

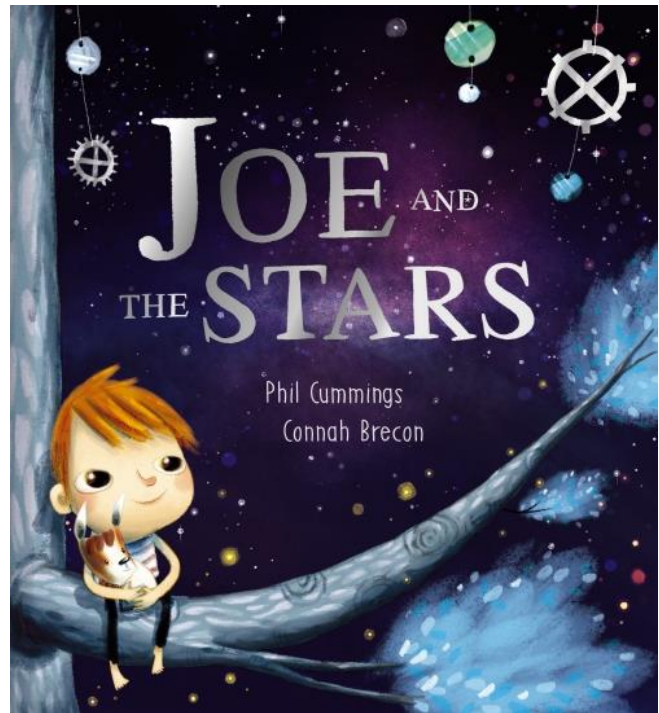
# Joe and the Stars

Author

**Phil Cummings**

Illustrator

**Connah Brecon**



## Synopsis

Joe has lived his whole life out in the red-dust countryside beneath a wide open sky where a billion stars shine every night. He loves to sit in the old tree that his grandpa planted, listening to the wind chime he and his grandpa made swing and sing in the breeze. The open land, the sky, and the sounds and smells all bring Joe happiness. But sometimes, change comes whether you want it or not, and one day a truck comes to take their family's belongings away. Joe and his family are moving to the city, and for Joe, their new home is strange and grey and wrong. His room is small, the window is tiny, and the stars at night are drowned by the bright lights of the noisy grey city. There is nothing outside worth looking at but one small sad tree with bare branches. So Joe decides to do something about this. He carefully sets to work, and creates a handful of shining stars to hang from the tree outside. And like the stars at home, Joe's stars also help bring him happiness and peace. For Joe his handmade starscape becomes a path to friendship with the other children living in the city, they brighten up both the day and the nighttime view, and along with his new friends he works to make even more stars and find the brightness in life however different it may be from before. A tale of resilience, hope, and living with unwanted change, *Joe and the Stars* is a predominantly autobiographical story of a small boy who makes the best of a situation he never wanted, and who manages to find an inner strength and ability to cope with change he never knew he had.

## About the Author

Award-winning author **Phil Cummings** was born in Port Broughton and grew up in the mid-north town of Peterborough in South Australia. Phil has published more than 60 books for young readers, many of which have received great acclaim locally and internationally. *Ride Ricardo*, *Ride* was named an Honour Book by the CBCA, 2016. *Boy* was the winner of the Children's Peace Literature Award, 2017. *Feathers* was shortlisted in the Prime Minister's Literary Awards in 2018.

## About the Author/Illustrator

**Connah Brecon** is an author and illustrator originally from the UK, now living in Victoria with his family. *Joe and the Stars* is his third book published by Scholastic Australia.

## Themes

Key Themes include: Hope, resilience, family, friends, the night sky, new places, adaptation, change, loss, new beginnings.

## Writing Style

Written throughout in the third person from the point of view of Joe, Cummings' language is moving and evocative. Aimed at younger readers, sentences are short and direct, while Cummings makes excellent use of metaphor and simile in his descriptions giving the text a lyricism that resonates emotionally. Dialogue is minimal and relevant, and the descriptions of Joe's actions and his family's interactions and behaviour are presented in a matter-of-fact manner. Cummings leaves it to the reader to infer for themselves how Joe feels about events, based on the simple yet poignant descriptions of his actions, and of the surrounding environment. Cummings understated depiction of Joe's response, in combination with his highly evocative description of places and events, creates an emotional depth to the story that is both touching and relatable. Well suited for reading aloud, Cummings' language brings the world Joe lives in to life and will engage the attention of the youngest reader as well as adult readers.

## Illustration Style

Digitally created, Brecon's artwork consists of full page spreads, half page spreads, and one page with a three-panel vignette superimposed on the other artwork. Places and people are presented both realistically, and with a degree of whimsy that reflects the author's hauntingly simple descriptive passages. The palette chosen is filled with bright and glowing reds and oranges; deep and subtly variegated night-sky blues, indigos and purples; and a multitude of smoky greys for the cityscape. Figures are naturally life-like, and Joe's vibrantly orange hair was a deliberate choice by the artist to encapsulate and reflect the reds and oranges of his home at the start of the story. The visual narrative directly parallels the textual narrative throughout, and Brecon deftly portrays the visual representations of Cummings' lyrical and metaphorically rich prose.

## TEACHER NOTES

- 1) Before reading the story, as a class look closely at the cover and title, and discuss what you can learn about the story. Some things that you might like to include in your discussion could be:
  - What is the title of this story?
  - Who do you think is pictured on the cover?
  - What is the boy on the cover doing in the picture?
  - Why do you think he is doing this?
  - How do you think he is feeling in the cover picture, and why?
  - What can you tell about the boy on the cover from the picture and title - where do you think he lives, how old might he be, and what things might be important to him?
  - What do you think could happen in this story?
  - How does the cover artwork make you feel? What are some words that you might use to describe this picture?
- 2) *Joe and the Stars* starts with a description of the part of the world where Joe lives. It mentions the soil - *the dust was as orange as sunset*; the landscape *the land was flat*; and the sky *the sky was wide*. As a class discuss this description, and the words the author has chosen for the different aspects of it.
  - What else can we learn about Joe's home from this sentence?

- What other sorts of skies might there be, and how could we describe them?
  - Why does the author talk about the colour of the dust rather than the colour of the ground?
  - What does this tell us about the climate of Joe's home?
  - Individually, or in pairs, write a description of where you live using the same or a similar format.
- 3) Joe and his grandpa made a wind chime from tin and twine. Create a wind chime of your own using found items from around your home or school. You might want to (carefully, and using gloves!) look in the recycling bin for metal or glass objects you can wash and use in your chimes. Old keys, cutlery, and nuts and bolts all make lovely chiming sounds when assembled in a wind chime. Be sure to ask an adult to help you with anything that might have sharp edges, and clean your found objects well before using them! Hang your finished wind chime in a tree, or by your front door.
- 4) Joe likes to watch the sunrise and sunset from the branch in his tree. Get up early and watch the sun rise one day, and that evening also watch the sun set. Does the sunrise look different from the sunset? If so, in what way, and why? You might want to take several photos of both the sunrise and the sunset so that you can more easily compare them later. Paint pictures of the sunrise and the sunset you saw, and share them with your class.
- 5) The tree where Joe likes to sit was planted by his grandpa years ago. Plant a tree of your own. Fill a medium sized pot with potting mix or soil, and carefully make a small hole in the centre. In the hole, plant the seed from a piece of fruit that you know grows near where you live. If you live in a more tropical area you might want to try planting a mango pit, macadamias, or an avocado seed, while if you live in a cooler climate apple seed, apricot seeds, or plum pits might be more successful. Care for your seed, watering it lightly every day or two, and place it in a warm (but not hot!) and sheltered corner of your house or yard. If your seed starts to grow into a tree you can either plant it in your yard, or you can move it to a larger pot and place it on a balcony, in a courtyard, or by your front door. Remember to keep watering it daily until it is at least a year old, and then still water it every few days unless it has been raining.
- 6) When Joe can't see the stars anymore because of the big city's lights, he creates a starscape of his own. How do you think he created all the little stars that he hung from the tree? Create a starscape of your own. Draw stars on thin cardboard, cut the star shapes out, and cover them in aluminium foil. Punch holes in them and hang them from strings across the windows or ceiling, or pin them to the walls. Use a permanent marker to write a word on each star that you think describes how Joe feels when he looks at his home made starscape.
- 7) In the story, the author talks about Joe's grandpa, the things that he did with Joe, and things that he said - but Joe's grandpa doesn't appear in the book. Why do you think this might be? How do you think Joe feels about his grandpa, and why?
- 8) As a class discuss how you think Joe feels when he first moves to the city with his family. Some things to include in your discussion are:
- Why do you think Joe and his family might be moving to the city?
  - How do you think that Joe feels about his family moving?
  - How do you think Joe feels about his new home when they first arrive?
  - How do you think Joe feels about his new home at the very end of the story, and why?
  - What are some words that you can use to describe all the different feelings that Joe has throughout the course of the story?

- 9) When Joe moves to the city he finds that it is very different. The house he lives in is different, the window he looks out is different, the sounds are different, and even the sky at night is different!
- Think about where you live, and whether it is more like where Joe lived in the country, or where he lives in the city.
  - What are some of the things where you live that are similar to Joe's old home?
  - What are some things where you live that are similar to Joe's new home?
  - What are the sounds, sights, and colours in the world around you where you live?
  - Do you live in a city, town or out in the country?
  - Write a short description of what you can see when you look out your bedroom window, and how you feel about the view.
  - Illustrate your description with a drawing or painting of the view from your bedroom window.
- 10) What do the stars look like at night where you live? Does the sky look like the country sky at the start of the book, or more like the city sky at the end? Look carefully at all the artwork in the book showing the stars at night. What are the different shapes, colours, and patterns that the illustrator has used? Create a night sky artwork of your own using acrylic paint on black card. Paint the background colours using blues and purples in deep swirls like the ones in the sky in *Joe and the Stars*, then dot stars on using white or silver paint. You can flick sprays of paint off a toothbrush, or you can make individual stars with the tip of a pencil dipped in paint.