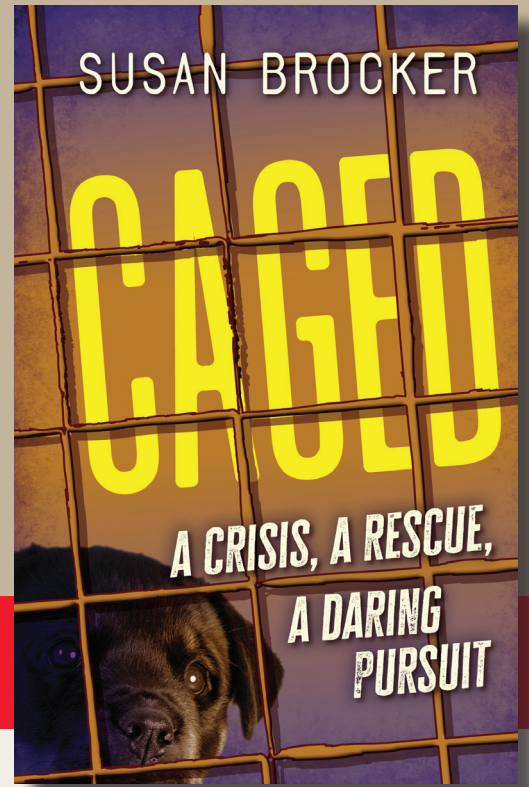


CAGED

By Susan Brocker

• Reading • Writing • Social Studies • History



Synopsis

CAGED is a gripping adventure about a teenage girl from a homeless family who becomes entangled in crime. She must eventually face her fears and her sense of what is right to defy a gang leader and rescue dogs from a backyard breeder. The story is set in present-day West Auckland where 14-year-old Samantha (Sam) hangs out with a gang of street kids and lives in a crowded camping ground with her homeless family. One night after the police pursue her with a bag of stolen gear, Sam scales a high fence and drops into a nightmare. A filthy backyard is full of caged dogs and about thirty puppies mill around her feet. The puppies are hungry, scared, and cold. Sam realises it's a puppy farm. She manages to rescue one poor pup she names Bobby, but when she returns to the camping ground her mother says she must get rid of him as they're not allowed to keep pets. Sam decides to hide Bobby in an abandoned car. Despite rescuing Bobby, Sam worries about the other puppies at the horrible house. She rings the SPCA for help, but they need her contact details in order to investigate. She hangs up because, like all her family, she's frightened of the authorities. They might visit her family and take her little brothers away as they've nearly done before.

Sam decides she'll sneak back to the house and feed and care for the puppies herself. But where will she get money for the food, let alone the money she needs to help pay her family's rent? When she asks for more jobs from the gang, they become increasingly dangerous. She must 'make deliveries' of meth, which she knows is wrong. While feeding the puppies one evening, she's discovered by a frail old lady who lives at the house. She'd realised someone was helping the animals and is grateful. She tells Sam to call her 'Aunt Ruby' and explains that her bullying nephew, Fowler, has taken over her home and breeds and sells the puppies online for a profit. If she reports him, she fears he'll evict her and harm, even destroy, the puppies and dogs.

Meanwhile Sam's close friend Niko is concerned about her illegal activities. She finally confides in him, and he says he'll help with the puppies if she agrees to stop delivering meth. One night at the house, Sam and Niko see Fowler hitting his dog, a big mastiff called Trojan. Sam recognises the bullying Fowler as the adult kingpin of the gang of kids, organising all the high-level crime. He hands out meth that he bakes in a home lab, but nobody knows where the lab is.

Sam and Niko work together to outsmart Fowler and track him to his lab. Sam has a clever idea. Fowler's dog Trojan always clutches a rugby ball in his mouth. Sam plants her phone in the ball and turns on the GPS to track him. With the help of the other street kids, they follow Fowler in the abandoned car and reach an address deep in the Waitakere Ranges. Sam climbs a towering kauri and finds the lab hidden in a tree hut. Suddenly, Fowler arrives in a helicopter and captures her and the others. They manage to outwit Fowler and escape while Sam traps him in the hut. Aunt Ruby and her father arrive with the police, and all is saved.

About the Author

Susan Brocker has written over 50 fiction and non-fiction books for older children and teens, which have been published worldwide. She has a history degree and a love of social history that is reflected in her books. Susan also has a close affinity with animals. She lives with her husband and many pets in a lovely old villa on a small farm near Tauranga. Other Scholastic titles by Susan include *1914 Riding into War* and *Ice* for older readers and picture books based on true NZ animal tales; *Bess the Brave War Horse*, *Friday the Rebel Dog*, *Mrs Chippy the Cat* and *Pelorus Jack the Dolphin Guide*.



teacher toolkit

 SCHOLASTIC

Writing Style

Caged is an uplifting novel written for the 10+ age group. Set in an urban landscape, the book uncovers the world of inhumane backyard breeders, petty crimes and the life of a struggling homeless family.

The well-crafted, heart-wrenching story is written in the third person past tense. It gives an insightful look into those who are trapped in a cycle of poverty and crime. The author covers themes such as loyalty, honesty, perseverance, pride, courage, survival, elder abuse and helping others.

The story is divided into 35 thrilling chapters, with the author's love of animals and empathy for those less fortunate evident throughout. The protagonist, Sam, is a teenage girl on a mission to save some starving dogs and puppies, put away a dangerous backyard breeder and drug criminal, and rescue Aunt Ruby from his abusive ways. The book's a page-turner, and Sam proves that one young girl can really make a difference.

Shared Learning and Discussion Points

Questions before reading help students make predictions and activate their prior knowledge. Questions during and after reading encourage students to clarify meaning, make connections and predictions, understand the author's purpose and better understand the characters and events. During the shared sessions, encourage the students to identify the challenges that Sam and her family face and how each of them deal with them in their own way. Have the students explore how Sam's character develops and changes as she goes from a person who undertakes petty crimes for survival to becoming a courageous person who executes a daring plan to take down a ruthless criminal.

ASK YOUR STUDENTS:

Look at the front cover and read the text on the back cover. Then read the paragraph on the opening page of the book.

- How does the dog look on the front cover? Why might he or she look like this?
- How do the words at the bottom of the front cover let you know what kind of book this is going to be?
- What tells you know Sam is not a selfish person?
- How does the text on the opening page let you know that Sam isn't your usual petty criminal?
- Read the author's dedication. What does she tell you about Sam's good character traits?

COMPREHENSION

- What kind of skills do you need to break into a vape shop? (pp.1–2)
- Sam knows she cannot outrun a police dog, but she thinks she can outsmart one. How does she do that? (p.2)
- Do you think a police dog would want a person to escape? Why or why not? (p.3)
- Sam's desire to escape the police is strong, but her desire to help the starving and thirsty dogs and puppies at the puppy farm is stronger. What does this tell you about Sam? (pp.4–6)
- The author compares Sam with a cat. What similarities do Sam and a cat share? (p.8 and p.14)
- Why does the vet lie to Sam about the puppy formula, bottles and teats being part of an unclaimed prize? (p.11)
- Sam names the puppy Bobby after a famous dog known as Greyfriars Bobby, who became a loyal and faithful companion to his master John Gray. The small dog even visited his master's graveside for 14 years after he died. Do you think Sam wants a loyal companion too? Why or why not? (p.12)
- Why do Sam's mother's eyes glisten and face soften as she speaks about Grandpa reading the story about Bobby? Why does she not dare look at the cute puppy? (p.17)
- How would you feel if you could not keep a pet you've been given, such as a dog or a cat? (p.18)
- Do you think Sam feels caged herself when she wants to keep Bobby but can't? Explain why. (pp.18–19)
- Why can the park boss not allow Sam's family to keep a puppy? Do you think that's fair? (p.19)
- Sam says the protection lady who visited her school said that all pets had a right to a warm, safe, secure place. Do you agree with her? Do you think people are also entitled to that? Why? (p.19)
- Do you think that the red abandoned car is a good place for a puppy? Do you think it's a reasonable solution for Sam given her circumstances? Why or why not? (pp.20–21)
- Sam is constantly struggling and working out ways to survive her circumstances. What effect does that have on a person's mental health? (p.23)



- Sam makes a promise to the vet and herself to look after Bobby. Do you think she will break that promise? Explain your answer. (p.24)
- Sam thinks about how to get her pack from the puppy farm as she showers. Why do people often think about things in the shower? (p.25)
- Sam's heart wants to look after Bobby, but her head is not so sure about it? Why does she have this conflict? (p.27)
- Do you think Sam will walk away from working with Reggie and the others? Why or why not? (p.41)
- Why does Sam feel happier now that she has a plan? (p.44)
- Sam hangs up the phone when the person at the local animal shelter asks for her contact details. How might Sam feel about the shelter being unable to help? (p.47)
- Why does Sam's father think that Sam is fibbing about the puppy? (p.49)
- The author uses the saying 'until I'm blue in the face'. Given the context of the sentence, what does it mean? (p.56)
- What would you do if you were Aunt Ruby? (p.57)
- What does 'hypocritical' mean? Why does Sam sound hypocritical? (p.59)
- The contents of the hessian sack can't cry out to Sam, so what makes her think that the sack is taunting her? (p.62)
- Stealing from shops and being a runner for a drug criminal are serious crimes. Do you think that Sam had a choice? Explain why. (p.63)
- How can a person's pride stop him or her from getting help? (p.65)
- The pack weighs heavily on Sam's back. How does it also weigh heavily on her mind? (p.67)
- Does Sam do the right thing when she doesn't deliver the package to the gym? Why do you think that? (pp.69-70)
- Why does the author describe Aunt Ruby's face as 'a wrinkled map of despair'? (p.73)
- Why is Niko angry about what meth does to people? (p.75)
- How has Sam's past experiences with the police and authorities affected what she thinks of them? (p.79)
- Sam doesn't know that she has already met Aunt Ruby's nephew. Who do you think he is? (p.80)
- As people age, they often find it harder to look after themselves and do chores around the home. Do you think Aunt Ruby has let her pride prevent her from getting help? Why or why not? (p.82)
- Why does Sam put the thought of the creek flooding and Bobby being stuck in the car aside while she cleans up the back yard? (p.83)
- What does chapter heading 'Fronting Up' mean? (p.90)
- Dad knew about Sam keeping Bobby in Cherry Bomb. Why do you think he kept that to himself? (p.91)
- What do you think Sam's second decision is? (p.95)
- Do you think Sam will be able to hand back the money and drugs and stop working for Fowler? Why or why not? (p.97)
- Why do you think Sam wakes up feeling light-headed and bright? (p.97)
- How are Sam and her mother similar? (p.102)
- Why are the chores at the vet easy for Sam? (pp.102-103)
- How is Aunt Ruby trapped by her circumstances? (p.107)
- What drives Aunt Ruby's nephew to act like he does? (p.111)
- What is the difference between a house and a home? (p.115)
- Why does Sam think she'll have more luck convincing her dad to ask for help than her mum? (p.118)
- If Sam asks for help, what help do you think she will ask for and who do you think she will ask? (p.125)
- Was asking for Mr Andrew's help a sensible decision? (pp.129-132)
- The author says that Sam's 'pants would soon be on fire'. What does she mean by this? Have you heard of the saying that this relates to? (p.133)
- What do you think of Sam's plan to track down the hidden meth lab using the planted phone in the toy rugby ball? (p.136)
- Aunt Ruby calls her own nephew a brute. How do you think she feels having someone in her own family treat her so badly? Have you heard of elder abuse? Give some examples of what could constitute 'elder abuse'. (p.138)
- Mr Andrews comes to help as he promised Sam he would. How would Sam be feeling at that moment? Would this encourage her to ask for more help in the future? Why or why not? (p.140)
- Sam doesn't think that vapes are as harmful as drugs. Do you agree with her? Why or why not? (p.147)
- Why does Sam say that her mother always helps people, just not herself? (p.152)
- Why does the author put the word 'teachers' in single quotation marks? What does she mean? (p.158)
- Why does Sam half wish that Niko had asked for her phone number earlier? (p.161)
- Sam's intuition tells her that the meth lab was nearby. Have you ever used your intuition? Did it turn out to be right? Explain. (p.168)
- Sam thinks that she didn't have a choice in many things in her life lately. Do you think that's the case? Explain your answer. (p.179)
- What do you think Sam's plan is to keep Fowler up in the tree hut? (p.189)
- How does trusting people transform Aunt Ruby's life and Sam's family's lives? (pp.201-203)



Activities

ACTIVITY 1: TRUTH OR LIE?

Sam is a good kid, despite doing bad things sometimes. She knows right from wrong, but unfortunately she often finds herself having to lie to get out of bad situations. She lies to the vet and his receptionist when she takes her puppy Bobby to get help. She lies to her family about where she is going, who she is hanging out with, and where she takes Bobby. She also lies to Niko, a boy who's actually trying to encourage her to get her life back on track and stop doing petty crimes. Both the vet and Niko even lie to Sam, but only to protect her feelings and save her from embarrassment. Write 10 statements from the book that are either true or false. Then test a friend. Read out each statement and have your friend say whether the statement is the truth or a lie.

ACTIVITY 2: SAM'S SIDE HUSTLE

Sam undertakes dodgy and dangerous jobs to earn extra money so that she can help pay the rent at the caravan park. There are ways for young people to earn money without doing petty crimes, such as babysitting and stacking shelves in a supermarket. However, often you need to be older than 14 years old. Today, many young people and adults have a side hustle to earn extra money when times are tough. Side hustles that young children could have might include delivering circulars, mowing lawns in the neighbourhood, walking dogs, feeding pets, washing rubbish bins, having a stall such as selling some of your old toys, and doing gardening work for neighbours. Sam loves helping dogs and older people. Design an advertisement that she could put up in a local shop window advertising her side hustle. For instance, she might offer to walk a dog for an elderly person who can no longer do it.

ACTIVITY 3: DO'S AND DON'TS

In the story, you learn quite quickly that Sam, despite her running away from the police at the beginning of the story, knows right from wrong. She knows what to do and what not to do, even though she doesn't always do it. Create a DO'S and DON'TS chart for Sam. Write all the things that she should do, such as ask for help, in the DO'S column. Then write all the things that Sam *shouldn't* do, such as steal, in the DON'TS column. Use the book to help you. Share your work with a friend.

ACTIVITY 4: ADOPT, DON'T SHOP!

On the last page, the author says that the book is written in recognition of the SPCA and the wonderful work they do preventing cruelty and advocating for animals. One of the things that the SPCA encourages is for people to adopt a pet from an animal shelter such as the SPCA or HUHA, rather than buy one from a shop or a breeder. It believes many animal shelters are overrun with homeless cats and dogs and that breeders don't need to keep breeding more. It also thinks that if you shop and don't adopt you're filling a space that could've been taken by a homeless pet that is looking for its forever home. Sam knows first-hand what the feeling is like to rescue a puppy and provide it with a forever home. Design a poster using infographics (a visual representation of information and data) and short, snappy text to encourage others to 'Adopt, Don't Shop!' For instance, you might want to give some facts and figures about how many pets are dumped at animal shelters in New Zealand, how many animals are adopted each year, and so on. Use the Internet to help you.

ACTIVITY 5: HEADSTONE WRITER

Sam was loyal and devoted to her puppy Bobby and vice versa. The author ended her story with an image of the headstone of Greyfriars Bobby, the small dog from Scotland who was loyal and devoted to his master both during his lifetime and for 14 years after his master died. Use the Internet to research the famous dog. Imagine that you were given the task of creating the headstone for Greyfriars Bobby or for a pet of your own that has passed away. Draw the headstone and write your message. Think about the character traits Greyfriars Bobby or your pet may have had, such as being loyal, faithful, devoted, affectionate, gentle, protective, brave and so on. Share your work with the class.

Written by Janine Scott