THE TAMING OF  
PZ**

*A laboratory dog's search for love*



**Martha Ritter**

Illustrations by Matt Ryan

**THE STORY:** A mute, nameless foxhound has spent her life in a laboratory cage. She has never seen the sun. When she gets rescued, Dottie, a diva ladybug, helps her understand the world and find a home with Olivia, a restless, solitary girl. It is definitely not love at first sight. The isolated dog and the hesitant girl must face their fear of connecting and learn to tame each other, let go, survive adventures, and find the courage to trust as they search for their place in the sun.



“PZ” is a layered book about being yourself, trusting your instinct, overcoming obstacles, mining experience for what matters, and doing what is necessary for the joy of a hard-won friendship. The classic illustrations are poignant and wacky.

*Inspired by the true story of Tess, a laboratory dog who entered civilization.*

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[www.TamingPZ.com](http://www.TamingPZ.com)

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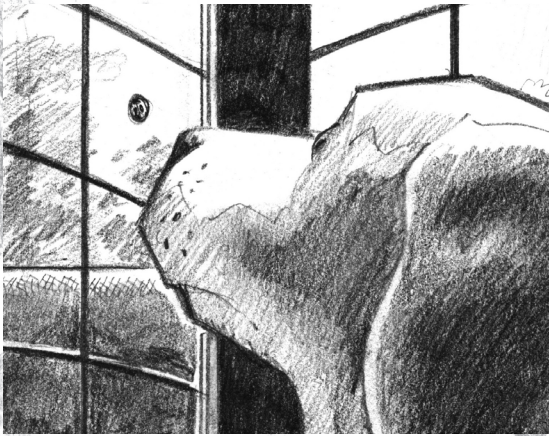


Sometimes it's hard to trust and love.  
Especially for this dog and a girl.



“Not since Kafka has an insect risen to this level of artistic genius.” — *Dottie*

“Ritter is at her best when grappling with her main characters’ internal lives, outlining in an accessible, realistically paced way how the psychology of grief and trauma can give way to hope and love.”  
— *Kirkus Reviews, Featured Review*



Heartfelt and funny.

“Much to ponder about the surprising twists in making connections. And a pleasure to meet such lively and beautifully drawn characters.”  
— *Maeve Kinkead*



## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. The first chapter is entitled, “The Laboratory.” How does the author describe PZ’s surroundings in the laboratory? How would you describe PZ’s emotions? In which ways are PZ’s perceptions of other settings throughout the story affected by her experiences in the laboratory? (RL.3)
2. Eventually, PZ moves from the laboratory to the shelter, where she meets Henry, an English bulldog. Compare and contrast how PZ feels about the laboratory and about the shelter at this point in the story. Do her feelings about the shelter change? In addition, how do you think Henry really feels about life in the shelter? Why do you think that? (RL.3)
3. What does Dottie, the ladybug, mean when she says, “Dogs are the experts on teaching humans to love”? (p.30) (RL.4)
4. What are the characteristics of Dottie and Henry that make PZ call them her family? Why is each important to the foxhound? How do they influence PZ’s transformation from the laboratory dog at the beginning of the story to the dog that we see at the end of the story? (RL.3)
5. In Chapter 9, PZ and Dottie argue over the trapeze. What does that argument teach PZ about friendship? (RL.3)
6. We meet Olivia in Chapter 14. How do Olivia’s comments reflect her feelings about adopting the foxhound? (RL.3)
7. Discuss the theme of change in the book. How do the different characters adjust to change, based on their experiences and personalities? (RL.2, RL.3, RL.6)
8. “Trust is what you and I have, foxhound. It feels good. We earned it. We are honest with each other and we support each other. We are loyal friends.” (p. 74) What is trust? Why is it difficult for PZ to trust? How do you see PZ developing trust throughout the novel? (RL.3, RL.4, L.4)
9. More than anything, the foxhound wants a name. Why is this so important to her? What does that say about her identity? (RL.3, RL.4, L.4)
10. “But if you tame me, then we shall need each other.” (p. 155) What is the meaning of taming in this book? How does the theme of taming, as described in *The Little Prince*, apply to Olivia and Lolly J’s relationship? (RL.2, RL.4)
11. What does Mrs. Rosas mean when she tells Olivia, “Try to get out of yourself for a moment, my sweet”? (p. 159) Why does Olivia have trouble understanding what her grandmother means by saying this? How do you know she does not understand? In what ways do Lolly J. and Olivia have the same problem of “getting out of themselves”? (RL.4)
12. How does PZ’s transformation help to heal Olivia and teach her to love again? (RL.3)



## WRITING PROMPTS

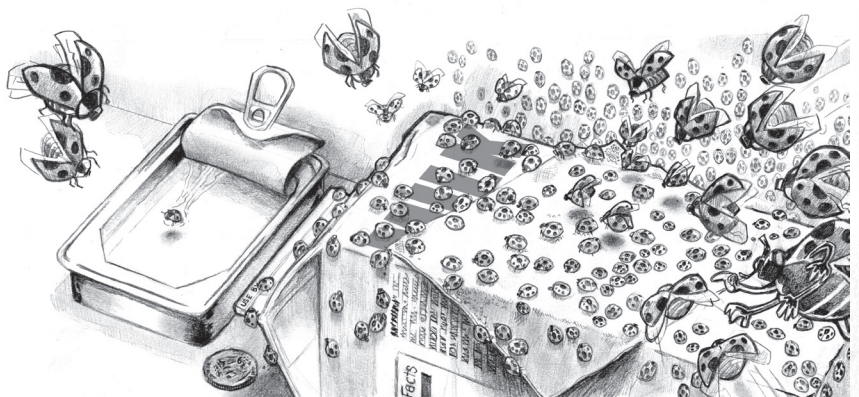
1. Friendship is an important theme in the book. Choose two characters and write about how their friendship developed. What is the impact on each character? (RL.6, W.1)
2. What is resilience? Choose a character and write about how he or she shows resilience. (L.4, RL.3, W.1)
3. In Chapter 9, Dottie and PZ argue over the trapeze. Write your own ending to this chapter. How would this change the next chapter? (W.2, W.3)
4. You have invited Dottie to dinner. Write one to two pages about how that conversation would go. What characteristics of Dottie are revealed? (W.3)

## SPEAKING AND LISTENING

1. Most stories tend to have one rising action and one climax. Describe these moments in *The Nearly Calamitous Taming of PZ*. If you decide that the book has multiple rising actions and climaxes, identify these parts of the story and explain your thinking. (SL.1, SL.6)
2. Lolly J. jumps onto tables in her new home and various characters respond. (pp. 105-108) Act this out. Why does the author include this scene? How does it affect the book's plot? What is the larger issue that might be discussed? (RL.1, RL.5, RL.6, RF.4, SL.1, SL.6)

## ACTIVITIES

1. Your classroom has become the newsroom at a radio station. Divide into pairs. One person in each pair is a character from the book. The other is a reporter who prepares three written questions and then uses them to interview the character. Record the interview and share with other teams. Switch Roles. (W.4, SL.1, SL.2, SL.5)
2. Dottie wants to get the word out about her Hibernation Spa. Divide into small groups and brainstorm to design a brochure with key sales points for Dottie to lure more ladybugs to the spa. (Send your favorite brochure to [info@taming.com](mailto:info@taming.com). It might be posted!) (W.2, SL.1, L.3)



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



*MARTHA RITTER* wrote her first book when she was in the sixth grade. It was a huge volume about the Republic of Indonesia, which the President of the United States requested she give to Indonesia's president. Reluctantly, she complied--and nearly caused an international incident.

Despite this complication, Ms. Ritter has been writing ever since. She is a journalist, speechwriter, poet, and actor. She has shared her sense of humor with a national audience in a number of classic TV commercials.

*This guide was developed in consultation with the University of Saint Joseph School of Education in West Hartford, Connecticut. Special thanks go to alumnae Jaelyn Clarke and Lindsey Atkins, and Director Suzanne Shippee.*

For more information or to inquire about virtual and in-person school and library visits, please contact:

[www.TamingPZ.com](http://www.TamingPZ.com)  
[info@BradleyStreetPress.com](mailto:info@BradleyStreetPress.com)

# REFERENCES TO COMMON CORE STATE STANDARDS (by grade)

## English Language Arts



### Reading: Literature

#### RL.1:

*3rd: Ask and answer questions to demonstrate understanding of a text, referring explicitly to the text as a basis for the answers.*

*4th: Refer to details and examples in a text when explaining what the text says explicitly and when drawing inferences from the text.*

*5th: Quote accurately from a text when explaining what the text says explicitly and when drawing inferences from the text.*

*6th: Cite textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text.*

#### RL.2:

*3rd: Recount stories, including fables, folktales, and myths from diverse cultures; determine the central message, lesson, or moral and explain how it is conveyed through key details in the text.*

*4th: Determine a theme of a story, drama, or poem from details in the text; summarize the text.*

*5th: Determine a theme of a story, drama, or poem from details in the text, including how characters in a story or drama respond to challenges or how the speaker in a poem reflects upon a topic; summarize the text.*

*6th: Determine a theme or central idea of a text and how it is conveyed through particular details; provide a summary of the text distinct from personal opinions or judgments.*

#### RL.3:

*3rd: Describe characters in a story (e.g., their traits, motivations, or feelings) and explain how their actions contribute to the sequence of events.*

*4th: Describe in depth a character, setting, or event in a story or drama, drawing on specific details in the text (e.g., a character's thoughts, words, or actions).*

*5th: Compare and contrast two or more characters, settings, or events in a story or drama, drawing on specific details in the text (e.g., how characters interact).*

*6th: Describe how a particular story's or drama's plot unfolds in a series of episodes as well as how the characters respond or change as the plot moves toward a resolution.*

#### RL.4:

*3rd: Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, distinguishing literal from nonliteral language.*

*4th: Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including those that allude to significant characters found in mythology (e.g., Herculean).*

*5th: Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including figurative language such as metaphors and similes.*

*6th: Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including figurative and connotative meanings; analyze the impact of a specific word choice on meaning and tone.*

#### RL.5:

*3rd: Refer to parts of stories, dramas, and poems when writing or speaking about a text, using terms such as chapter, scene, and stanza; describe how each successive part builds on earlier sections.*

*4th: Explain major differences between poems, drama, and prose, and refer to the structural elements of poems (e.g., verse, rhythm, meter) and drama (e.g., casts of characters, settings, descriptions, dialogue, stage directions) when writing or speaking about a text.*

*5th: Explain how a series of chapters, scenes, or stanzas fits together to provide the overall structure of a particular story, drama, or poem.*

*6th: Analyze how a particular sentence, chapter, scene, or stanza fits into the overall structure of a text and contributes to the development of the theme, setting, or plot.*

#### RL.6:

*3rd: Distinguish their own point of view from that of the narrator or those of the characters.*

*4th: Compare and contrast the point of view from which different stories are narrated, including the difference between first- and third-person narrations.*

*5th: Describe how a narrator's point of view influences how events are described.*

*6th: Explain how an author develops the point of view of the narrator or speaker in a text.*



### Reading: Foundational Skills

#### RF.4:

*3rd, 4th, and 5th: Read with sufficient accuracy and fluency to support comprehension.*

*6th: N/A*



### Language

#### L.3

*3rd, 4th, 5th, and 6th: Use knowledge of language and its conventions when writing, speaking, reading, or listening.*



## Writing

### W.1:

*3rd* : Write opinion pieces on topics or texts, supporting a point of view with reasons.

*4th and 5th* : Write opinion pieces on topics and texts, supporting a point of view with reasons and information.

*6th*: Write arguments to support claims with clear reasons and relevant evidence.

### W.2

*3rd, 4th, and 5th*: Write informative/explanatory texts to examine a topic and convey ideas and information clearly.

*6th*: Write informative/explanatory texts to examine a topic and convey ideas, concepts, and information through the selection, organization, and analysis of relevant content.

### W.3:

*3rd, 4th, and 5th*: Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, descriptive details, and clear event sequence.

*6th*: Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, relevant descriptive details, and well-structured event sequence.

### W.4

*3rd*: With guidance and support from adults, produce writing in which the development and organization are appropriate to task and purpose.

*4th and 5th*: Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development and organization are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.

*6th*: Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.



## Speaking and Listening

### SL.1:

*3rd, 4th, 5th, and 6th*: Engage effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grade-appropriate topics and texts, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly.

### SL.2

*3rd*: Determine the main ideas and supporting details of a text read aloud or information presented in diverse media and formats, including visually, quantitatively, and orally.

*4th*: Paraphrase portions of a text read aloud or information presented in diverse media and formats, including visually, quantitatively, and orally.

*5th*: Summarize a written text read aloud or information presented in diverse media and formats, including visually, quantitatively, and orally.

*6th*: Interpret information presented in diverse media and formats (e.g., visually, quantitatively, orally) and explain how it contributes to a topic, text, or issue under study.

### SL.5

*3rd*: Create engaging audio recordings of stories or poems that demonstrate fluid reading at an understandable pace; add visual displays when appropriate to emphasize or enhance certain facts or details.

*4th*: Add audio recordings and visual displays to presentations when appropriate to enhance the development of main ideas or themes.

*5th*: Include multimedia components (e.g., graphics, sound) and visual displays in presentations when appropriate to enhance the development of main ideas or themes.

*6th*: Include multimedia components (e.g., graphics, images, music, sound) and visual displays in presentations to clarify information.

### SL.6:

*3rd*: Speak in complete sentences when appropriate to task and situation in order to provide requested detail or clarification.

*4th*: Differentiate between contexts that call for formal English (e.g., presenting ideas) and situations where informal discourse is appropriate (e.g., small-group discussion); use formal English when appropriate to task and situation.

*5th*: Adapt speech to a variety of contexts and tasks, using formal English when appropriate to task and situation.

*6th*: Adapt speech to a variety of contexts and tasks, demonstrating command of formal English when indicated or appropriate.