

ENGLISH

A Dog Named Crab

A Story Writing Activity by Nicola Davies

William Shakespeare is famous for his writing genius and the fact that his words, characters and plots still speak to us today. But he's famous for something else too: that we know so little about him.

I think there are glimpses of him in his plays – the way he writes such strong female characters and such weak or troubled men, the way he talks about love or justice with such passion and the way he understands the wickedness of lords and kings.

But there is one little clue about him that I really love, and that is **Crab**.

Crab isn't a person or an actual crab – he's a dog (the only dog that appears in Shakespeare's plays). Crab belongs to the character Lance – a happy-go-lucky servant in one of Will's first plays, *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*. Like his master, Crab seems to like mischief: he steals a chicken leg and pees on a lady's skirt.

Will was young when he wrote *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, just 26 or 27 – a young man, just at the start of being successful. Life was a bit mad and a bit precarious!

This makes me think about Crab. Mainly because of his name – I love a good and humorous name for a dog and the name Crab is both of those. It also has the feel of a *real* name, with a history behind it. Certainly Crab would have been played by a real dog and has been in many, many performances since the play was first staged.

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So then I start to wonder ... to think of many things I'd love to know about Crab.

- Was Crab the *real* name of Shakespeare's *real* dog?
- How did he come to be written into a play?
- Did he follow Will around like a shadow?
- Did he steal a chicken from someone important at the theatre so that the only way Will had to protect his dog was to make him part of the theatre company?

Crab is described in the play as a big dog, "as big as ten" of the lapdog the lady lost and which Crab was sent to replace (that's how he came to steal someone's dinner and spoil the lady's frock). So...

- Where did Crab come from?
- Was he a hunting dog?
- Was he an old dog, part of Will's earlier life?
- Was he a fancy, aristocratic hound that ran away to the city?
- Was he a dog who once belonged to someone Will loved?

Whatever he was, and wherever he came from, Crab may have seen the real Shakespeare: the young man working by candlelight over a script, driven by the stories in his head and still not secure or confident, a free spirit trying to find a place in the world for his voice. Crab might have seen and heard things that no one else did. Perhaps, somehow, Crab saved Will from something...

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Story Writing Activity

I'd like to set you a challenge to try to write Crab's story...

Think about the point-of-view

You could pretend to be Will Shakespeare, telling us all about Crab. Or you could write it from the third-person, as an 'outsider'. Or you could even try to write from the dog's point of view, but remember he's a *dog*, not a human! He has a different understanding from that of a human ... his nose will tell him things about where Will has been, how he feels, what he's eaten and if he is sick or well. A dog won't understand what plays are, or what writing is, although he will know about emotion – love and loyalty, anger and fear.

Use your imagination and do some research

Of course there's no way to tell if Crab was real, so you can let your imagination do its thing. Just keep in mind that the world Will lived in was real – different from ours in some ways but similar in others. Research that world, wriggle yourself into it a bit and look around the London of 1591. Think about how different it would feel not to have electric light, for instance, or only one set of clothes. No cars but horses everywhere, and animals of all sorts in the city. Sheep grazing, goats and chickens in the back of pubs. Back then the countryside would have been very close by – check out a map of London and look at the names of different places: St Martins in the Fields was given that name because it was in the fields between London and Westminster. There are resources online that will help you to stroll around London the way it was back then.

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Ask lots of questions

A good way to start writing is just how I began thinking about Crab – asking questions.

- Where did he come from?
- Who did he belong to?
- Why did Will put him in the play?

If you've done your research and your imagining well enough your brain will start to come up with answers ... and those answers will start to generate more questions. Then you might need a bit more research about Will, about his plays, about what we DO know of him. Then back to your imagination to get you the next layers of your story. Don't force it – let it grow bit by bit, unplanned and higgledy-piggledy, the way London grew. You can shape your imaginings and answers into a proper story later.

Have fun. Explore. Play.

I think you'll have a really good time in Crab's company!

P.S. A good book written from a dog's point-of-view is: *Fire, Bed and Bone* by Henrietta Branford. You could even check out Laurie Anderson's film 'Heart of a Dog'.

Nicola Davies

Nicola Davies is an award-winning author, whose many books for children include *A First Book of Nature*, *A First Book of the Sea*, *Tiny*, *Lots*, *The Promise*, *King of the Sky*, *Ice Bear*, *Big Blue Whale* and the *Ariki* series. She graduated in zoology, studied whales and bats and then worked for the BBC Natural History Unit. In 2017, she became the first ever recipient of the SLA's Award for Outstanding Contribution to Information Books. She lives in Wales. www.nicola-davies.com.

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