

The Short & Curly Guide to Life, by Matt Beard and Kyla Slaven (2018). Puffin Books.

What is the connection between a vampire, a fox, a virtual reality machine and a zombie?

I am the full-time father of two very curious boys aged 7 and 8 for whom I do the daily school run commute and drop off, before I do my other job of teaching high school philosophy. It is a constant challenge to keep my car companions occupied every day, so I'm indebted to the 'ABC Short and Curly' podcast. My boys are big fans of the show, and our daily car journeys have been enlivened with often heated discussions about who we would save in a fire, or should we rob the rich to help the poor? Such questions have transformed my humble family car into a mobile 'Philosophy in Schools'(P4C) classroom for our morning commute. The podcast provides the stimulus, while I facilitate the discussion as I navigate rush-hour traffic—it is a great way to prepare me for my school day.

As a result, I was excited to receive a copy of the accompanying series book *The Short and Curly guide to life*. The book is written by the Short and Curly's resident Philosopher and Ethicist Dr Matt Beard and Kyla Slaven. The book approaches ethical issues in the style of a collection of 'field research reports' that are completed by characters from the 'Brains Trust' who take on the role of research agents. Twelve ethical issues are investigated at length, with a chapter being allocated to each—examples being lying, happiness, fairness, promises, friendship, bravery and integrity.

The 'field agents' present an ethical issue in the form of an email conversation with Dr Matt Beard that initially outlines the main scenario being discussed. These scenarios are ethical dilemmas which are 'dressed up' by the authors in a relatable context story—for example the issue of integrity is discussed as the ethics of cheating in a school French test. The key underlying questions are then outlined and responded to in a 'Philoso-Mail' from Dr Matt Beard to the field agent, which then sets up some key questions and thought experiments for the reader to consider and discuss. These are supported by contemporary examples—again using the issue of integrity as an example, Lance Armstrong and Diego Maradona are highlighted as figures who may be lacking in integrity for their behaviour in the Sporting world. A well-known philosopher on the topic is then introduced with some of their key ideas to develop the theme. Members of the ethical pantheon feature heavily here, with appearances from John Locke, Martha Nussbaum, Immanuel Kant alongside Aristotle, Robert Nozick and Laurie Paul. Each topic is then further developed with some 'research updates' from the agent, which are again responded to by Dr Matt Beard. The chapters are concluded with an 'Agent de-brief' to draw together some of the key issues.

The ethical theories—which are the backbone of any rigorous ethical discussion—are introduced and used with good effect to support the decision-making process of the

book. Again, they are presented in an accessible and attractive manner to the reader and they employ relevant examples to explain sometimes very difficult and abstract conceptual ideas. For example, Kant's ethical theory is explained under the title 'Promises and ice-cream' to show how Kant's Universal Law works in practice, while Nietzsche's 'tragedy of life' with friends and enemies is likened to the relationships between Darth Vader and Obi-Wan Kenobi, and Dumbledore and Grindelwald. This is a significant strength of the book, and it shows Dr Beard's great ability to make highly complex philosophy accessible to the young reader.

The book is illustrated by Simon Greiner, who brings to life many of the aforementioned members of the ethical pantheon. The portrayals of John Stuart Mill cuddling a seemingly happy pig and Aristotle on a play station are my particular favourites! The images are in black and white characterisations that break up the text in an attractive and complimentary contemporary style.

In my view, the strength of the book lies with the tackling of difficult and often abstract philosophical issues, which are skilfully related to contexts and scenarios that young people can understand and engage with. (The answer to the question at the start of this review is obviously *The Short and Curly Guide to Life*). Similar examples pervade throughout, and it will have an undoubted appeal to many young people. Who would have associated Aristotle with being a video game designer, or John Rawls being applied to coconuts? This is the book's enduring appeal.

However, my struggle with the book is how best to use it. Despite the accessible nature and appeal of the topics, the readability of the book is beyond the capability of my 7 and 8 year old boys who are very competent readers. Admittedly, my boys are at the lower end of the target market for the book, but as they are big fans of the podcast, it was perhaps disappointing for them not to be able to access the book by themselves. This inaccessibility is due to the large amount of text used to outline the scenarios and to respond in a manner that is consistent with the ethical theory. This is clearly achieved—but in my view, it reduces the suitability of the book away from the late primary to the early middle school age bracket.

With some creativity, it could be used in the classroom—for example the initial email from the field agent could be used as a stimulus material to a Community of Inquiry. However, the depth that each topic has been investigated in means that it would need to have multiple sessions dedicated to each section to gain maximum understanding of the issue. In the pressured time-poor curriculum, this is a luxury that many classrooms don't enjoy, but it could lend itself to extension or gifted based inquiry learning.

Given this, I would suggest the book would be more suited to the individual reader. However, for me, this loses something of its value. As with all philosophy, the topics require discussion that goes beyond individual contemplation, which would be lost when a student reads by themselves. The ‘thinking questions’ (or ‘curly questions’ as they are often referred to) where the listener is invited to ‘stop and discuss’ the issue with their fellow listeners is an undoubted strength of the podcast version of Short and Curly. The inclusion in the book of ‘thinking questions’ in each section suggests that the intent is similar for the book—but this is obviously lost when the book is being read alone. This could be avoided by co-reading with a parent or educator, but as previously discussed, this would require a significant time investment.

So, whilst I really like the concept and style of the book, my question would be how best to use the undoubted wealth of knowledge and ideas contained within its pages to gain maximum effect. I am concerned that, as it does not easily lend itself to classroom use, and as it requires too much collaboration to be exclusively for the individual reader, its main purpose is unclear. It is nonetheless a very attractive book due to the lively illustrative style and the use of lively, contemporary examples, and it will undoubtedly sell well due to the success of the podcast. It will be a useful addition to my resources.

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