


A boy and his dog learn that they are better together.

# Just Gus



BEST-SELLING AUTHOR OF *STELLA*

McCall Hoyle



**G**us is a livestock guardian dog with one job—protecting his farm from coyotes and foxes. He likes keeping the sheep, the chickens, and his humans safe, and he's very good at it.

One day, Diego and his dad come to visit the farm, and Gus immediately connects to the small boy. They both like to sit still and enjoy the quiet, and Gus can tell that Diego likes being around a gentle giant of a dog, that it helps relieve the boy's constant worry.

When Gus detects the scent of a bear in the woods, he rushes to protect his flock, injuring his leg in a fight with the dangerous beast. Wounded, Gus needs to rest and heal away from his sheep, so he doesn't risk reinjuring his leg. Diego suggests Gus come home with them to the North Carolina coast.

Suddenly, Gus is thrust into a new world of saltwater and sand and neighbors who don't appreciate the presence of a large guard dog, like the neighbor who reminds Gus of his first owner—the junkyard man with the heavy boots.

Gus realizes Diego might need a friend as much as his sheep need a protector, but if he can't learn to control his instincts, like barking and patrolling the neighborhood, Gus might lose his chance to stay in his new home. If he can't protect the farm or his boy, Gus worries he might never find his place in the world.

*Just Gus* is a tender story of belonging and of two friends who learn they are better together than they were alone.

DO NOT DUPLICATE

# Just Gus

McCall Hoyle

Illustrations by Vivienne To



FOR REVIEW ONLY

*For Trey, my favorite boy, and his dogs*

Illustrations © 2023 Vivienne To

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Everyone thinks they have the best dog,  
and none of them are wrong.

—UNKNOWN

# Chapter One

**M**y nose never sleeps. My ears don't either. They both have important work to do, especially at night. That's when the sheep need me most because that's when the coyotes prowl around our farm.

My name is Gus.

I'm a livestock guardian dog. I protect the flock. That's what I do.

Protect. Protect. Protect.

And I'm good at it. We've never lost a lamb on my watch. Thanks to my super senses, the nice boss lady, Esperanza, can rest at night, and so can her girl, and so can the two dogs that sleep in the house with them.

Inhaling, I sniff the cool mountain air for any sign of trouble. My eyes grow heavy, though the rest of me is wide awake. There doesn't seem to be any danger, but I open one eye every now and then just in case. The sheep sleep. The forest at the edge of the field sleeps. Even the pumpkin moon rising above the mountaintops seems to sleep.

But I still have work to do. I stand, and careful not to wake the flock, I stretch. The corners of my mouth rise. The night air

feels nice on my belly. I could stand like this forever, but I must remind everyone who's boss around here. So I head toward the edge of the field, lift my leg, aim carefully, and mark fence post after fence post. No predator will miss that scent. Not even the scrawny coyote that's been hanging around the chicken coop behind the barn.

I will fight if I need to protect my flock or the farm, but I'd rather not. Marking is smarter than fighting. It reminds other animals that I mean business, but nobody gets hurt. Tilting my head back, I bark a few times just in case my nose might have missed any sign of danger. A watchdog can never be too careful.

Most of the sheep open their eyes. A couple of them stand, but they will rest again as soon as I lie down near them. Proud of my work, I step toward the old oak tree near the main gate. I should mark it too. Halfway there, the air changes direction, and I catch a hint of an unfamiliar animal.

The scent swirls around the inside of my nose. It's definitely an animal—a large one. I don't like it one bit either. Lifting one ear, then the other, I listen for a clue, but hear nothing. Squinting, I search the forest shadows. Then the air shifts again, and the smell disappears.

I know the scent of every animal on this farm and in that forest, but no matter how hard I try, I can't identify that mixture of berries, insects, and rotting fish. I've smelled it before though. That's for sure.

The odor brings back memories from puppyhood, from my time before the sheep, before the nice boss lady, Esperanza, and her daughter who live in the house on this farm. That smell is from a time I want to forget—a time with other

humans—humans who shook their fists and kicked their feet when a young pup lifted his leg anywhere near their house. Despite my size and strength, I am small again. A whimper rises in my throat.

The sheep stir, bringing me back to present and reminding me I have work to do.

Flapping my jowls, I shake my body to get rid of those memories. Then I circle the field again before scratching out a cool spot in the grass to watch the sheep sleep and the moon drop behind the mountains.

I try to rest and trust my nose and ears to keep the sheep safe for the rest of the night. But no matter how hard I try, I can't forget the stink of that big animal mixed with berries, insects, and rotting fish.

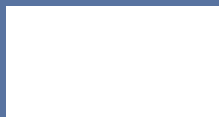


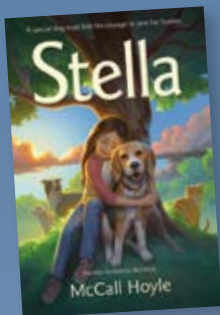


**MCCALL HOYLE** is an award-winning author and teacher librarian. She writes heartfelt books for kids of all ages and believes one of the best ways to spread hope is by writing about the special bond between dogs and their humans. When McCall isn't writing or teaching, you can find her training one of her four-legged friends for agility, obedience, or dock diving in the foothills of the North Georgia Mountains she calls home.

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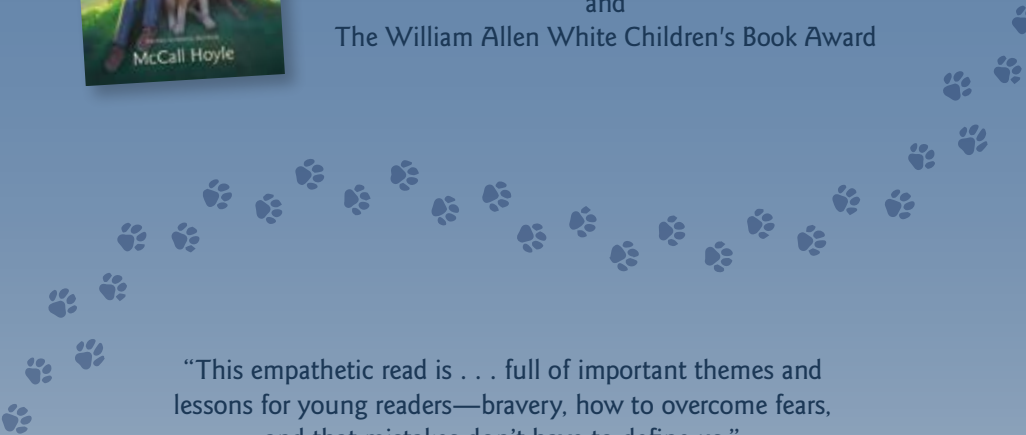




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A dog looks to heal—and find a home.”

—Foreword Reviews

