



Always Jack
by Susanne Gervay

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Teaching notes written by Christine Sarandis

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1. Book Description

Jack's life is pretty good - he has brilliant friends, everyone loves his funny jokes and he's a great inventor. But things are getting complicated. Nanna's older and wobblier, and why does his face now go red when he sees his best friend Anna? And to top it off Mum and Rob's wedding seems to be taking over the world.

Something really scary has also happened to his mum and it's going to take all of Jack's courage to deal with it.

From the author of the bestselling *I am Jack* comes an insightful and inspiring book about the effect of cancer on families.

2. About the author

Susanne Gervay is an award-winning Australian author and a specialist in child development. Her much-loved and bestselling *I am Jack* is becoming a classic on school bullying, reaching adults and children alike. Her most recent book, *That's Why I Wrote this Song*, was written in collaboration with her daughter, Tori. Susanne's books have earned awards ranging from the Children's Book Council of Australia's Notable Books list to the Family Therapy Awards.

Susanne says:

'I didn't know I was going to be an author. I just wrote because I had to. Because it helped me work out things like - Why did Mum and Dad argue? How could my son be bullied at school? What was love? Friendship? Why is there war? Terrorism? How come my dog made me laugh? Will I ever look OK? What's it mean being here? I'm inspired by my kids, parents and the people who touch my life and have a strong commitment to emotional truth. I write about migration and the refugee experience. My parents were post war refugees and really grateful to be able to make a new life in Australia.

'Being an author is the most fantastic thing. Why do I love it? My best friends in the world are authors and they are amazing, passionate, funny, loving. My readers are my best friends too. When a fan holds *Butterflies* close to her heart and says 'I read and re-read *Butterflies* because it's important to me', I feel privileged. I write because my kids love it too and we share a unique and special experience through my books.

'Writing and life are the same to me. I'm not someone who sits at a desk and writes all day. Writing is here and there, slotted in at night when I'm not too tired. I often get up at four in the morning to write. It's quiet. I work, raise my family, do writing tours. I have to admit that sometimes I go away for a week, so I can finish a book. Writing filters into everything I do.'

3. Acknowledgements

In a rare endorsement, the Cancer Council put their national symbol, the yellow daffodil on the cover of *Always Jack*. The author would also like to acknowledge the generous contribution of National Breast and Ovarian Cancer Centre for providing expert advice in the development of *Always Jack*.

The book is being launched in Breast Cancer Awareness Month October 2010. See the [Cancer Council](#) website.

4. Note to teachers

Any discussions about cancer should be sensitively managed to take into account the feelings of students and whether they may have been personally affected by cancer in the family. Children should not feel pressured to discuss or reveal personal circumstances. Support and counseling should be readily available for children who become distressed.

A presentation about cancer and its phases in class should focus on psychological and emotional issues, and aim to enable children to discuss the disease, to gain some awareness of appropriate reactions and ways to support those diagnosed and their family members. Teaching modules should be developmentally appropriate for different ages. As in the book, focus on the treatable nature and high survival rates of the illness should be presented.

5. Main characters

Jack and his family - Mum, step dad Rob, sister Samantha, step-brother Leo, Nanna, Granddad (now deceased), friends Christopher and Anna.

6. Themes for discussion

- Family life – growing old, remembering those who have passed away, blending families, friends, love, school.
- Jack's interest in how things work and science.
- Cancer and illness.
- Photography as a way of recording life events and experiences.
- Growing up – Jack and Anna's feelings for one another.
- The role of humour and a positive outlook on life.
- The value of talking through problems and questions.

7. Also discuss ...

- Cancer types, causes, support and treatments.
- The difference between radio and chemo therapy.
- The value of talking about issues or problems that concern us.

- How information and accurate facts can help us to understand things better and ease some of our worries.
- Different ways in which people deal with bad news or circumstances.
- The ways in which Jack and his family create some positive situations and have some laughs when faced with life's challenges (e.g. Nanna's ageing, Mum's cancer, Mum and Rob's decision to forego wedding gifts in favour of money to help send Christopher's family to Vietnam). Think of some other examples from the book to discuss.
- The many ways in which Jack and friends of the family helped during difficult times.
- The humour in the novel and how it affects the reader's experience of a serious issue.

8. Plot questions to kick start discussion

Chapter 1

- After reading the first chapter, give your impressions of Jack and his family.

Chapter 2

- What serious issue was momentarily raised but then brushed off during a family wedding shopping trip?

Chapter 3

- Describe Jack's emotions about his relationship with Rob and Rob's son Leo.

Chapter 4

- Despite being jealous of Leo, why did Jack feel compelled to be kind to him after the car scene between Rob and his ex-wife?
- At the barbeque, what did Jack learn about his friend Christopher and why was he initially hurt?

Chapter 5

- What prompted Jack's insecurities about his mum and Rob?
- On the bus, what reaction did Jack have to seeing George Hamel, the boy who had bullied him?
- Why were Jack and Christopher both interested in researching Vietnam?
- During their research for the project on Vietnam, what disturbing image remained with Jack?
- Why did Patch's death cause Jack to worry about Nanna?

Chapter 6

- Why did Jack resent Rob going away for the weekend to see Leo?
- What made Jack sad after visiting his grandfather's grave?
- Describe what Jack learnt about the war in Vietnam and his grandfather's role in it during his project interview with Nanna?
- Which precious gift was passed down to Jack from his grandfather?

Chapter 7

- Why do you think Jack's mum wanted him and Samantha to know about how the mammogram worked?
- How did Jack ensure Nanna would use her walking stick to prevent possible falls?
- How did Jack react to Christopher's interview with his parents?

Chapter 8

- What made Jack's joy about winning the project prize and holding hands with Anna suddenly seem insignificant?
- Describe Jack's confused reaction to learning about his mum's breast cancer?

Chapter 9

- How did Nanna, Jack and Samantha relieve some of their worries about Mum while visiting Grandad's grave?
- What did Nanna say Jack and Samantha should do to help their mum through a difficult time?

Chapter 10

- How did Mum say the family could best help her as she learnt how to deal with her cancer?
- What emotion did all of the unanswered questions evoke in Jack, his family and friends?

Chapter 11

- How did Jack, Nanna and Samantha manage while Mum was in hospital?
- Why was Mum overcome with emotion when she arrived home?
- What did Jack learn when he researched radiotherapy?
- In relation to Mum's cancer, what did Rob refer to as "great news" and why?

Chapter 12

- What did Christopher and Jack learn when they researched cancer in Vietnam and what positive action did they take as a result?
- How did Samantha and Jack feel and what did they experience during their visit to the cancer ward with Mum for her radiotherapy?
- What was Rob and Mum's gift to the children at the lunch to celebrate the end of Mum's hospital treatment?

Chapter 13

- What was Christopher's exciting news about his family?
- Following mum's last check-up, why was it suddenly 'the best day of [Jack's] life'?
- According to Jack, which decision would make Rob and Mum's wedding the best ever?

Chapter 14

- Which additional occurrences made the day of the wedding extra special for Jack?

9. Projects and activities

- Create a project as Jack's class was required to do. Choose an immigration story and a place that is important to you or your family and conduct interviews, do some research, find or take photographs and present and share the work with your class. Work could be presented in poster, PowerPoint or another agreed format.
- Discuss and draw up a class list of favourite recipes or foods that you and your family love. Make Jack's famous banana cake (see recipe at the back) or Nanna's favourite choc chip cookies to share with the class. (See recipe below – Worksheet 1.)
- Conduct a class survey and graph or write up the results to show where all the members of the class and their parents and grandparents come from. Think of a way to represent the places you have discussed by drawing, writing or telling a story. (See Worksheet 2 below).
- Find out the meanings for a range of cancer-related terms. (See Worksheet 3 below.)
- Talk about the importance of the SunSmart program or another cancer council campaign. <http://www.sunsmart.com.au/>
- Fundraising activities & ideas: Organise and run a cancer fundraiser at school.
 1. Dress in yellow to support Daffodil Day
<http://www.daffodilday.com.au/home.htm>
 2. Host a parents or grandparents morning tea for the Cancer Council's fundraiser <http://www.biggestmorningtea.com.au/>
 3. Relay for Life – www.relayforlife.org
- Read and discuss the author comments on writing (above) and the 'Acknowledgements' at the back of the book.

10. Other books by the author

- *I Am Jack*
- *Super Jack*
- *That's why I Wrote This Song*
- *Butterflies*
- *The Cave*
- *Daisy Sunshine*

11. Useful links and resources

Monkey Baa theatre have adapted Susanne Gervay's *I Am Jack*
<http://www.monkeybaa.com.au/i-am-jack.html>

Susanne Gervay's website and blog

<http://www.sgervay.com/writingnews.php>

<http://www.sgervay.com/blog/?p=4656>

Link to teaching resources on Susanne's books including those in the Jack trilogy

<http://www.sgervay.com/readingnotes.php>

Cancer information

<http://www.cancercouncil.com.au/>

<http://www.canceraustralia.gov.au/>

Worksheet 1

Nanna's Favourite Chocolate Chip Cookies

Ingredients

150g softened butter
½ cup caster sugar
½ cup brown sugar
1 tsp vanilla extract
1 egg
1 ¾ cups plain flour
½ cup dark chocolate bits
½ cup milk chocolate bits

Method

Preheat oven to 160°C. Line 2 baking trays with non-stick paper. Beat 1 softened butter, caster sugar, cup brown sugar and vanilla extract for 1-2 minutes or until smooth and well combined. Beat in the egg.

Stir in plain flour in two batches. Stir in dark chocolate bits and milk chocolate bits until evenly distributed. Spoon tablespoonfuls of the mixture into balls and place on the lined trays. Press down slightly.

Bake for 15-18 minutes or until light golden and cooked at 220 degrees. Transfer to a wire rack to cool. Eat and enjoy.

Worksheet 2

Where we come from

Complete the sheet below and then create a bar graph to show where all of the students' in the class were born. You could do the same for parents and grandparents.

Student's name	Student's origin	Parent 1 origin	Parent 2 origin	Grand-parent 1 origin (Mother's side)	Grand-parent 2 origin (Mother's side)	Grand-parent 3 origin (Father's side)	Grand-parent 4 origin (Father's side)

Worksheet 3

Find out meanings for all of the words listed, add three of your own and write them down to share with others.

Word	Meaning
Cancer	A term for diseases in which abnormal cells divide without control and can invade nearby tissues.
Radiotherapy	
Chemotherapy	
Oncologist	
Leukaemia	