

# Storm Whale

By Sarah Brennan,  
illustrated by Jane Tanner

June 2017

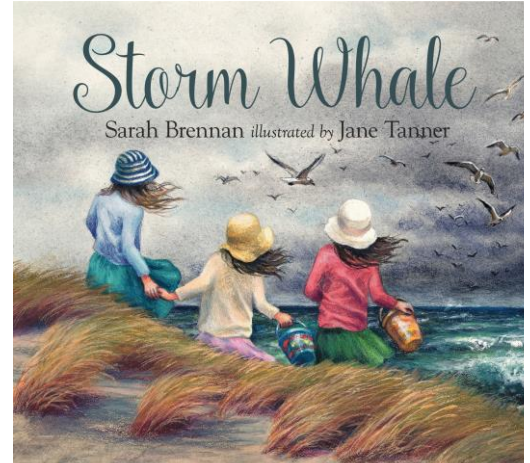
ISBN 9781760293642

Hardback picture book. Recommended for 4-8 year olds.

May 2019

ISBN 9781760875442

Paperback picture book. Recommended for 4-8 year olds.



## Summary

*Bleak was the day and the wind whipped down  
When I and my sisters walked to town...*

For whale-lovers everywhere, this moving story of innocence, courage and love takes children on a nostalgic trip to the seaside, where an ancient whale lies beached on the shore, waiting to drift or die. The little girls who find him struggle all day to save his life—to no avail. But then, when all seems lost, something wonderful happens...is it a miracle, or mere chance, or an answer to their prayers? Decide for yourself in this beautiful story in rhyme by Sarah Brennan, exquisitely illustrated by award-winning artist Jane Tanner.

## Use in the curriculum

### Language

The text contains some unfamiliar words for vocab building as well as similes, metaphors and alliteration. Word choice matches mood: *Bright cheeks streamed like a rainy day, / White breath steamed and was hurled away, / Hair flew wild like a brumby's tail...* Children can chant these lines in such a way as to voice the storm. (NB: spot the verbs.) Note the use of ellipsis...and the special punctuation of poetry. Note the poetic inversion of some phrases: *Bleak was the day...When I and my sisters walked to town* and *Long cold hours did we spend that day.*

### Literature

The text is a poem, with rhyme and rhythm and other poetic features. Through the text and pictures, we can experience the beach in a way that we may not have personally experienced ourselves.

*Storm Whale* takes what is familiar to many students—holidays at the beach—and transports them into a literary world of heightened emotions. The illustrations are as vital as the text to the eliciting of emotion. The book provides an excellent springboard for students to share their responses to it and to widen their discussion to whales and nature in general.

The information about the author and illustrator at the end of these notes makes clear the importance of nature in their own lives. How do your students relate to that idea?

Students can create their own picture books with cover, endpapers, dedication, title page.

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## Literacy

Some comprehension questions are provided below. *Storm Whale*, an imaginative text, can be compared to informative texts about whales from the school library.

Students can memorize sections of the poem and recite to the class, duplicating the correct order of the verses.

## Themes

- the environment
- family
- whales
- sisters
- nature
- resilience

## Discussion questions

1. Before opening *Storm Whale*, look at the title and cover design. Ask the following questions to encourage students to predict what might follow in the story:
  - Where do you think the story will be set? How do you know this?
  - What will the weather be like in the story? What clues lie in the book's title and cover illustration?
  - What might the three girls be looking at? Hint – think about the title.
2. Explore what the class knows about whales. Discuss their size, what they eat, where they live, and ask what might happen when a whale becomes beached.
3. Language (a): read through the story once and ask older students if the story reads like a poem and why. Encourage them to discuss the use of rhyme and rhythm and how both devices made them feel.  
(b): ask students to write a meaning for these words—*mariner*, *fugitive*, *tempest*, *becalmed* and *balm*.
4. Perspective: turn to the page with the words, 'Scarred old mariner, beached in hell...' and look at the image. Ask students why they think the illustrator shows us the whale and little girls from the viewpoint of the seagulls. What does this perspective tell us about the size of the sea creature in relation to the girls?
5. Colour (a): encourage students to see how the use of colour changes during the course of the story. Why might the illustrator have decided to do this? How does the bright red of the girl's shirt seen in the image where the sisters are in the water make the scene even more dramatic. (b) Turn to the page where the girls are sitting back in their beach house with their mother. Describe the colours here and the emotions these colours make you feel.
6. Turn to the page where the three girls are waving out to sea after the storm. How do these colours make you feel about the scene?
7. Turn to the page with the text, 'Tossed by tempest and torn by gale,' and discuss what is happening on this page. What visual clues tell us that the little girl is dreaming about the whale?
8. Compare the opening page with the last page of the story. How are they the same and how do they differ? Ask students to come up with some ideas of why the author decided to repeat this idea.
9. Watch a real-life rescue of a pod of whales on YouTube here <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LNUbae-QBeQ> and afterwards ask students what they should do if they came across a beached whale.



## Related texts

It seems that whales have inspired many picture books especially praised for their illustration. These would be perfect for a genre study, comparing and contrasting books with very similar stories and messages.

***Trapped: A Whale's Rescue* by Robert Burleigh, ill. Wendell Minor. Charlesbridge (Watertown, Massachusetts) 2015.**

32-page picture book for 4-10 year olds.

Beautifully illustrated information book with poetic text. Tells the story of a whale trapped in a net at sea. Contains two fact pages.

***Stranded* by Jan Ramage, ill. Mark Wilson. Black Dog Books, 2010**

32-page picture book for 4-9 year olds.

Based on true stories of whale rescues in Busselton, Western Australia. Ben rouses his community to save beached whales in stormy weather. Mark Wilson's oil paintings are highly textured and impressionistic, moving between close-ups of Ben's experience with the young whale and the efforts of the crowds against the gathering night.

***The Snail and the Whale* by Julia Donaldson, ill. Alex Scheffler. Macmillan UK, 2003.**

32-page picture book for 4-7 year olds.

A snail must help his friend the whale, who has become beached. *Magpies* says: 'There's a lovely feel to this book by an author and an illustrator who know just how to work together to bring out the best in the text and the wonder and friendship that lie behind it.'

***The Little Yellow Digger Saves the Whale* by Betty Gilderdale, ill. Alan Gilderdale. Scholastic NZ, 2001.**

32-page picture book for 4-8 year olds.

When children spot a young orca whale which has become separated from its mother and stranded, the little yellow digger provides assistance. Betty Gilderdale's verse story is nicely complemented by Alan Gilderdale's handsome double-page colour spreads. The author notes that this book is based on a genuine whale rescue at Mangawhai, New Zealand, where a stranded whale calf was reunited with its mother which had waited offshore.

***Whale Watching* by Josephine Croser, ill. Veronica Jefferis. Era Publications, 1996. (in the Magic Bean series)**

18-page picture book for 3-7 year olds. A young girl watching a whale in a bay wonders about where it travels and what it sees. There is also a Big book edition of this title.

***The Whales' Song* by Dyan Sheldon, ill. Gary Blythe. Hutchinson, London, 1989.**

24-page picture book for 4-8 year olds.

Lilly's grandmother tells her a story of her youth when she watched for whales, and that night Lilly dreams that she too knows how to call the whales and they come to sing for her.

***Hemi and the Whale* by Ron Bacon, ill. Sharon O'Callaghan. Waiatarua, NZ, 1988.**

32-page picture book for 8-10 year olds.

One morning, on the beach near his grandmother's home, Hemi finds a stranded whale. He scares off the seagulls and keeps its skin wet, then steadies it as it floats off on the incoming tide. Hemi has saved the whale. Sharon O'Callaghan's colour illustrations are powerful

The following two picture books, also about whales, approach the topic with humour.

***Cork on the Ocean* by Mark Sommerset, ill. Rowan Sommerset. Primordi, NZ, 2005. Reissued by Dreamboat, 2010.**

40-page picture book for 3-6 year olds.

This charming picture book, which is followed by a sequel *Cork and the Bottle* (2008), uses rhyme to tell of the aquatic adventures of Cork – who is indeed a cork. Cork finds the sea an exciting place. It also surprises him by making new friendships possible, meeting, amongst other sea creatures, a wise whale. The cheerful message and careful use of sounds and rhythms makes *Cork on the Ocean* a good book for reading aloud.

***Dear Greenpeace* by Simon James. Walker Books UK, 1993.**

32-page picture book for 4-8 year olds.

A young girl finds a whale in her pond and begins a correspondence with the local office of Greenpeace on how to look after it. Tongue-in-cheek illustrations show us the whale prospering under her care while the disbelieving letters from Greenpeace feed us snippets of information about whales.

And this book, one in a series devoted to Indigenous characters, is recommended for newly independent readers aged 6 to 10 just moving on from Beginner books.

***Born to Sing* by Sally Morgan, ill. Craig Smith. Omnibus Books, 2016.**

53-page, 5-chapter book with drawings at every page opening.

A story about whales, singing and the kindness of strangers. Mum, Nan and Maddie are heading to Shark Bay to whalewatch. Will they make it?

All books and plot summaries were found on *Magpies' The Source*. Many school libraries subscribe to this excellent service. <https://www.magpies.net.au/the-source/>

## The author

Sarah Brennan grew up on the slopes of Mount Wellington in Tasmania, reading under her bed to avoid the washing up, writing lots of stories and poems, playing the bagpipes, exploring the bush and caring for a menagerie of exotic animals.

After studying law in Queensland, her varied career included bagging flour on a factory production line, fielding phones in a psychiatric hospital and typing letters (very badly), before settling down as a medical lawyer in London for ten years.

Moving to Hong Kong in 1998, she followed her childhood dream, becoming the much-loved author of the funny and educational *Chinese Calendar Tales* and the *Dirty Story* series for primary school aged kids. She lives in Hong Kong beside a nature reserve near the Chinese border with her French husband and teenaged daughters, visiting schools in Hong Kong, China, South East Asia and Australia on a regular basis.



Sarah has always loved whales, and was inspired to write *Storm Whale* by her childhood holidays with her family in the north of Tasmania, where the weather was often cold and wet, and where she and her sisters sometimes found stranded whales on the beach. She used to feel heart-broken about their plight, and wished that she could pull them back out to sea. This story is her wish of how things could have been for all those beautiful animals.

## The illustrator says:

When I was in grades 4 and 5 we lived near a railway line and we walked to school along the train track, through a swampy wetland. I used to linger on the way home to catch tadpoles, listen to frogs and watch dragonflies skimming above the bulrushes...

The way I learned to observe the natural world around me has meant that I love every day, no matter the weather. I love watching the sky, the clouds, the way the wind or rain or hot sun changes things. I love long shadows and bird songs. I love watching people...the way their expressions change, the way they walk or stand or sit...and these things I put into my drawings.

I use coloured pencils because their sharp leads make details easy...like the shadows on a cheek cast by long eyelashes. I use paint for loose, large areas and I draw with soft pastel for smudging. I even draw with pastel dust and cotton buds for softness. There are no rules...just experimenting and practising. I work in a tiny shed in my garden and sometimes I wander down in my nighty and bare feet first thing in the morning to peep at the drawing I did the night before...and I forget to come back for breakfast.

I love my job and I love hearing from the children who read my books. I think children are very valuable people. They see the world with clear eyes.

### **On illustrating *Storm Whale***

For me, this book celebrates the elements of nature. I want the readers to feel the wind in their hair, to taste the salt spray on their lips...to be buffeted by powerful forces and then, at the end, to feel the warm sun on their backs and see the wonderful, wide ocean, sparkling on a new day. I fell in love with the beautiful language as soon as I read this text. I had been waiting for something poetic and a story that took the reader on a difficult journey with a positive and honest resolution.

As one of a family of sisters, I easily imagined the three children as girls (with very separate personalities and ages.) The three little girls who modelled for me were persuaded to run along the beach in their pyjamas, to bucket water fully clothed and up to their waists in the surf.

To get the miserable images of them being overwhelmed by strong waves and wind, I photographed them under the shower...fully dressed. Maggie, Ella and Hazel created a natural, happy family group although Maggie had never met the younger girls until the photo shoot.

I began with photos of my models to get the details of wet hair, wet clothes and skin but I improvised from those pictures to construct my scenes. The sea was drawn in soft pastel and built up layer upon layer. I really studied the ocean in all its moods.

