BECAUSE OF WINN-DIXIE by Kate DiCamillo Copyright © 2000 Kate DiCamillo. Licensed by Candlewick Press, Somerville, MA. My name is India Opal Buloni, and last summer my daddy, the preacher, sent me to the store for a box of macaroni-and-cheese, some white rice, and two t omatoes and I came back with a dog. This is what happened: I walked into the produce section of the Winn-Dixie grocery store to pick out my two tomatoes and I almost bumped right into the store manager. He was standing there all red-faced, screaming and waving his arms aroun d. “Who let a dog in here?” he kept on shouting. “Who let a dirty dog in here?” At first, I didn’t see a dog. There were just a lot of vegetables rolling around on the floor, tomatoes and onions and green peppers. And there was what seemed like a whole army of Winn-Dixie employees running around waving their arms just the same way the store manager was waving his. And then the dog came running around the corner. He was a big dog. And ugly. And he looked like he was having a real good time. His tongue was hanging out and he was wagging his tail. He skidded to a stop and smiled right at me. I had never before in my life seen a dog smile, but that is what he did. He pulled back his lips and showed me all his teeth. Then he wagged his tail so hard that he knocked some oranges off a display, and they went rolling everywhere, mixin g in with the tomatoes and onions and green peppers. The manager screamed, “Somebody grab that dog!” The dog went running over to the manager, wagging his tail and smiling. He stood up on his hind legs. You could tell that all he wanted to do was get face to face with the ma nager and thank him for the good time he was having in the produce department, but somehow he ended up knocking the manager over. And the manager must have been having a bad day, because lying there on the floor, right in front of everybody, he started to cry. The dog leane d over him, real concerned, and licked his face. “Please,” said the manager. “Somebody call the pound.” “Wait a minute!” I hollered. “That’s my dog. Don’t call the pound.” All the Winn-Dixie employees turned around and looked at me, and I knew I had done something big. And may be stupid, too. But I couldn’t help it. I couldn’t let that dog go to the pound. “Here, boy,” I said. The dog stopped licking the manager’s face and put his ears up in the air and looked at me, like he was trying to remember where he knew me from. “Here, boy,” I said again. And then I fi gured that the dog was probably just like everybody else in the world, that he would want to get called by a name, only I didn’t know what his name was, so I just said the firs t thing that came into my head. I said, “Here, Winn-Dixie.” And that dog came trotting over to me just like h e had been doing it his whole life. The manager sat up and gave me a hard stare, like maybe I was making fun of him. “It’s his name,” I said. “Honest.” The manager said, “ Don’t you know not to bring a dog into a grocery store?” “Yes sir,” I told him. “He got in by mistake. I’m so rry. It won’t happen again. “Come on, Winn-Dixie,” I said to the dog. I started walking and he follo wed along behind me as I went out of the produce department and down the cereal aisle and past all the cashiers and out the door. Once we were safe outside, I checked him over real careful and he didn’t look that good. He was big, but skinny; you could see his ribs. A nd there were bald patches all over him, places where he didn’t have any fur at all. Mostly, he looked like a big piece of old brown carpet that had been left out in the rain. “ You’re a mess,” I told him. “I bet you don’t belong to anybody.” He smiled at me. He did that thin g again, where he pulled back his lips and showed me his teeth. He smiled so big that it made him sneeze. It was like he was saying, “I know I’m a mess. Isn’t it funny? ” It’s hard not to immediately fall in love with a dog who has a good sense of humor. “Come o n,” I told him. “Let’s see what the preacher has to say about you .” And the two of us, me and Winn-Dixie, started walking home. That summer I found Winn-Dixie wa s also the summer me and the preacher moved to Naomi, Florida, so he could be the new pre acher at the Open Arms Baptist Church of Naomi. My dadd y is a good preacher and a nice man, but sometimes it’s hard for me to think about him as my dad dy, because he spends so much time preaching or thinking about preaching or getting ready to preach. And so, in my mind, I think of him as “the prea cher.” Before I was born, he was a missionary in India and that is how I got my first name. But he calls me by my second name, Opal, because that was his mother’s name. And he loved her a lot. Anyway, while me and Winn-Dixie walked home, I t old him how I got my name and I told him how I had just moved to Naomi. I also told him about the preacher and how he was a good man, even if he was too distracted with sermons and pray ers and suffering people to go grocery shopping. “B ut you know what?” I told Winn-Dixie. “You are a suffering dog, so maybe he will take to you rig ht away. Maybe he’ll let me keep you.” Winn-Dixie looked up at me and wagged his tail. He w as kind of limping like something was wrong with one of his legs. And I have to admit, he stunk. Bad. He was an ugly dog, but already, I loved him with all my heart. When we got to the Friendly Corners Trailer Park, I told Winn-Dixie that he had to behave right and be quiet, because this was an all adult trailer park and the only reason I got to live in it was because the preacher was a preacher and I was a good, quiet kid. I was what the Friendly Corners Trailer Park manager, Mr. Alfred, called “an exception.” And I told Winn-Dixie he had to act like an exception, too; specifically, I told him not to pick any fights w ith Mr. Alfred’s cats or Mrs. Detweller’s little yappie Yorkie dog, Samuel. Winn-Dixie looked up at me while I was telling him everything, and I swear he understood. “Sit,” I told him when we got to my trailer. He sat right down. He h ad good manners. “Stay here,” I told him. “I’ll be right back.” The preacher was sitting in the living room, working at the little folding table. He had papers spread all around him and he was rubbing his nose, which always means h e is thinking. Hard. “Daddy?” I said. “Hmmm,” he said back. “Daddy, do you know how you always telling me that we should help those less fortunate than ourselves?” “Mmmmmm-hmmm,” he said. He rubbed his nose and looked ar ound at his papers. “Well,” I said, “I found a Less Fortunate at the grocery store.” “Is that rig ht?” he said. “Yes sir,” I told him. “He’s a stray if I’ve ever seen on this Less Fortun here thinking about things and not ever sticking his head out into the world. “Daddy, I was w ondering. Could I stay with us for a while?” Finally the preacher looked up at me. “Opal,” he said, “wh at are you talking about?” “I found a dog,” I told him. “And I want to keep him.” “No dogs,” t he preacher said. “We’ve talked about this before. You don’t need a dog.” “I know it,” I said. “I know I don’t need a dog. But thi s dog needs me. Look,” I said. I went to the trailer door and I hollered, “Winn-Dixie!” Winn-Dix ie’s ears shot up in the air and he grinned and sneezed, and then he came limping up the steps and into the trailer an d put his head right in the preacher’s lap, right on top of a pile of papers. The preacher looked at Winn-Dixie. He looked at his ribs and his matted-up fur and the places where he was bald. The preacher’s nose wrinkled up. Like I said, the dog smelled pretty bad. Winn-Dixie looked up at the preacher. He pulled back his lips and showed the preacher all of his crooked yellow teeth and wagged his tail and knocked some of the preacher’s papers off the table. Then he sneezed and some more papers fluttered to the floor. “What did you call this dog?” the preacher asked. “Winn-Dixie,” I whispered. I was afraid to say anything too loud. I could see that Winn-Dixie was having a good effect on the preacher. He making him poke his head out of his shell. “Well,” said the preacher. “He’s a stray if I’ve ever seen on e.” He put down his pencil and scratched Winn-Dixie behind the ears. “And a Less Fortunate, that’s for sure. Are you looking for a home?” the preacher asked, real soft, to Winn-Dixie. Winn-Dixie wagged his tail. “Well,” the preacher said. “I guess you’ve found one.” I started in on Winn-Dixie right away, trying to clean him up. First, I gave him a bath. I used the garden hose and some baby sh ampoo. He stood still for it, but I could tell he didn’t like it. He looked insulted, and the whole time I was working on him, he didn’t show me his teeth or wag his tail once. After he was all washed and dried, I brushed him good. I used my own hairbrush and worked real hard at all the knots and patches of fur stuck to him. He didn’t mind being brushed. He wiggled his back, like it felt pretty good. The whole time I was working on hi m, I was talking to him. And he listened. I told him how we were alike. “See,” I said, “you don’t have any family and neither do I. I’ve got the preacher, of course. But I don’t have a mama. I mean I have one, but I don’t k now where she is. She left when I was three years old. I can’t hardly remember her. And I bet you don’t remember your mama much either. So we’re almost like orphans.” Winn-Dixie looked straight at me when I said that to him, like he was feeling relieved to finally have somebody understand his situation. I nodded and went on talking. “I don’t even have any friends, because I had to leave them all behind when we moved here from Watley. Watley’s up in north Florida. Have you ever been to north Florida?” Winn-Dixie looked down at the ground, like he was trying to remember if he had. “You know what?” I said. “Ever since we moved here, I’ve been thinking about my mama extra-extra hard, more than I ever did when I was in Watley.” Winn-Dixie twitched his ears and raised his eyebrows. “I think the pr eacher thinks about my mama all the time, too. He’s still in love with her; I know that because ard the ladies at the church in Watley talking about him. They said he’s still hoping she’ll come ba ck. But he doesn’t tell me that. He won’t talk to me about her at all. I want to know more about her. But I’m afraid to ask the preacher; I’m afraid he’ll get mad at me.” Winn-Dixie looked at me hard, like he was trying to say something. “What?” I said. He stared at me. “You think I should make the preacher tell me about her?” Winn-Dixie looked at me so hard he sneezed. “I’ll think about it, ” I said. When I was done working on him, Winn-Dixie looked a whole lot better. He still had his bald spots, but the fur that he did have cleaned up nice. It was all shiny and soft. You could s till see his ribs, but I intended to feed him good and that would take care of that. I couldn’t do anything about his crooked yellow teeth because he got into a sneezing fit every time I started brushi ng them with my toothbrush, and I finally had to give up. But for the most part, he looked a well, and so I took him into the trailer and showed him to the preacher. “Daddy,” I said. “Hmmm, ” he said. He was working on a sermon and kind of muttering to himself. “Daddy, I wanted to say Winn-Dixie.” The preacher put down his pencil and rubbed his nose, and finally, he looked up. “Well,” he said, smiling real big at Winn-Dixie, “well, now. Don’t you look handsome.” Winn-Dixie looked back at the preacher. He went over and put his head in the preacher’s lap. “He smells nice, to o,” said the preacher. He rubbed Winn-Dixie’s head and looked into his eyes. “Daddy,” I said, “I before I lost all my nerve, “I’ve been talking to Winn-Dixie.” “Is that right?” the preacher said; he s cratched Winn-Dixie’s head. “I’ve been talking to him and he agreed with me that, since I’m you should tell me ten things about my mama. Just ten things, that’s all.” The preacher stopped r ubbing Winn-Dixie’s head and held real still. I could see him thinking about pulling his head off his shoulders. “One thing for each year I’ve been alive,” I told him. “Please.” Winn-Dixie looked up at th e preacher and kind of gave him a nudge with his nose. The preacher sighed. He said to Winn-Dixie, “I should have guessed you were going to be trouble.” Then he looked at me. “Come on, Opal, ” he said. “Sit down. And I will tell you ten things about your mama.” “One,” said the preacher, “sitting on the couch and Winn-Dixie was sitting between us. Winn-Dixie had already decided that he liked the couch a lot. “One,” said the preacher again. Winn-Dixie looked at him kind of has fun. “Just like me,” I said. “Just like you,” the preacher nodded. “Three. She liked to plant things. She had a talent for it. S s.” “Just like me,” I said. “Just like you,” the preacher nodded. “Three. She could run fast, but she could stick a tire in the ground and grow a car.” Winn-Dixie started chewing on his paw, a nd I tapped him on the head to make him stop. “Four,” said the preacher. “She could run faster, you could ever let her get a head start, because she would beat you for sure.” “I’m that way, too,” I said. “Back home, in Watley, I raced Liam Fullerton, and beat him, and he said it was fair, but girls shouldn’t race each other to begin with. I told him he was just a sore loser.” The preacher nodded. He was quiet for a minute. “I’m ready for number five,” I told him. “Five,” he said. “She could count to ten.” right © 2000 Kate DiCamillo. Licensed by Candlewick Press, Somerville, MA. She burned everything, including water. She had a hard time opening a can of beans. She couldn’t make head nor tail of a piece of meat. Six.” The preacher rubbed his nose and looked up at the ceiling. Winn-Dixie looked up, too. “Number six is that your mama loved a story. She would sit and listen to stories and she would tell a story. She especially liked funny ones, stories that made her laugh.” The preacher nodded his head like he was agreeing with himself. “What’s number seven?” I asked. “Let’s see,” he said, “the constellations, every planet in the nighttime sky. Every last one of them. She could name them. And point them out. And she never got tired of looking up at them. “Number eight,” said the preacher, with his eyes closed, “was that she hated being a preacher’s wife. She said she just couldn’t stand having the ladies at church judge what she was wearing and what she was cooking and how she was singing. She said it made her feel like a bug under a microscope.” Winn-Dixie la y down on the couch. He put his nose in the preacher’s lap and his tail in mine. “Ten,” said the preacher. “Nine,” I told him. “Nine,” said the preacher. “She drank. She drank beer. And whiskey. And wine. Sometimes, she couldn’t stop drinking. And that made me and your mama fight quite a bit. Number ten,” he said with a long sigh, “number ten, is that your mama loved you. She loved you very much.” “But she left me,” I told him. “She left us,” said the preacher softly, could see him pulling his old turtle head back into his stupid turtle shell. “She packed her bags and left us, and she didn’t leave one thing behind.” “Okay,” I said. I got up off the couch. Winn-Dixie opped off, too. “Thank you for telling me,” I said. I went right back to my room and wrote down all ten things that the preacher had told me. I wrote them down just the way he said them, and then I read them out loud to Winn-Dixie until I had them memorized. I wanted to know those ten things inside and out. That way, if my mama ever came back, I could recognize her and hold on to her tight and not let her get away from me again. Winn-Dixie couldn’t stand to be left alone; we found that out real quick. If me and the preacher went off and left him by himself, he would pull all the cushions off the couch and all the toilet paper off the roll. So we started tying him up outside with a rope when we left. That didn’t work either. Winn-Dixie howled until Samuel, Mrs. Detweller’s dog, started howling, too. It was exactly the kind of noise that people in an all adult trailer park do not like to hear. “He just doesn’t want to be left alone,” I told the preacher. “That’s all. Let’s take him with us.” I could understand the way Winn-Dixie felt. Getting left behind probably made his heart feel empty. After a while, the preacher gave in. And everywhere we went, we took Winn-Dixie. Even to church. The Open Arms Baptist Church of Naomi isn’t a regular-looking church. The building used to be a Pick-It-Quick store, and when you walk in the front door, the first thing you see is the Pick-It-Quick motto. It’s written on the floor in little tiny red tiles that make great big letters that say “PICK PICK PICK QUICK QUICK QUICK.” The preacher tried painting over those tiles, but the letters won’t stay covered up, and so the preacher has just given up and let the m be. The other thing about the Open Arms that is different from other churches is there aren’t any pews. People bring in their own foldup chairs and lawn chairs, and so sometimes it looks more like the congregation is watching a parade or sitting at a barbecue instead of being at church. It’s kind of a strange church and I thought Winn-Dixie would fit right in. But the first time we brought Winn-Dixie to the Open Arms, the preacher tied him outside the front door. “Why did we bring him all the way here just to tie him up?” I asked the preacher. “Because dogs don’t belong in church, Opal,” the preacher said. “That’s why.” He tied Winn-Dixie up to a tree and said how there was lots of shade for him and that it ought to work out real good. Well, it didn’t. The service started and there was some singing and some sharing and some praying, and then the preacher started preaching. And he wasn’t but two or three words into his sermon when there was a terrible howl coming from outside. The preacher tried to ignore it. “Today,” he said. “Aaaaaarrooo,” said Winn-Dixie. “Please,” said the preacher. “Arrrrooooowwww,” said Winn-Dixie back. “Friends,” said the preacher. “Arrruiiiiipppp,” wailed Winn-Dixie. Everyone turned in their lawn chairs and foldup chairs and looked at one another. “Opal,” said the preacher. “Owwww,” said Winn-Dixie. “Yes sir?” I said. “Go get that dog!” he yelled. “Yes sir!” I yelled back. I went outside and untied Winn-Dixie and brought him inside, and he sat down beside me and smiled up at the preacher, and the preacher couldn’t help it; he smiled back. Winn-Dixie had that effect on him. And so the preacher started in preaching again. Winn-Dixie sat there listening to it, wiggling his ears this way and that, trying to catch all the words. And everything would have been all right, except that a mouse ran across the floor. The Open Arms had mice. They were there from when it was a Pick-It-Quick and there were lots of good things to eat in the building, and when the Pick-It-Quick became the Open Arms Baptist Church of Naomi, the mice stayed around to eat all the leftover crumbs from the potluck suppers. The preacher kept on saying he was going to have to do something about them, but he never did. Because the truth is, he couldn’t stand the thought of hurting anything, even a mouse. Well, Winn-Dixie saw that mouse, and he was up and after him. One minute, everything was quiet and serious and the preacher was going on and on and on; and the next minute, Winn-Dixie looked like a furry bullet, shooting across the building, chasing that mouse. He was barking and his feet were skidding all over the polished Pick-It-Quick floor, and people were clapping and hollering and pointing. They really went wild when Winn-Dixie actually caught the mouse. “I have never in my life seen a dog catch a mouse,” said Mrs. Nordley. She was sitting next to me. “He’s a special dog,” I told her. “I imagine so,” she said back. Winn-Dixie stood up there in front of the whole church, wagging his tail and holding the mouse real careful in his mouth, holding onto him tight but not squishing him. “I believe that mutt has got some retriever in him,” said somebody behind me. “That’s a hunting dog.” Winn-Dixie took the mouse over to the preacher and dropped it at his feet. And when the mouse tried to get away, Winn-Dixie put his paw right on the mouse’s tail. Then he smiled up at the preacher. He showed him all his teeth. The preacher looked down at the mouse. He looked at Winn-Dixie. He looked at me. He rubbed his nose. It got real quiet in the Pick-It-Quick. “Let us pray,” the preacher finally said, “for this mouse.” And everybody started laughing and clapping. The preacher picked up the mouse by the tail and walked and threw it out the front door of the Pick-It-Quick, and everybody applauded again. Then he came back and we all prayed together. I prayed for my mama. I told God how much she would have enjoyed hearing the story of Winn-Dixie catching that mouse. It would have made her laugh. I asked God if maybe I could be the one to tell her that story someday. And then I talked to God about how I was lonely in Naomi because I didn’t know that many kids, only the ones from church. And there weren’t that many kids at the Open Arms, just Dunlap and Stevie Dewberry, two brothers who weren’t twins but looked like they were. And Amanda Wilkinson, whose face was always pinched up like she was smelling something real bad; and Sweetie Pie Thomas, who was only five years old and still mostly a baby. And none of them wanted to be my friend anyway because they probably thought I’d tell on them to the preacher for every little thing they did wrong; and then they would get in trouble with God and their parents. So I told God that I was lonely, even having Winn-Dixie. And finally, I prayed for the mouse, like the preacher suggested. I prayed that he didn’t get hurt when he went flying out the door of the Open Arms Baptist Church of Naomi. I prayed that he landed on a nice soft patch of grass. I spent a lot of time that summer at the Herman W. Block Memorial Library. The Herman W. Block Memorial Library sounds like it would be a big fancy place, but it’s not. It’s just a little old house full of books, and Miss Franny Block is in charge of them all. She is a very small, very old woman with short gray hair, and she was the first friend I made in Naomi. It all started with Winn-Dixie not liking it when I went into the library, because I couldn’t go inside, too. But I showed him how he could stand up on his hind legs and look in the window and see me in there, selecting my books; and he was okay, as long as he could see me. But the thing was, the first time Miss Franny Block saw Winn-Dixie standing up on his hind legs like that, looking in the window, she didn’t think he was a dog. She thought he was a bear. This is what happened: I was picking out my books and kind of humming to myself, and all of a sudden, there was this loud and scary scream. I went running up to the front of the library, and there was Miss Franny Block, sitting on the floor behind her desk. “Miss Franny?” I said. “Are you all right?” “A bear,” she said. “A bear?” I asked. “ He has come back,” she said. “He has?” I asked. “Where is he?” “Out there,” she said and pointed at Winn-Dixie standing up on his hind legs, looking in the window for me. “Miss Franny Block,” I said, “that’s not a bear. That’s a dog. That’s my dog. Winn-Dixie. Are you positive?” she asked. “Yes ma’am,” I told her. “I’m positive. He’s my dog. I would know him anywhere.” Miss Franny sat there trembling and shaking. “Come on,” I said. “Let may.” I stuck out my hand and Miss Franny took hold of it, and I pulled her up off the floor. She didn’t weigh hardly anything at all. Once she was standing on her feet, she started saying how I must think she was a silly old lady, mistaking a dog for a bear, but that she had a bad experience with a bear coming into the Herman W. Block Memorial Library a long time ago and she had quite gotten over it. “When did that happen?” I asked her. “Well,” said Miss Franny, “it is a very long story.” “That’s okay,” I told her. “I am like my mama in that I like to be told stories. But you start telling it, can Winn-Dixie come in and listen, too? He gets lonely without me. ” “Well, I don’t know,” said Miss Franny. “Dogs are not allowed in the Herman W. Block Memorial Library.” “He’ll be good,” I told her. “He’s a dog who goes to church.” And before she could say yes or no, I went outside and got Winn-Dixie, and he came in and lay down with a “huumm,” a sigh, right at Miss Franny’s feet. She looked down at him and said, “He most certainly is a large dog.” “Yes ma’am,” I told her. “He has a large heart, too.” “Well,” Miss Franny said, bent over and gave Winn-Dixie a pat on the head, and Winn-Dixie wagged his tail back and forth and snuffled his nose on her little old-lady feet. “Let me get a chair and sit down so I can tell this story properly.” Back when Florida was wild, when it consisted of nothing but palmetto trees and mosquitoes so big they could fly away with you,” Miss Franny Block started in, “and I was just a little girl no bigger than you, my father, Herman W. Block, told me that I could have anything I wanted for my birthday. Anything at all.” Miss Franny looked around. She leaned in close to me. “I don’t want to appear prideful,” she said, “but my daddy was a very rich man. A very rich man.” She nodded and then leaned back and said, “And I was just as a little girl who loved to read. So I told him, I said, ‘Daddy, I would most certainly love to have a library for my birthday, a small little library would be wonderful.’” “You asked for a whole library?” “A small one,” Miss Franny nodded. “I wanted a little house full of nothing but books and I wanted to share them, too. And I got my wish. My father built me this house, the very one we are sitting in now. And at a very young age, I became a librarian. Yes ma’am.” “What about the bear?” I said. “Did I mention that Florida was wild in those days?” Miss Franny Block said. “Uh-huh, you did.” “It was wild. There were wild men and wild women and wild animals.” “Like bears!” “Yes ma’am. That’s right. I have to tell you, I was a little-miss-know-it-all. I was a miss-smarty-pants with my library full of books. Oh, yes ma’am, I thought I knew the answers to everything. When I went Thursday, I was sitting in my library with all the doors and windows open and my nose stuck in a book, when a shadow crossed the desk. And without looking up, I said, ‘Is there a book I can help you find?’ “Well, there was no answer. And I thought it might have been a wild man or a wild woman, without even looking up, I said, ‘Is there a book I can help you find?’ “Well, there was no answer. And I thought it might have been a wild man or a wild woman, these books and afraid to speak up. But then I became aware of a very peculiar smell, a very strong smell. I raised my eyes slowly. And standing right in front of me Yes ma’am. A very large bear.” “How big?” I asked. “Oh, well,” said Miss Franny, “perhaps three times the size of your dog.” “Then what happened?” I asked her. “ I looked at him and he looked at me. He put his big nose up in the air and sniffed and sniffed as if he was trying to decide if a little-miss-know-it-all librarian the mood to eat. And I sat there. And then I thought, ‘Well, if this bear intends to eat me, I am not going to let it happen without a fight. No ma’am.’ So very slowly and very sed up the book I was reading.” “What book was that?” I asked. “Why, i t was War and Peace, a very large book. I raised it up slowly and then I aimed it carefully at that bear and screamed, ‘Be gone!’ And do you know what?” “No ma’am,” I said. “He went. But this is what I will never forget. He took the book with him.” “Nuh-uh.” I said. Yes ma’am,” said Miss Franny. “He snatched it up and ran.” “Did he come back?” I asked. “No, I never saw him again. Well, the men in town used to tease me about it. They would say, ‘Miss Franny, we saw that bear of yours out in the woods today. He was reading that book and he said it sure was good and would it be all right if he keep it for just a day?’ Yes ma’am. They did tease me about it.” She sighed. “I imagine I’m the only one left from those days. I imagine I’m the only one that even recalls that bear. All my friends are gone.” She sighed again. She looked sad and old and wrinkled. It was the same way I felt sometimes, being friendless in a new town. I wished that my mama was alive, but I knew when I was young, they are all dead and gone.” She sighed a head off his paws and looked back and forth between me and Miss Franny. He sat up and then and shook his head. Miss Franny said, “Not having a mama to comfort me. I sighed, too. Winn-Dixie raised his It’s a talent of his,” I told her. “It is a fine talent,” Miss Franny said. “A very fine talent.” And she smiled back at Winn-Dixie’s teeth. “Well now, look at that,” she said. “That dog is smiling at me.” “ Winn-Dixie, we could all be friends.” Miss Franny smiled even bigger. “Why, that would be grand,” she said, “We could be friends,” I said to Miss Franny. “I mean you and me and Winn-Dixie.” Miss Franny smiled even bigger. “Why, that would be grand,” she said, “just great.” And right at that minute, right when the three of us had decided to be friends, who should come marching into the Herman W. Block Memorial Library but a Wilkinson. She walked right up to Miss Franny’s desk and said, “I finished John ny Tremain and I enjoyed it very much. I would like something even more difficult to read advance reader.” “Yes dear, I know,” said Miss Franny. She got up out of her chair. Amanda pretended like I wasn’t there. She stared right past me. “Are dogs allowed in the library?” Miss Franny. “Certain ones,” said Miss Franny, “a select few.” “ And then she turned around and winked at me. I smiled back. I had just made my first friend in Naomi, nobody was going to mess that up for me, not even old pinch-faced Amanda Wilkinson. Winn-Dixie’s bald spots started growing fur, and the fur that he had to begin with healthy; and he didn’t limp anymore. And you could tell that he was proud of looking so good, proud of not looking like a stray. I thought what he needed most was a collar Gertrude’s Pets, where there were fish and snakes and mice and lizards and gerbils and pet supplies, and I found a real handsome red leather collar with a matching leash. to come inside the store (there was a big sign on the door that said NO DOGS ALLOWED), so I held the collar and the leash up to the window. And Winn-Dixie, who was the window, pulled up his lip and showed me his teeth and sneezed and wagged his tail something furious; so I knew he absolutely loved that leash and collar comb sive. I decided to explain my situation to the man behind the counter. I said, “I don’t get a big enough allowance to afford something this fancy. But I love this collar g, and I was thinking that maybe you could set me up on an installment plan.” “Installment plan?” said the man. “Gertrude!” somebody screamed in a real irritating as sit ting on top of one of the fish tanks, looking right at me. “An installment plan,” I said, ignoring the parrot, “you know, where I promise to give you my allowance now.” “I don’t think I can do that,” said the man. He shook his head. “No, the owner, she wouldn’t like that.” He looked down at the counter. He wouldn’t ed back like Elvis Presley’s. He had on a name tag that said OTIS. “Or I could work for you,” I said. “I could come in and sweep the floors and dust the shelves and Gertrude’s Pets. There was sand and sunflower-seed shells and big dust bunnies all over the floor. I could tell that it needed to be swept. “Uh,” said Otis. He looked screamed again. “I’m real trustworthy,” I said. “I’m new in town, but my daddy is a preacher. He’s the preacher at the Open Arms Baptist Church of Naomi, so I’m really hoping have to come inside with me; because if we get separated for too long, he starts to howl something terrible.” “Gertrude doesn’t like dogs,” said Otis. “Is she the owner?” I asked. “ nted at the fish tank. “That Gertrude. The parrot. I named her after the owner.” “Gertrude’s a pretty bird!” screamed Gertrude. “She might like Winn-Dixie,” I told Otis. “Almost every r, and if the two of them get along, then could I have the job?” “Maybe,” Otis mumbled. He looked down at the counter again. So I went and opened the door, and Winn-Dixie came out. “Gertrude. “I know it,” Otis told her. And then Gertrude got real quiet. She sat on the top of the fish tank and cocked her head from one side to the other, looking at Winn-Dixie. And Winn-Dixie. He didn’t wag his tail. He didn’t smile. He didn’t sneeze. Copyright © 2000 Kate DiCamillo. Licensed by Candlewick Press, Somerville, MA. He just stared at Gertrude and Winn-Dixie’s head. “Dog,” she croaked. Winn-Dixie wagged his tail just a little tiny bit. And Otis said, “You can start on Monday.” “Thank you,” Pets, I said to Winn-Dixie, “You are better at making friends than anybody I have ever known. I bet if my mama knew you, she would think you were the best dog ever.” Winn-Dixie was smiling up at me and I was smiling down at him, and so neither one of us was looking where we were going and we almost bumped right into Sweetie Pie Thomas. She was standing there, sucking on the knuckle of her third finger, staring in the window of Gertrude’s Pets. She took her finger out of her mouth and looked at me. Her eyes were all big and round. “Was that bird sitting on that dog’s head?” she asked. She had her hair tied up in a ponytail with a pink ribbon. But it wasn’t much of a ponytail, it was mostly ribbon and a few strands of hair. “Yes,” I told her. “I seen it,” she said. She nodded her head and put her knuckle back in her mouth. Then she took it out again real quick. “I seen that dog in church, too. He was catching a mouse. I want a dog just like it, but my mama won’t let me get no dog. She says if I’m real good, I might get to buy me a goldfish or one of them gerbils. That’s what she says. Can I pet your dog?” “Sure,” I told her. Sweetie Pie stroked Winn-Dixie’s head so long and serious that his eyes drooped half closed and the cool came out of the side of his mouth. “I’m going to be six years old in September. I got to stop sucking on my knuckle once I’m six,” said Sweetie Pie. “I’m having a party. Do you want to come to my party? The theme is pink.” “Sure,” I told her. “Can this dog come?” she asked. “You bet,” I told her. And all of a sudden, I felt happy. I had a dog. I had a job. I had Miss Franny Block for a friend. And I had my first invitation to a party in Naomi. It didn’t matter that it came from a five-year-old and the party wasn’t until September. I didn’t feel so lonely anymore. Just about everything that happened to me that summer happened because of Winn-Dixie. For instance, without him, I would never have met Gloria Dump. He was the one who introduced us. What happened was this: I was riding my bike home from Gertrude’s Pets and Winn-Dixie was running along beside me. We went past Dunlap and Stevie Dewberry’s house, and when Dunlap and Stevie saw me, they got on their bikes and started following me. They wouldn’t ride with me; they just rode behind me and whispered things that I couldn’t hear. Neither one of them had any hair on his head, because their mama shaved their heads every week during the summer because of the one time Dunlap got fleas in his hair from their cat, Sadie. And now they looked like two identical bald-headed babies, even though they weren’t twins. Dunlap was ten years old, like me, and Stevie was nine and tall for his age. “I can hear you,” I hollered back at them. “I can hear what you’re saying.” But I couldn’t. Winn-Dixie started to race way ahead of me. “You better watch out,” Dunlap hollered. “That dog is headed right for the witch’s house.” “Winn-Dixie,” I called. But he kept on going faster and hopped a gate and went into the most overgrown jungle of a yard that I had ever seen. “You better go get your dog out of there,” Dunlap said. “The witch will eat that dog,” Stevie said. “Shut up,” I told them. I got off my bike and went up to the gate and hollered, “Winn-Dixie, you better come on out of there.” But he didn’t. “She’s probably eating him right now,” Stevie said. He and Dunlap were standing behind me. “She eats dogs all the time.” “Get lost, you bald-headed babies,” I said. “Hey,” said Dunlap, “that ain’t a very nice way for a preacher’s daughter to talk.” He and Stevie backed up a little. I stood there and