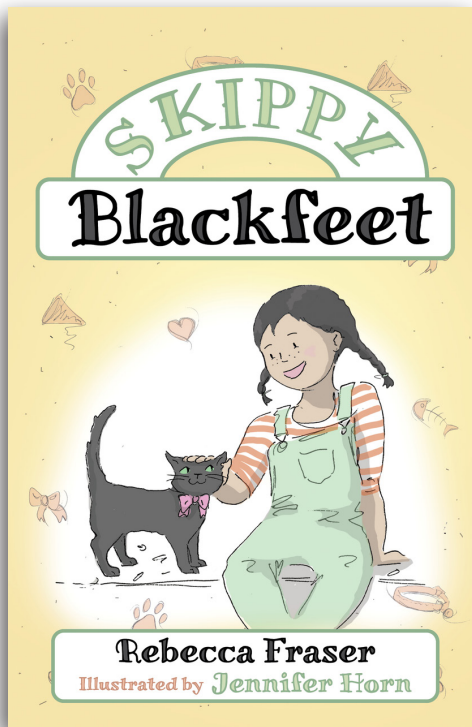

Teachers' Notes



SKIPPY BLACKFEET

Rebecca Fraser / Jennifer Horn

ISBN: 9781761111808

Recommended retail: \$19.99

Reading level: 5 to 8

BOOK SUMMARY

Skippy Blackfeet lives behind the cemetery walls. He's often hungry and lonely... but safe.

When May finds Skippy Blackfeet and brings him home, their adventures begin.

For starters they need to win May's dad over. Then there's the fierce neighbourhood dog, birthday party bungles, tumultuous trips to town, fireworks and thunderstorms, and everything in between!

But Skippy Blackfeet and May go together like milk and sardines, and together they can face any challenge.

Three stories of a loving cat and his best friend May collected in one volume:

Hello Skippy Blackfeet, Trip Ups and Trips Out, Fireworks and Thunderstorms

THEMES

Friendship • Trust • Bravery •

Belonging • Family • Neurodiversity •

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**Rebecca Fraser is available for author talks and workshops.
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Skippy Blackfeet Teachers' Notes can be used in schools (independent learning, small groups, and whole classes); at home with caregivers; and as part of mental health support programs facilitated by counsellors, psychologists, children's charities, etc.



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Rebecca Fraser lives and writes on Bunurong Land. Her work has won, been shortlisted for, and honourably mentioned for numerous awards including Adaptable: Turning Page to Screen, The 2023 Readings Children's Prize, Aurealis Awards, Australian Shadows Awards, Ditmars, and Mornington Peninsula Shire Mayor's Writing Award. Rebecca's publications include three middle grade novels, a junior fiction and young adult novel, a collection of short fiction, and over sixty short stories, poems, and articles in various anthologies, journals, and magazines.

Rebecca chairs and participates in panels at festivals and facilitates author 'in conversations' at libraries, as well as facilitating creative writing workshops for authors of every age and ability. She has served as a convenor and on the judging panel of nationally-recognised literary competitions, and is proud to be an Ambassador for Australia Reads and a participant in the Australian Author Pen Pals program.

Say G'day at www.rebeccafraser.com or find Rebecca @writingandmoonlighting on Facebook or @becksmuse for Twitter & Instagram.

AUTHOR NOTE

As a lifelong lover and mother of cats (and a son on the autism spectrum), it brought me much joy to write Skippy and May's story.

May's family are a reflection of the people I share space with on a day-to-day basis...and you probably do too! The uncomplicated tradie, the creative and hardworking Mum with tattoos and piercings, the families from immigrant backgrounds and our 'new Australians' with stories and culture to share, the everyday household calendars of shopping and specialist appointments, sports and school, birthday parties and shared fencelines, and the special milestones, challenges and worries unique to your family. It is my hope that Skippy, the little black cat with the very big heart, holds a mirror up to society, and you might see yourselves reflected back with the same kindness, humanity, and love of all creatures great and small.

May has high functioning autism. I did not want this to be the focus of the story, but rather have a completely normal contemporary Australian family represented. May is simply just another awesome neurodivergent kid. (My son is on the spectrum and the hints at May's ASD are taken from my observations of his responses and reactions when he was around the same age). It is my hope that May's ASD neurodivergence is woven through in a way that does not sledgehammer the reader with "Token Autistic Character", but rather forms part of her authentic character and daily family experience. My aim was for it to float gently below the surface of the story, the same with her ethnically-diverse neighbourhood and friendship group.

Skippy Blackfeet explores how lives were changed for the better through trust, friendship, and allowing each other the space to be their authentic selves.

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ABOUT THE ILLUSTRATOR



Jennifer Horn is a Brisbane-based illustrator and children's writer. Her fairytale debut picture book *The Precious Plum* was shortlisted for the 2022 Little Pink Dog's Authorstrator Prize. She illustrated the real-life-inspired picture book *The Boy From The Sea* and an entry in the anthology, *Our Australian HeART*. With a background in architecture and film, Jen draws on her experiences to create whimsical illustrations. She is a pen-and-paper sketcher and brings the line drawings into Photoshop to colour and polish. Jen co-hosts the Book Review program on community radio station Reading Radio, where she enjoys reading books aloud with all the voices. She takes turns

with her husband and toddler to try and tempt their very own black cat, Riley, from under the bed. She tried to coerce Riley to model for more of the sketches, but he was too self-conscious.

ILLUSTRATOR NOTE

I can say that in hindsight, having four cats at a time throughout my childhood definitely quelled my own anxiety. There is something about a silent stoic furry companion curled up next to you that has a calming effect, especially if it has soft silky fur it lets you stroke, and a vibrational trance of a purr. A few of these cats were moggies given to us as they knew my Mum had a total soft spot for cats needing adopting. Like Skippy and May though, the bonds were always very mutually beneficial.

Animal therapy can be such a helpful emotional support and channel for a child (or adult) to feel grounded and connected to another living being, without the fear of judgement or societal behaviours of other humans. I felt it was really cute how we saw Skippy find purpose and take great pride in being given this role, and thus how Skippy and May ended up saving each other.

As for my illustration-moulding, I aim for an art style that is part playful-Quentin Blake, and part flowy-Charlie Mackesy, using a soft yet cheerful colour palette for Skippy's stories. I do actually have a black cat of my own, and initially had lofty ideals of using him for many of Skippy's sketches, but soon realised that when he does stay still enough (and his fluffy black fur is well enough lit in our not-overly-bright home, it's really only when he's asleep and that's not many poses to hang a book on!

REASONS FOR STUDYING THIS BOOK

At its heart, *Skippy Blackfeet* is an emotionally-rewarding and uplifting Australian tale of friendship, trust, bravery, belonging, and family told through the point of view of a little stray black cat.

The tales in *Skippy Blackfeet* can be used to explore family dynamics, pet ownership and caring for animals, friendships and our roles in social situations, and support developing emotional intelligence.

KEY CURRICULUM AREAS & LEARNING OUTCOMES

YEAR ONE

English, Humanities and Social Science

AC9E1LA06 - understand that a simple sentence consists of a single independent clause representing a single event or idea

AC9E1LE02 - discuss literary texts and share responses by making connections with students' own experiences

AC9E1LY02 - use interaction skills including turn-taking, speaking clearly, using active listening behaviours and responding to the contributions of others, and contributing ideas and questions

AC9E1LA07 - understand that words can represent people, places and things (nouns, including pronouns), happenings and states (verbs), qualities (adjectives) and details such as when, where and how (adverbs)

ACELT1584 - Discuss features of plot, character and setting in different types of literature and explore some features of characters in different texts

AC9E1LA03 - explore how texts are organised according to their purpose, such as to recount, narrate, express opinion, inform, report and explain

AC9E1LY11 - use short vowels, common long vowels, consonant blends and digraphs to write words, and blend these to read one- and two-syllable words

AC9E1LY05 - use comprehension strategies such as visualising, predicting, connecting, summarising and questioning when listening, viewing and reading to build literal and inferred meaning by drawing on vocabulary and growing knowledge of context and text structures

AC9E1LA10 - understand that written language uses punctuation such as full stops, question marks and exclamation marks, and uses capital letters for familiar proper nouns

AC9E1LE01 - discuss how language and images are used to create characters, settings and events in literature by First Nations Australian, and wide-ranging Australian and world authors and illustrators

AC9E1LA09 - recognise the vocabulary of learning area topics

AC9HS1S04 - discuss perspectives related to objects, people, places and events

AC9E1LE05 - orally retell or adapt a familiar story using plot and characters, language features including vocabulary, and structure of a familiar text, through role-play, writing, drawing or digital tools

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YEAR TWO

English, Humanities and Social Science

AC9E2LA01 - investigate how interpersonal language choices vary depending on the context, including the different roles taken on in interactions

AC9E2LA03 - identify how texts across the curriculum are organised differently and use language features depending on purposes

AC9E2LE05 - create and edit literary texts by adapting structures and language features of familiar literary texts through drawing, writing, performance and digital tools

AC9E2LA02 - explore how language can be used for appreciating texts and providing reasons for preferences

AC9E2LE03 - discuss the characters and settings of a range of texts and identify how language is used to present these features in different ways

AC9E2LY01 - identify how similar topics and information are presented in different types of texts

AC9HS2S04 - discuss perspectives related to objects, people, places and events

YEAR THREE

English, Humanities and Social Science

AC9E3LE01 - discuss characters, events and settings in different contexts in literature by First Nations Australian, and wide-ranging Australian and world authors and illustrators

AC9E3LY02 - use interaction skills to contribute to conversations and discussions to share information and ideas

AC9E3LY01 - recognise how texts can be created for similar purposes but different audiences

AC9E3LE02 - discuss connections between personal experiences and character experiences in literary texts and share personal preferences

AC9HS4K09 - diversity of cultural, religious and/or social groups to which they and others in the community belong, and their importance to identity

AC9HS3S07 - present descriptions and explanations, using ideas from sources and relevant subject-specific terms

AC9HS3S05 - draw conclusions based on analysis of information

TEACHING POINTS AND ACTIVITIES

This book may be used in whole class, small group or independent learning activities in schools.

Please note, the following suggestions and activities are suited to a variety of year levels spanning Foundation to Year 6 primary aged children. Some activities may be applicable to early secondary school students, as well.

KNOWLEDGE AND LITERAL UNDERSTANDING

PRE-READING QUESTIONS

1. Show the cover to the class and ask the students what they think the book might be about.
2. Read the back cover blurb. Does this give them more of an idea of what the book could be about?
3. Ask students if they have any guesses as to what the stories will be about from just the cover image.

AFTER-READING QUESTIONS

1. Ask students about their first impression of May and of Skippy Blackfeet.
2. Discuss May's family dynamics and how Skippy Blackfeet fits in with the family.
3. Ask students about what role a pet has - are they a friend, a responsibility, the baby.
4. What about Skippy helps May throughout her various life events?
5. Does Skippy or May learn anything throughout the stories?
6. What are some of the emotional arcs May goes through? For example, the emotional rollercoaster of preparing for her birthday party.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

GENERAL

- Skippy starts off as a stray cat. What do you know about stray cats?
- How does May bringing Skippy home help Skippy?
- How does Skippy coming home with May help May?
- What are May's parents reactions when Skippy comes home to live with them?
- May's dad doesn't like cats, especially black ones. What do you think May does to help her dad change his mind about Skippy Blackfeet?
- May sometimes has some Big Feelings. Have you ever had Big Feelings? (Big Feelings is a term used for when a feeling can feel overwhelming and too much to handle)
- What did you do when you had a Big Feeling?
- What did a Big Feeling physically feel like?
- What kind of ways can we manage Big Feelings?
- May and Skippy feel like they can rely on each other because they're good friends. Do you have friends that you can rely on? What does it mean to rely on someone?
- May sometimes struggles with her friends and with feeling understood. Why might that be? Why might May need Skippy as an emotional support cat?
- Skippy Blackfeet brings comfort and companionship to May. How do pets or animals help people feel better or less lonely?
- What are some ways pets can help children or families with challenges?

TRUST

- What does trust mean to you? Do you always trust everyone you meet straight away? Why or why not?
- Why is trust important in relationships, whether between animals and people, or between friends and family?
- Skippy Blackfeet has lived a life where he's been scared of the outside world. What do you think made him take the risk of trusting May when they first met?
- May trusts Skippy even though he's a stray cat, and he might not trust her at first. Why is it important for people to take chances and trust others, even if they are unsure at first?
- It takes time to win someone's trust, especially when their past experiences have not been good. When May first meets Skippy Blackfeet and brings him home, the family have to establish trust with their new pet. What actions do May, and her Mum and Dad take to win Skippy's trust?
- How do May's parents show they are beginning to trust Skippy as part of the family?
- What are some things Skippy does to show that he is beginning to trust May's family?
- Imagine you are a stray animal (you could choose a dog or a cat, or another animal). How do you

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think your experience on the streets would make you less likely to be trustful? (Think about Skippy's experiences in Chapter One - cold, wet, hungry, no shelter, frightened of cars beeping, dogs barking, people spraying him with hoses, etc).

BRAVERY

- Both Skippy and May face challenges in the story. Can you think of a time when you were scared of something and had to face it? How did you overcome your fear?
- Why do you think Skippy is afraid of the outside world, but later starts to trust May and her family?
- Skippy Blackfeet is only a very small cat...but he has a very big heart. He is loyal and brave. Can you think of three examples in the book where Skippy shows bravery (even when he's feeling scared).
- Skippy has to be brave to leave the cemetery and enter May's world, where things are unfamiliar. What does this show us about the connection between bravery and change? How is it sometimes scary to face a new situation, but bravery helps us move forward?
- May is also brave, but there are times when she feels anxious and overwhelmed. Can you identify any physical reactions May has to these feelings throughout the book. (For some people, these actions can be helpful and/or soothing).
- Skippy is terrified of dogs...especially Sandy the dog that lives next door. What surprising things does Skippy learn about Sandy? (Hint: Sandy is a small dog, who just has a very loud bark / Sandy is scared of thunderstorms. Everyone is afraid of something, it's how you manage your fear and don't let it conquer you that matters).
- Sometimes bravery isn't about doing something big, but about small, everyday acts. What are some small acts of bravery that May and Skippy show in the story? For example, when May asks her mom to let her bring Skippy home, or when Skippy learns to trust a new family.
- Can you think of a small, brave thing you did recently that helped someone or made you feel proud of yourself?

FRIENDSHIP

- May and Skippy's friendship starts when they meet in the cemetery. What qualities do you think helped them become friends? What do you think they both needed from each other to start their friendship? Why do you think Skippy felt safe and comforted by May, even though they were strangers at first?
- Skippy and May go together like milk and sardines. They are good friends. What do you think are the qualities that make a good friend? How do May and Skippy demonstrate these qualities to each other?
- Is it important for friends to be exactly the same, or is it okay to have differences?
- On the morning of her ninth birthday party, May says to Skippy: "My tummy feels like a washing machine. I've never had a birthday party before. What if my friends think it's boring. What if they think I'm boring? What if they say they want to go home?"
- Think about the qualities of friendship you explored in Question 1. Do you think May has any reason to be concerned that her friends will react like this?
- May understands Skippy's needs, even when he is scared or hiding. Why is it important for friends to

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understand each other's feelings and fears? How does understanding each other make a friendship stronger?

- What are some of the adventures that May and Skippy go on in the story? How do they face challenges together?
- If you could go on an adventure with Skippy Blackfeet, what kind of adventure would it be and why?
- Skippy's life changes when May brings him home, and their friendship helps him adapt to the new situation. How does May's friendship with Skippy help him feel safe in his new home? How does your friendship with someone help you adjust to changes in your life, like moving to a new school or meeting new people?

FAMILY

- What is the relationship like between May and her parents? Do you think they have a strong relationship? Use examples from within the narrative to support your argument.
- As well as seeing Skippy Blackfeet as an important part of the family, May and her parents are responsible pet owners. They ensure Skippy is well cared for and comfortable and that his nutritional, physical and emotional needs are met. They also ensure he visits the vet and complies with local council regulations. Can you identify ways they have done this in the story? (Ch 4)
- How does May's relationship with her mum influence her ability to care for Skippy? Do you think her mum supports her in a way that's helpful for May?
- How does Skippy adapt to being part of May's family? What challenges does he face when he first moves into her home?
- Skippy has been living in the cemetery, away from people. How do you think being part of a family changes Skippy's life for the better?
- May visits the cemetery to lay flowers on her Nonna's grave. Do you think this is a family tradition? What kinds of traditions do you have in your family? Why are traditions important in family life?
- The story shows a family with different opinions and emotions (May's dad doesn't like cats, for example). Do you think all families have the same way of dealing with challenges? What are some other differences you might find in families?
- How do families support each other during difficult times? How did May's family support her when she was scared in the cemetery?

BELONGING

- What do you think it means to belong somewhere? Is it where you live? Your family? Friends? Perhaps your neighbourhood or club or school or church or online gaming community are also places that give you a strong sense of belonging?
- Can you name three places where you feel you belong?
- How does Skippy's view of the world change when May enters his life?
- At the start of the story, Skippy feels safe behind the cemetery walls, but he is also alone. How does

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Skippy's feeling of belonging change throughout the story?

- When May's mum declares Skippy Blackfeet an 'Emotional Support Cat', Skippy feels proud and useful. Do you think Skippy felt an increased sense of belonging in May's household with this new title? Why?
- What does it mean for Skippy to "belong" to a family? How is his sense of belonging different from when he was living on his own?
- May has a deep connection to her Nonna and her family traditions. How does May's sense of belonging to her family and her heritage help her navigate the world around her?
- When people move to a new school or community or country, it can be hard to make friends at first. Can you think of any ways that might help someone feel that they are included, welcome and belong if they are new to your community?
- May and Skippy are very different from each other, yet they still form a strong bond. How does the story show that differences don't mean you can't belong together? How do May and Skippy help each other feel accepted despite their differences?
- How do families or communities show that it's okay to be different and still belong? Can you think of examples from the book or from your life?
- May helps Skippy feel like he belongs in her home, but she also learns about what it means to truly care for and accept someone. How can we help others feel like they belong? What can we do to make others feel welcome and accepted?
- Do you think belonging is important for everyone, both humans and animals? Why is it important for everyone to have a place where they belong?

ACTIVITIES

A FOCUS ON CATS

Cats are beautiful animals. They have been celebrated for over four thousand years for their intelligence, companionship, friendship, grace and affection, as well as their beauty. But not all cats are the same. Some are big, and some are small. Some love being cuddled, and some don't like being picked up. Some have long, silky fur...and some breeds of cat have no hair at all!

Think about Skippy Blackfeet. He has a physical description, as well as virtues (good qualities) and flaws (not so admirable qualities). These elements help shape his character.

Some words to describe Skippy Blackfeet include: Black, shiny, emerald eyes, little, blue collar, big-hearted, friendly, brave, playful, cheeky, anxious, fearful, uncertain, impulsive, overthinker, protective, curious.

Can you create a cat character of your own?

- What is its name?
- Five words to describe what your cat looks like: _____
- Five words to describe your cats personality: _____
- Draw a picture of your cat.

FAMILY FUN

Families come in all shapes and sizes. Some are very small (it could just be you and your Mum or Dad), and some are very large with lots of relatives. May is an only child, which means she doesn't have any brothers or sisters.

- Do you have brothers or sisters? What shape is your family?
- Draw a picture of your family with yourself in the middle. (Don't forget your pets, they're an important part of your family too)!
- What are some of the things you and your family do for fun?
- What are some of your family's traditions? Which one is your favourite?

BIRTHDAY INVESTIGATION

May invites four friends to her birthday. May's party is at home. They play party games, have a birthday cake, balloons and decorations, and lots of delicious party food to celebrate (including Pradeep's samosas). May's friends give her presents, and sing Happy Birthday.

Different cultures celebrate birthdays and other holidays and milestones in different ways. These differences are what makes our world exciting and interesting! We can learn many things from other cultures, including different customs and languages. Sometimes families also choose to create their own traditions.

- What does a birthday party look like in your household? Maybe it looks just like May's, or maybe it is

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held at a play centre or outdoors. Maybe it is much larger and filled with family and friends. T

- Think about a birthday party you have either had or been to. What was it like? What food was there? What activities or games did you do or play?
- Think about your dream birthday party. It can be anything you like. Let your imagination go wild! Where would it be? Who would you invite? What entertainment would you have? What sort of food, decorations, music would there be?
- In your dream birthday party would you include anything that you saw at someone else's birthday party?

PET CARE CLASS

It's important to take care of our pets as they rely on us for their health and happiness. In this activity we're going to take a 'Pet Care Class'.

- As a group discuss the responsibilities of owning a pet and what pets need to feel safe and loved, just like Skippy did when he joined May's family.
- Gather together some pet care books or videos. You can choose any kind of pet that you either have at home or want.
- Get out some paper and pens and get to work drawing your pet and listing all the different things you need to have or do to take proper care of your chosen pet. A dog will need different things compared to a lizard for food and shelter, and will need activities like walks that a lizard won't need.
- One by one get up in front of the class to share how you care for your pets (or how they would care for a pet if they don't have one). Discuss the importance of providing food, safety, and love to animals.

SKIPPY'S NEW HOME

Skippy needs a new special home! May wants to build him a little nook to call his own. But she needs help designing it. Consider all the things Skippy might need or like in his new little den.

- What makes a home a place of belonging? What will make this area a really cosy place for Skippy?
- Draw out this new area. Where in the house will it be? Is it dark or a place that gets sunlight? Will it have lots of cushions or a scratching post? An automatic cat feeder? Add special features that would make Skippy feel safe and comfortable. This could include a comfy bed, a safe place to hide, or a window to watch birds.
- Use paper, colored pencils, crayons, markers, and stickers to bring your design to life.
- Share your design in a small group and talk about what makes a place feel like home.