



Teachers' Notes



Fil and Harry, by Jenny Blackford

Illustrated by Kristin Devine

ISBN: 9780648815402

Published by Christmas Press

May 2021

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**About the story:**

Fil always suspected that her cat Harry could talk if he really tried. Sometimes she even dreamed about it. But it was still a shock when he did start talking, on the worst afternoon of her life – or one of them. She seemed to be having a lot of them lately.

Her friend Kirsten had ignored her all day at school, again, after spending the weekend at her place. Harry told her that her friend Kirsten was 'selfishness personified', and maybe he was right.

Things got worse after that. Grandma painted Fil's older brother's bedroom walls black, escalating tensions with Fil and Stephen's stepmother Elspeth, who tried far too hard. And Kirsten soon showed her true colours, making Fil's life even more difficult...

Harry was the only one in the family who knew the way out of the tangle.

A fresh, lively junior novel by Jenny Blackford (left, below), winner of the 2020 Davitt Award for Best Children's Crime Novel, with fabulous illustrations by Kristin Devine (right, below), winner of the 2019 New England Illustration Prize.



**About the author:**

Jenny loves writing for kids, and often contributes poems and stories to *The School Magazine*. Her awards include the Thunderbolt Prize for Crime Poetry in 2017, and two first prizes in the Humorous Verse section of the Henry Lawson prizes.

Her previous novel from Christmas Press (in the Eagle Books imprint) was *The Girl in the Mirror*, a spidery, ghostly middle-grade mystery. It won the 2020 Davitt Award for Best Children's Crime Novel.

Jenny lives in sunny Newcastle. She loves cats so much that she wrote a whole tiny book of cat poems, called *The Duties of a Cat* (Pitt Street Poetry). Her Ragdoll cat Felix has her twisted around his furry little paw. Now and then she dreams that he can talk.

Jenny's website is at <http://www.jennyblackford.com/>

**About the illustrator:**

Kristin Devine is an artist and illustrator from the New England region of NSW Australia. She grew up in the small town of Inverell with her parents, three sisters and a veritable menagerie of pets. She has a deep fascination with the natural world and loves to explore intricate specimens of flora and fauna through her drawings. In 2019, she won first prize in the New England Illustration Prize, a national award for illustrators at all stages of their careers.

*Fil and Harry* is the first children's novel she has illustrated.

Kristin's website is at <https://www.kadevine.com.au>

**Something from the author:**

I often used to dream of my cat talking to me (in human English, not in Cat). One morning the cat was loudly demanding SOMETHING — maybe he wanted me to feed him, maybe to pick him up, or put him down RIGHT NOW, or.... (He was a very demanding cat.) I said, 'Well, why don't you just tell me what you want in English, like you did last night? I know you can do it when you really want to'.

It took a minute for me to go, Oops, cats don't really talk. It was just a dream.

*Fil and Harry* grew out of that Oops moment. In *Fil and Harry*, Fil's cat Harry really CAN talk in human English. As I'm sure many of them could, if they really wanted to!

One of the themes in *Fil and Harry* is fitting in at school and trying to make friends. That is something close to my own experience. I changed schools often as a kid, four different primary schools and two different high schools, and I had to try to fit in and make friends every time. That was never easy, and sometimes it could be terrifying! And some kids have a

lot more changes than that. It can be a struggle, fitting in, if you're shy or different in some way.

Sometimes, too, people who you think are your friends aren't really. They're just using you, and it hurts terribly when you find that out, just like Fil found out with Kirsten. But most people are genuinely lovely, and sometimes friends you make at school are still great friends as adults. I dedicated *Fil and Harry* to one of them, my friend Amanda, who I first met at the start of High School when we were both 11. And we're still friends now.

### **Something from the illustrator:**

My illustrations for *Fil and Harry* started with a combination of mind maps and sketches — lots of key words and very quick sketches. Illustrations have to stand well on their own as well as interact with both the text and other pictures within the book, so I spent some time working out the pacing and balance of the images, combining or separating ideas etc before I started creating each illustration. I also spent some time sketching and developing the visual appearance of the main characters. The illustrations for *Fil and Harry* were created digitally, which means that I draw with a digital pencil on digital paper and with pixels instead of pigments. I have been creating an increasing number of illustrations this way over the past year as it is such a versatile medium and is well suited to the digital marketplace. I also use digital mannequins instead of the traditional little wooden ones — they are much more adaptable and hold their poses much better!

### **Post reading classroom discussion questions**

1. Fil didn't know Harry could talk before he said he wanted roast chicken, not tinned anchovies. Why do you think he suddenly revealed his secret to her?
2. Grandma tells Fil at the end of the book that Harry's mum Delilah could also talk. How do you think Grandma found out about that?
3. Lexie and Indigo sound much nicer than Kirsten. So why do you think Fil wanted so much to be friends with her, not them?
4. It doesn't seem that Stephen, Dad or Elspeth know anything about Harry talking. How do you think they would react if they found out?

### **Classroom research activities**

1. Cats are found all over the world, and there are many breeds of them. Harry is a Persian cat. How many other breeds can you list?
2. Cats had a very special place in ancient Egypt. Look up some examples. You can start with this: <https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/animals/gayer-anderson-cat>
3. Harry not only talks, but he also helps sort out some of Fil's problems. He's fictional, but there are real cats who have had jobs! Have a look at this article here about some real-life

examples in England: <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-england-42098216> See if you can find out more about one of them.

### **Classroom creative activities**

1. Do you have a pet cat? Imagine if it could talk! What do you think it would say to you? Write a short conversation you might have with your cat. Even if you don't have one, think about cats in your neighbourhood, or cats that friends or family members own, and make up a conversation.
2. In Chapter Seven, we learn that Fil thinks dolls are creepy. Imagine what Harry might think of them and create a cartoon of how he might react to one of those creepy dolls!
3. In the lovely illustration of Fil's room in Chapter Fifteen, we can see books on the shelf. What books do you think they might be? (You can make them up, they don't have to be real books). Write a bit about one of them and create a book cover for it.

### **Bonus research/creative activity, by Kristin Devine:**

a. You know where your elbow is, but where is a cat's elbow? Did you know that cats walk on their toes? For a research activity, find some pictures of your favourite cat characters (Simba, Puss in Boots, Tom Kitten etc.) and compare them to real cat and human anatomy. How have the illustrators and animators combined human and cat characteristics to make these colourful characters? Some helpful resources can be found here:

<https://www.dkfindout.com/us/animals-and-nature/cats/inside-cat/>

b. When you are drawing your cartoon of Harry (see activity 2 above), think about what you have learnt about cat anatomy to help you imagine how he might look and move.

### **Bonus fun facts article, by Jenny Blackford**

*In Fil and Harry, of course, Harry talks to Fil. But not all of us are lucky enough to have a talking cat in the family. That doesn't mean your cat doesn't communicate with you, though! In this fun article, author Jenny Blackford answers the question: **So, what is your cat trying to tell you?***

Cats talk to us quite differently from how they talk to one another. While cats will purr, hiss, growl and yowl to other cats, they very seldom meow to one another. But almost all cats meow to communicate with their human families.

Whether you can work out what your cat is trying to tell you is a different problem. A meow can mean almost anything, maybe 'Hello' or 'Go away', 'Stop working and pay attention to me' or 'It's raining! The garden is wet and it's all your fault!', 'The litter tray is disgusting', or the ever-popular 'I'm starving — feed me!'. It's often a matter of trial and error to work out what they mean. And all cats are different!

Sometimes, after my own cat has meowed at me for a while, and I've refilled his water bowl, put out fresh food, opened the door to let him out, opened it again to let him back in (often several times), picked him up, put him down, sat on the sofa and tickled his ears, and every single thing I try turns out to be wrong, he looks at me with what can only be described as feline frustration. I can almost hear him saying: 'Human beings! They are so stupid! I have explained it perfectly clearly, and she still hasn't done what I've asked!'

We might never be able to understand exactly what a cat is trying to tell us (if we don't have a cat like Harry, that is!). But it helps to understand some of the basics of feline body language. Here are a few of the most important possibilities:

*Is your cat's tail sticking straight up, high in the air like a furry flag?*

Your cat is telling you it's happy to see you. It's the same signal as cats use with other cats to tell them they are friendly.

*Is its tail swishing slowly from side to side?*

Your cat is telling you it is conflicted. Maybe it is enjoying what is happening (being tickled on the tummy, for example) but at the same time it feels a bit threatened. It's probably a good time to stop tickling its tummy (or whatever) and leave the cat alone for a while, or you might get scratched.

*Is your cat's tail lashing from side to side?*

Your cat is telling you that it is *definitely not* happy. Stop doing what you're doing immediately. Remember that cats have sharp claws and teeth.

*Is your cat's fur fluffed up so it looks twice its usual size? Is its tail curved downwards? Is its back arched? Is it standing sideways to you, or to some other animal?*

Your cat is *really* not happy! It is trying to look larger, to deter a predator or enemy from attacking it. Is there a cat around that it really hates? Or a dog? (Though sometimes my cat does this when he wants to play-fight with me, as if we were both kittens. I pretend to run towards him, he jumps into the air, maybe runs at my legs and swerves away at the last moment, and I pretend to try to catch him. It's fun for all the family.)

*Is your cat weaving around your legs?*

Some cynical people think this behaviour just means it wants to be fed — but often cats do this when they aren't hungry at all. Cats will weave their bodies around other cats that they are friendly with. Your cat is actually saying 'I like you. You're my friend.'

*Does it rub the sides of its face against doorways, cupboards, coffee tables and so on?*

Your cat is saying that it owns the furniture, and the house it is in. Which it does, from a cat point of view.

*Does it rub the sides of its face against your hands, shoes, jeans, knees etc.?*

It is marking you as part of its territory. Your cat is saying that it owns you, which is probably true 😊

*Is your cat purring?*

This is complicated. People used to think it meant a cat was happy, because kittens purr to their mothers — but even cats in pain will purr to their humans. Scientists now think that it means, 'I'm here. Don't forget about me. Please stay with me.'

*Is your cat kneading you with its paws (and claws, ouch)?*

Your cat is regressing to kittenhood, when it kneaded at its mother's side for milk. Your cat was warm and happy and well-fed, snuggled up with its family. If your cat is kneading at you, it is remembering how happy and secure it felt with its mother. Which doesn't stop the claws hurting!