



# Desmond and the Very Mean Word

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**Based on a true story from Archbishop Desmond Tutu's childhood in South Africa, *Desmond and the Very Mean Word* reveals the power of words and the secret of forgiveness.**

When Desmond takes his new bicycle out for a ride through his neighborhood, his pride and joy turn to hurt and anger when a group of boys shout a very mean word at him. He first responds by shouting an insult, but soon discovers that fighting back with mean words doesn't make him feel any better. With the help of kindly Father Trevor, Desmond comes to understand his conflicted feelings and see that all people deserve compassion, whether or not they say they are sorry. Brought to vivid life in A. G. Ford's energetic illustrations, this heartfelt, relatable story conveys timeless wisdom about how to handle bullying and angry feelings, while seeing the good in everyone.

## Desmond and the Very Mean Word Details

Date : Published December 3rd 2012 by Candlewick Press

ISBN : 9780763652296

Author : Desmond Tutu , A.G. Ford (Illustrator)

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# From Reader Review *Desmond and the Very Mean Word* for online ebook

## Karin says

Plot summary and personal response:

This award-winning book is a biography, written with a young audience in mind. It introduces the reader to some of the real-life childhood experiences of Archbishop Desmond Tutu in segregated and racist South Africa.

Young "Desmond was very proud of his new bicycle" and was looking forward to showing it to his friend and mentor, Father Trevor, a white priest. When he is confronted by a group of white boys who taunt him with "a very mean word", Desmond is hurt and angry. He confides in Father Trevor about his feelings but is unable to let the matter drop. When young Desmond retaliates with a "very bad word" of his own he does not feel better, as he expected. Over time, and through council, Father Trevor tries to help Desmond to understand about forgiveness and ending "the cycle of violence" in his world. Father Trevor tells Desmond, "When you forgive someone, you free yourself from what they have said and done. It's like magic."

Desmond's life was changed by a single word. The question: Will it be changed for the better or the worse? This story takes the reader on an emotional journey with Desmond, helping to convey the complexities involved in racism, bullying, hatred, and forgiveness to the young reader.

Literary Merit and Genre Considerations:

The complex issues have been paired down into an easy to understand format, appropriate for audiences aged seven and up. The "mean word" is never spoken in the text or explained; it simply is not necessary because what matters is not the word itself but the effect that it had. The author's sensitive treatment of this issue is truly remarkable. This book confronts social issues such as racism, forgiveness and overcoming adversity and subtly addresses African segregation and civil rights struggles. It is also strongly centered around issues of bullying. Not only examining a bullied child and his emotions, but taking a look at the bully and making some inferences as to the source of his behavior.

The pages of the book are filled with beautiful and emotionally-charged oil illustrations. The illustrator makes use of extreme close-ups and interesting angles to convey emotion through the pages. The book ends with a brief, one paragraph note from the author about his own experience with the real Father Trevor Huddleston and includes a photograph of the man with Louis Armstrong.

Reader Response and Classroom Connections:

This story could be used in many ways in an elementary classroom. It would serve as a tremendous tool to use when teaching the class social issues such as: history of the segregation in South Africa, bullying, controlling one's emotions, and overcoming adversity. I think that this could be a great piece of introductory literature for social studies units focusing on civil rights and racial issues around the world, discussing issues in America and South Africa in the mid-twentieth century. It could be paired with a Venn Diagram activity comparing segregation issues in both countries. The significant issues of bullying, hatred, and forgiveness would be a wonderful topic for discussion in a class team-building discussion or certainly, following a bullying incident. The class could engage in discussions about bullying, right and wrong, and write class rules about the proper way to treat each other in the classroom. They could continue this exercise by exploring bullying issues school-wide, creating action plans about what to do when encountering bullying

behaviors, and even doing a school-wide read-aloud of the book and discussing bullying issues with others in the school during an assembly.

#### Text Set

The book could be paired, as a text set, with other multicultural books about overcoming disadvantages. Great partner books would be: 'My Name is Blessing' (by Eric Walters) and 'Rosa' (by Nikki Giovanni).

#### Awards:

Children's Africana Book Award, Winner, U.S. (2014)

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### **Clara Jeong says**

This book won the 2014 Children's Africana Book award and is written by an author of color. Desmond uses the help from his surroundings, including Father Trevor, to overcome the hardships he faced as the children in his neighborhood said a mean word to him.

I highly recommend this book to young readers, who are mostly at a stage where friendships and fellow classmates, friends, etc. significantly make a difference in their lives. Through reading this book, I can see students learning the best way to handle difficult situations with an unfriendly friend. The teacher could use this book to elaborate on what the students could do positively or how the student could wisely act upon the situation. Because the story of this book is based on friendships and how not everyone shows their "good" at first, I realized that it will help students learn how to act and what they could do instead in their own experiences.

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### **Alyson Long says**

Tutu, Desmond. Desmond and the Very Mean Word. Candlewick Press. 2013. 32 p. Gr. 1-4.

Desmond is a young African American boy who finds himself in need of some guidance after an unfortunate encounter he had with a group of Caucasian boys. He rides his new bicycle to the person whom he feels he can confide in, Father Trevor. Father tells Desmond that in order to free yourself, you have to forgive others for their wrong doings. At first this is difficult for Desmond to come to terms with, but his decision in the end may have been the best one he could have made.

Classroom Response: Teacher will discuss with students what it means to forgive someone for something wrong that they have done. Students will brainstorm ideas of instances throughout their lives where they were not treated as well as they should have been by someone else, possibly a friend or classmate. In their writing journals, the students will write about how that made them feel. Older students will create a personalized quote that shows their understanding of what it means to forgive someone and share it with the class. The teacher can turn all of the class quotes into a quote flipbook to keep in the classroom.

Another idea would be for the students to pretend they are in Desmond's shoes. Have them write a letter to the red-haired boy describing how they would have felt if they were Desmond and were called a mean word.

Have them explain their feelings and why they feel that way. Have them explain Father Trevor's concept of forgiveness to the red-haired boy, to get a sense of their understanding.

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### **Mary Kate says**

I love how the mean word is kept generic so that children can imagine their own experiences with being called names. It also offers ideas about how to work through problems while honoring a real compassionate adult advocating for forgiveness.

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### **Gwendolyn says**

In the book *Desmond and the Very Mean Word*, a young boy named Desmond gets a new bike. When he goes to show Father Trevor his new bike, a group of boys call him a bad name. Desmond feels hurt and isn't able to let go of what the boys said. Even after talking to Father Trevor, he still doesn't feel any better and isn't able to forgive them. He then decides to get even and call the red haired boy a bad name, but when he sees the boy getting picked on, he feels bad about it and apologizes.

This book can definitely be classified as controversial because it tackles the issue of racism. It centers around Desmond being picked on because of his race by boys who are of a different race. He isn't able to forgive them at first because of how hurt he is by that word. This book really shows how hurtful words can be, and shows how much people can be effected by them. It shows bullying and racism in a way that children can understand, and makes it so that they can really see themselves as Desmond. It also teaches children the power of forgiveness and how "getting even" doesn't make you feel any better. The illustrations are very realistic and very detailed, which allows the reader to become even more engaged in the story. The story being set in South Africa also puts an interesting twist on the issue because you wouldn't necessarily know that racism is a big problem in South Africa, but the story shows children that racism exists outside the U.S. Overall, I thought this was a good book to use to introduce children to the issue of racism and expose the hurtful reality of bullying.

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### **Jennifer says**

*Desmond and the Very Mean Word*, is a picture book, which would be appropriate for younger students, possibly in 1st-2nd grade. This book focuses on bullying and forgiveness. Desmond is a young African American boy, and while riding his brand new bike, he is called a mean name by kids who are playing in the street. The "mean word" is never stated in the text, so it is up to the reader to infer what the kids might have said. Desmond seeks advice from Father Trevor, who tells him, "That is the problem Desmond. You will get them back, and then they will get you back, and soon our whole world will be filled with nothing but 'getting back.'" The themes of accepting others, developing friendship, and the importance of forgiveness, are seen throughout the book. This 2014 award winning Children's Africana Book, is written by Archbishop Desmond Tutu and Douglas Carlton Abrams. The events in this story are based on Desmond Tutu's experiences, while growing up in South Africa. This book has colorful and realistic pictures, which children will find engaging. This text would be appropriate for using in the classroom, while teaching about differences and forgiving others. Read *Desmond and the Very Mean Word* to find out if Desmond makes the choice of forgiveness!

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## **Barbara says**

Using gentle language and avoiding the "mean word" that hurt him so deeply as a child in South Africa, Archbishop Desmond Tutu draws a lesson about forgiveness from his own experiences. While riding his new bike through a neighborhood, a group of boys heckles him and calls him a name, thus spoiling his pleasure in the ride. Even though his mentor, Father Trevor, advises him to forgive the bullies, Desmond cannot, and he insults the boy who insulted him the next time he sees him. After seeing the same boy picked on by his brothers and having his own conscience pricked, Desmond eventually does the right wrong. The story makes clear the ripple effect of our actions and the joy of choosing to forgive others. It might be interesting to pair this title with *Each Kindness* by Jacqueline Woodson. Certainly, young readers would find much to discuss in the story itself and its possible impact on the adult Desmond. I particularly enjoyed the facial expressions of the characters in the oil illustrations as well as the author's note providing information about the real Father Trevor. What a lovely reminder of the impact of our actions, large or small, on those around us!

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## **Gabriela Alvarez says**

Gr. 2-5

... "When you forgive someone, you free yourself from what they have said or done. It's like magic." In this story, Desmond learns the truth of these words. Desmond, a young boy learns that mean words can be very hurtful, but that saying something mean back or holding a grudge, only causes more pain. Listening to the wise words of a dear friend, Desmond learns that forgiving not only makes you feel better, but really sets you free from holding on to something that only causes resentment and pain.

The author doesn't mention the mean word that was said, yet you can understand what grief this caused Desmond. As you read the story, the words his friend uses to comfort him, is also comforting for the reader, and is good advice. I think we have all been in situations where we've been told something mean, or maybe have held a grudge, but what this story teaches, is that it is much better to forgive so that we can be free. I think this is a good book that can be used in school, especially because now a days, kids can sometimes say really mean things to each other without thinking, and this could be used to think about how they would feel in someone else's shoes, and think about the words that they used.

I though the story's illustrations were very good too. I thought the way the characters felt were clearly depicted through the illustrations and words.

- I found this book from the Children's Africana Award

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## **Kaitlyn says**

This book is a fantastic resource to use in the classroom when talking about forgiveness and the power of our words. Desmond receives a brand new bike. While he is out riding, a red haired boy yells a really mean word at Desmond. I love how the author does not say what the word is. It is left up to the imagination and adds to the point that it could really be anything hurtful not just one specific word. In the midst of all of Desmond's

anger he is haunted by this very mean word. It is all he thinks about. He sees the boys another day and decides to shout the meanest thing he can think of at them. Desmond does not feel any better. Father Trevor talks to Desmond about the power of forgiveness. At first he is not ready to forgive the boy, but then he sees the boy being picked on. He realizes that he feels sorry for the boy. He ends up apologizing to the red haired boy. He does not need the boy to apologize back because he has already forgiven him in his heart. I had my fourth graders write a personal narrative about a time when someone said or did something hurtful to them. They had to describe how they responded and what they would do differently if the problem ever occurred again in the future. I might have them dig further and find other books in the classroom, online, or in the library with the theme of forgiveness. They could analyze multiple forgiveness plots and look for commonalities. They could then compare and contrast Desmond and the characters from other books with the same theme.

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### **Jill says**

This is a wonderful book! I cried at the end of course. I found it absorbing and definitely don't think it's just for kids!

Archbishop Desmond Tutu, the famed South African social rights activist and retired Anglican bishop, tells the true story of an experience he had when he was a young boy, when he got called a very mean word by another child. He was so hurt, and wanted to get even.

Father Trevor, his childhood hero and mentor, helped him through that rough patch, by talking to him about how he could feel better about himself and about others.

Father Trevor went on to become Archbishop Huddleston, one of the most important members of the South African anti-apartheid movement, and Desmond Tutu not only became an Anglican archbishop, but was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1984. He named his first son Trevor.

**Evaluation:** This book not only suggests how to deal with cruelty from others, but shows that even great men, even future Nobel Laureates, at one time struggled with being hurt by other kids, and with learning the best way to deal with it. Young Desmond had a strong desire to get revenge, but Father Trevor showed him there was actually a better way to get free of the hurt he felt.

A. G. Ford adds to the impact of the story with his vivid and realistic oil paintings.

Highly recommended for all ages!

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### **Julia says**

Tutu's picture book recollection of an incident from his own child is engaging and meaningful from start to finish. In this story, a young Desmond interacts with some young boys who call him a mean name when he is riding his new bike through town. When Desmond discusses this situation with Father Trevor, his mentor, he is advised to forgive the boys. However, Desmond finds this to be easier said than done and makes the mistake of saying something unkind back to the boys. Ultimately, at the end of the book, Desmond does

make the decision to forgive the boys, and there are indications that Desmond and the leader of the other boys have come to a friendly understanding by the book's finish.

The theme of forgiveness in this story makes it an ideal choice to pair with other texts with similar themes. For example, I used this book with a group of students after we had read *Island of the Blue Dolphins* by Scott O'Dell. I found that sharing this text with the students helped them to make connections between the two stories and really hit home the importance of being forgiving of other people in our lives.

Additionally, I would be completely remiss if I failed to mention A.G. Ford's lovely illustrations. My students really responded to the pictures and felt that they perfectly accompanied the message and the text in this book.

Overall, I think this story would be an excellent choice for students in any of the elementary school grades, particularly for students in second through fourth grades. I greatly enjoyed this text and look forward to using it again in the future.

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### **Perry Staff Reads says**

This is a wonderful new picture book from Archbishop Desmond Tutu. It relates a story that happened to a young Desmond during his childhood. I like that he does not name "the very mean word", as that opens the story up to any child who has been called something hurtful.

Much like his mentor Father Trevor, Archbishop Tutu creates his story in a kind and gentle way, relating the idea that forgiveness needs to be genuine and come in its own time. I especially like the words of Father Trevor, as he tells Desmond, when he wants to "get them back" for calling him a name, that "You will get them back, and then they will get you back, and soon our whole world will be filled with nothing but 'getting back.'" Wise words for children and adults!

One aspect of this book that makes it stand out, I think, is that the idea is presented that you need to forgive your tormentors, even if they don't apologize or seem remorseful. "When you forgive someone, you free yourself from what they have said or done. It's like magic." We can't control others, we can only control ourselves.

Archbishop Tutu does a great job introducing the idea of rising above and letting go of anger. (E Tutu)

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### **Nadia Buffa says**

This story is based on real life events of Archbishop Desmond Tutu's personal experiences of his childhood in South Africa. The story is about young Desmond who is the only child who has a shiny new bike. As he is riding his bike towards Father Trevor's house, a gang of boys shout a very mean word to him. Upset and hurt, Desmond tells Father Trevor of the day's events. Father Trevor teaches Desmond that getting back to the bully is not a good way of coping with bullying. He tells Desmond it is important to forgive the bully because everyone deserves respect, even if they don't show respect towards you.

Father Trevor teaches Desmond to forgive his bullies. This confuses Desmond because his bullies have not



apologized for their actions. However, Father Trevor explains that someone does not have to apologize for you to forgive him or her. A few days later, Desmond runs into his bully at the local convenience store and says he forgives him for the mean word he said. When Desmond leaves the store, the boy waits for him outside and hands Desmond a piece of candy, symbolizing their forgiveness.

This book is a great book to incorporate into a text set about Bullying and Respect For Others because it teaches a child about forgiveness and how to cope with being bullied. It teaches the child that bullying does not make a person feel good about themselves. It also teaches the victim of the bullying to talk to an adult to help them figure out what to do. Desmond felt a lot happier when he talked to Father Trevor about his problem. Father Trevor helped Desmond realize that forgiveness is an important quality to have. It also teaches that even a bully deserves respect, sympathy, and compassion. It teaches a child to see the good within everyone.

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### **Brenda Kahn says**

Gr. 3- 5

A gentle work of fiction based on a childhood experience conveys the power of forgiveness and pays tribute the mentorship of a beloved parish priest who cared for everyone in his care. The history of racism in South Africa may be bewildering to younger readers. Middle grade readers may relate to the dilemma of standing up to white bullies or the close relationship with a mentor/ priest.

The oil paint illustrations feature a dusty palette and a full range of emotions in the characters.

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### **Slytano says**

A story of forgiveness. The only problem is it is wrapped up a little too neatly. It is based on a true story, so I can't really fault the author, but sometimes a person that wrongs us isn't always sorry for what they did.

Still, you have to love a story of forgiveness, and especially one that deals with the reality of racism.

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