



# SAVING SAM by SUSAN BROCKER

AN ENGLISH UNIT FROM



HarperCollins Publishers

Moving, disturbing, poignant, gripping, fast-paced, and thought-provoking are all words that can be used to describe Susan Brocker's superbly written second novel for older Kiwi kids and teenagers. *Saving Sam* is all about a very lonely boy and a dog he comes to love and adore, and the special relationship they develop. *Saving Sam* is, however, much deeper than this as it deals with dysfunctional families, bullying and drug dealing — all issues that many teenagers may have to confront at some time during these often difficult years. *Saving Sam* confronts these issues head-on. Layla the dog and Ben the boy are described as damaged goods: both seem to be unwanted and both have severe problems that they will have to try to overcome. This uplifting novel, as well as being about a growing relationship and respect between a scared dog and a sad, lonely boy, also brings home to young readers that trust, truth, love, respect for each other and for what's right are powerful forces for good in our modern society. Best suited to older primary/intermediate students and teenagers.

For more information about Susan Brocker and further books, visit [www.susanbrocker.com](http://www.susanbrocker.com)

## Story synopsis

Ben and his older brother, Sam, are placed in the care of their Aunt Ida and Uncle Joe. Their mother is dead and their father is once again in prison. This has meant regular foster care from often reluctant relatives. Ben has progressively become more withdrawn, has no friends, no confidence and is often bullied, while Sam seems to not have a care in the world. Uncle Joe had bought a dog, Layla, from a man at the pub, and it too is withdrawn, ill-cared for and scared of people — a little like Ben in fact. (Layla was trained as a police dog, found unsuitable and later bought by a gang member for dog fighting.) Ben convinces Uncle Joe not to put her down and slowly begins to win her trust.

School is a living hell for Ben. His small physical stature makes him a natural target for the class bully — BJ. He is also picked on and often humiliated in front of the class by another bully — the PE coach. The greatest humiliation is when the coach breaks Ben's 'he's in the army' cover story about his father and the whole school knows he is in prison. Sam, with his easy-going nature, towering stature and great sporting ability, is the coach's favourite and Sam often hangs out with and runs errands for the coach.

Layla starts to show considerable ability at dog-training sessions. Even Uncle Joe is taking a keen interest. Sam, however, is seldom home and skips school, and Ben worries about Sam's increased paranoia. BJ becomes friendly towards Ben, and they find out that Sam is selling drugs for the coach and becoming increasingly addicted. BJ, Alisha (a dog-training friend), Uncle Joe, and the dog trainer, Henare (a customs officer), convince Ben that he must overcome his fears and inform the school authorities and police about the drug dealing, otherwise Sam's life and those of others will be ruined. The police are informed, but no evidence can be found to incriminate the coach. To make matters worse, Sam is now missing — last seen driving with the coach. Evidence must be found. Layla's incredible scenting ability finds the drugs in the coach's bag, allowing Ben to expose his guilt to the whole class. Knowing the game is up, the coach takes Ben as a hostage in his car. Layla, with new courage, finds a way into the car that is being driven recklessly while chased by the police. The coach and a gang member are arrested at a P lab. Sam, they are told, is at Rainbow's End being 'sorted out' by the drug-ring boss for not selling P to young teenagers at the amusement park. The 'Boss' was once the owner of Layla and, after initially running away, she confronts her fears and trusts Ben, who tells her to hold the Boss down until the police can make the arrest. Sam is found wasted on P, but with determination he will make a full recovery. Ben and Layla are no longer damaged goods: they have both confronted their demons and won. All three have been saved!

## Pre-reading activities

- Prior to reading, ask students to make predictions about the plot of the book using just the cover. Who do they think will be the main main character or characters? Note answers for later discussion.
- Discuss why dogs are such popular pets. List the benefits we get from dog ownership and what dogs should expect from us. Introduce the idea that owning a dog (or pet) brings with it certain responsibilities. Can students list these? Do they know about the *5 animal freedoms*? Google these and compare with their list.

## During and post-reading activities

- How would the students describe Ben's state of mind at the time he goes to stay with Uncle Joe and Aunt Ida? What reasons can they give for him being so withdrawn?
- Discuss the ways that Ben tries to deal with bullying. How successful are they? Do students think that the way Ben is treated by the PE coach is a form of bullying, and how does it compare with BJ's treatment of Ben? A general discussion on bullying as it has affected members of the class could be appropriate here.
- Identify people in the story who change their outlook and behaviour. What are these changes and what leads to these changes?
- What reasons can students give for the American family never making contact with Uncle Joe and Aunt Ida? What influence does Ben have in resolving this problem? Did he do the right thing?
- Discuss the positive outcomes that dog-obedience training had on both Layla and Ben. If there is an obedience class in your district, arrange for students to visit and observe a session and/or invite a dog trainer to talk to the class. Why do students think that mutual trust and love play such an important part in this process?
- What frightening facts did Ben uncover when he conducted web research into P? What devastating effects did P have on Sam? How did his behaviour change with P use? Can they find any evidence to suggest Sam will recover?
- Have students construct a 'before and after' chart that shows the contrast between Ben at the beginning of the story and at the end. Use adjectives and/or short phrases. Do the same for Layla.
- Do students think that it will be possible or desirable for Ben to try to resurrect the relationship with his father in the future? If this was possible, what would it depend on?
- How does the story show that truth, trust, love and respect for each other are so important for relationships between people? Does this also apply to relationships between people and animals? Discuss.

Published by HarperCollins • Recommended retail price: \$18.99