

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Author: Sam Bowring

Sam Bowring is a writer living in Sydney, Australia. He began writing at a young age, and his first book was published when he was nineteen. Since then he has written other books and stage plays, as well as for various televisual broadcasts. His critically acclaimed fantasy series 'The Broken Well Trilogy', has been reprinted four times and has sold over ten thousand copies. Sam also works as a standup comedian, and has been nominated for several awards at important festivals, though sadly he has never actually won anything. Sam writes that this story is important to him for a few reasons.

It is a true story of my family. When my parents, Jane and Ian, first brought me home as a new baby, they realised that they had already used up the name they liked on the cat. Sam was a ginger tom, a large and relaxed sort of fellow, who predated my arrival by a couple of years. However, once I turned up, mum and dad decided to rename the cat 'Jack', and they gave me the cat's name... A little while after having his name stolen by a newborn baby, there was a terrible storm in which Jack the cat went missing. My parents looked everywhere for him, but they could not find him - the fear was that he had hidden somewhere from all the thunder and lightning, and when it finally stopped, all the smells he would have followed home had been washed away. Then, by happy circumstance, Jack somehow ended up all the way across town, near to where my dad worked. One morning dad walked past him on his way to the office, and recognised him - and Jack recognised dad.

Illustrator: Andrew McLean is a fulltime painter, and illustrator of children's books. Many of the books illustrated by Andrew have received awards from the Children's Book Council of Australia. *My Dog* written by John Heffernan won Book of the Year for Younger Readers; *You'll Wake the Baby* by Catherine Jinks, and *A Year On Our Farm* by Penny Matthews, won the Book of the Year award in the Early Childhood Category. Other books illustrated by Andrew include *Reggie Queen of the Street* by Margaret Barbalet, *There's a Goat in My Coat* by Rosemary Milne, and *My Country* by Dorothea Mackellar. Together with Janet McLean, Andrew has also created a number of popular and award-winning picture books, including *Hector and Maggie*, *Dog Tales*, *Josh*, and *Let's Go Baby-o!*

Sam the Cat
Sam Bowring / Andrew McLean

TEACHER NOTES
By Janet McLean

SYNOPSIS *Sam the Cat* is a ‘true story’ about a cat whose life began to change when his owners, Jane and Ian, brought home a new baby. Jane and Ian decided to give the baby Sam’s name. So, Sam the Cat became Jack the Cat. Not only did Sam have a new name - his owners now spent all their time with the baby. Sam was very put out, and decided to take a walk – ‘further than he had ever gone before’. Before long he was lost, bedraggled and hungry. And all he wanted was to be in his own home with Jane and Ian and Sam, the baby. His wish comes true, and he comes to accept the new Sam, and his new name - Jack. The simple text carries a deeper message for families who are bringing a new baby into their homes – life from now on will be different, but everyone is wanted and loved.

WRITING STYLE **Sam Bowring** has blended two real life incidents to create a new story. He has used various writing strategies throughout the book to help children follow and respond to the story. *Sam the Cat* has a straightforward narrative structure: in the first few pages the main characters and the setting are introduced. A complication that needs to be resolved is quickly introduced – there’s a new baby who is given Sam’s name, Sam runs away and gets lost. He faces some challenges – a storm, menacing cats, hunger and loneliness, But in the end everything works out well and Sam / Jack is happily reunited with his loving family – a satisfying ending. There are simple, direct sentences – *Once there was a cat called Sam*. There are rhythmic, lilting sequences of events – *Sam went out of the yard, down the alley, around the corner, and through the park*. And there are sentences that cause the reader to stop and think about what is *going* to happen – *He went further than he’d ever gone before*. Sam Bowring places the reader alongside Sam the Cat when he is hungry, frightened and alone.

ILLUSTRATIONS **Andrew McLean** used pen, ink, watercolour and pastels for the illustrations in this book. The strong visual personality of Sam, reinforces the text as he moves from a cat who is contented with the way things are, to a cat who is upset by change, who becomes, lost, frightened and lonely, to a cat and who rediscovers a sense of well-being. Much of the emotion of the story is carried in Andrew’s portrayal of Sam - Sam looking very pleased with himself on the first page; Sam’s alarm when he hears that his name is going to be changed; Sam’s fear and loneliness when he realizes that he is lost. Andrew has followed Sam Bowring’s narrative structure by creating a series of un-bordered pictures (vignettes).

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These pages are interspersed with three double page spreads that bleed off the edge of the page. Many of the vignettes follow a pattern, per double page, of a single drawing on one page and two drawings on the other page. Towards the end of the book, as the narrative gradually reveals a happy ending, Andrew has put just a single illustration on each page.

DISCUSSION POINTS AND FOLLOW-UP ACTIVITIES

- Before you read *Sam the Cat* with the children tell them Sam Bowring's real life stories about *his* name change, and about the family cat going missing.
- Talk with the children about how the author has drawn on stories that he has been told about when he was a baby. And about how all authors can use their own experiences, or stories they have heard to create their own new stories.
- The first time you read the story take time to talk with the children about what is happening, and allow time for them to comment, to ask questions, and to express their own feelings. This will help them to grasp the underlying meaning, and the mood and atmosphere created by the words and the pictures.
- The story will prompt children to tell their own pet stories. Ask the children to write and illustrate their own stories.
- For children who can't yet write, transcribe their stories as they tell them. For children who are still learning to write, the stories that they *tell* will be lively and expressive, and they will have the pleasure of seeing their words written down, and knowing that they will soon be able to do this themselves.
- Make word and picture lists with the children of the different pets that they own. Refine the lists into categories – cats, dogs, birds, fish, reptiles, etc.
- Lists of the names of the children's pets. Ask the children why their pet has that name. If they don't know they can ask their parents to tell them the story about why the pet was given that name.
- Andrew McLean likes drawing animals, using movement, gesture and facial expression to convey feeling. Ask the children to look carefully at the pictures of Sam throughout the book. Talk with them about how Andrew has used body language and facial expression to show feelings. Find examples of Sam when he is happy, alarmed, and scared.
- Ask the children to draw or paint or make collage pictures of cats who are happy, contented, sad, and scared.