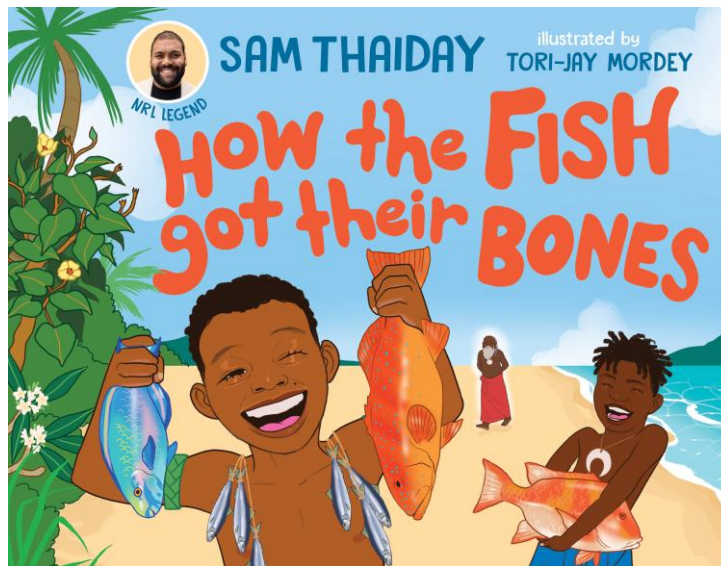




HOW THE FISH GOT THEIR BONES

Written by SAM THAIDAY

Illustrated by TORI-JAY MORDEY

RECOMMENDED FOR: Ages 4–9 YEARS OLD (FOUNDATION TO YEAR 4 PRIMARY)

GENRE: Fiction Picture Book – a rhyming teaching story

THEMES: Torres Strait Islander storytelling, sharing and generosity, caring for the environment, sustainability, greed and consequences, family, Elders, oral history and passing down stories, respect, courage and creativity

CURRICULUM LEARNING AREAS:

- Across the Curriculum: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Histories and Cultures
- Across the Curriculum: Sustainability
- English: Language and literacy
- The Arts: Visual Arts

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Note: As with all First Nations content, please teach this story with care and respect, and seek the guidance of local Torres Strait Islander and Aboriginal community members and Elders where possible.

INTRODUCTION

How the Fish Got Their Bones is a vibrant, rhyming picture book that brings to life a teaching story from the Torres Strait. From the big heart of beloved NRL Broncos legend Sam Thaiday – a proud Kulkalgal man – and brought to life by Tori-Jay Mordey's stunning illustrations, it follows two boys, a generous old man and a catch of fish, and explains why fish have bones to this very day.

When two boys catch far more fish than they need, they refuse to share even a single one with an old man who asks. They have forgotten an ancient rule: take only what you need, and always share. The old man turns out to be a keeper of the ways, and the boys' greed has a consequence that lasts forever. With rhythm, humour and warmth, the story carries a powerful message about generosity, respecting our elders and caring for the world around us.

These notes invite students to do four things, just as Sam hopes his readers will. First, to talk to their own elders and family and listen to the stories they hold. Second, to think carefully about the lesson this book teaches and how it applies to their own lives. Third, to begin creating their own stories about the things they care about. And fourth, to find the courage to illustrate those stories and share them with others.

A WORD FROM SAM THAIDAY

'My name is Samuel Arthur Thaiday. Samuel was the maiden name of Aka Raina, my grandmother on my father's side. She was a proud Kulkalgal woman from Iama, also known as Yam Island, in the Torres Strait. Arthur was the name of my grandfather on my mother's side, a cattle farmer near Mount Barker in Western Australia. And Thaiday is my family name, which I carry with pride.

'As a child, I struggled to find books to read. To be honest, I just struggled to read in general. I would look for books with rhythm and flow – books with a rhyme or a beat to them. I found these a whole lot easier to read.

'I especially found myself drawn to Dreamtime stories – stories with hidden messages and cultural connections threaded throughout them. But as much as I enjoyed these stories, I really wanted to find stories of the Torres Strait. So I set off on a cultural journey of connection and decided to put some stories of my own together – stories I'd been told, with messages I wanted to teach my own daughters.

'I hope this story of how the fish got their bones inspires you to ask questions, seek knowledge and explore your own family stories.'

CLASSROOM DISCUSSION AND ACTIVITIES

BEFORE READING

Setting the Scene

- To support learning and create a caring, sharing environment, try sitting in a circle with students to talk through these points and undertake these activities. Where possible, sit outside near water or under a tree. If you are able to, invite a local Elder or other Custodian to be part of your learning – it is up to them to decide what is appropriate to share, and they should be paid appropriately for their time and knowledge.

This is a teaching story from the Torres Strait, shared by Sam Thaiday. As you read and discuss it, remember that First Nations stories, cultures and histories are not only of the past – they are alive and continuing today.

Where Is the Torres Strait?

- The Torres Strait is a group of islands between the tip of Cape York in far north Queensland and Papua New Guinea. Sam's grandmother, Aka Raina, was a Kulkalgal woman from Iama (Yam Island). Torres Strait Islander peoples are one of the two distinct First Nations groups of Australia, alongside Aboriginal peoples, each with their own languages, cultures and stories.
 - Find the Torres Strait on a map of Australia. How is it the same as, and different from, where you live?
 - What do you already know about the Torres Strait? What would you like to find out?
 - Use the AIATSIS Map of Indigenous Australia to find out what Country your school is on, and what the original language of that place is.

On the Cover

- Show the cover, read the title aloud and ask:
 - What do you see? What do you think this story might be about?
 - The two boys are holding fish and laughing. How do you think they are feeling? How might that change by the end of the story?
 - Why do you think the title is *How the Fish Got Their Bones*? What is a story that explains how or why something came to be?
 - How do you feel when you go fishing, or visit the ocean or a river?

Predicting from the Title

- Stories that explain why the world is the way it is – why the fish have bones, why the sun rises, why a bird has its call – are found in cultures all over the world. As you read, look for the clues that explain why, in this story, fish came to have bones.

ACROSS THE CURRICULUM: ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER HISTORIES AND CULTURES

Stories Are Our History

- The book opens with the lines: 'Stories are our history, passed on down the line. But sometimes they get lost, and jumbled over time.' For thousands of years, First Nations peoples have passed down knowledge through storytelling, song, dance and language. These stories carry lessons, history and connection to family and place.
 - Why do you think Sam begins the book by telling us that stories are our history?
 - What does it mean for a story to be 'passed on down the line'?
 - Why might it matter that some stories 'get lost and jumbled over time'? How can we help keep important stories alive?

Listening to Your Elders

- Sam wrote this book partly to pass on stories he had been told, and he hopes it inspires readers to 'ask questions, seek knowledge and explore your own family stories'. One of the most important things we can do is sit down, listen to our elders and older family members, and hear the stories they carry.

Sam says he set off on a 'cultural journey of connection' to find and gather the stories of his family and the Torres Strait. Everyone's journey of connection looks different – but it always begins with asking and listening.

ACTIVITY

Story Collectors

Over the coming week, become a 'story collector'. Talk to a grandparent, an Elder, an aunty, uncle or older family member or friend, and ask them to share a story. You might ask:

- What was a story you were told when you were young?
- Is there a story about our family, or about where our family comes from?
- What is a lesson an older person taught you that you have never forgotten?
- Was there a special place that mattered to you when you were a child?

Bring your story back to share with the class (only the parts your family is happy for you to share). As a class, talk about what these stories have in common. What lessons do they carry? How does it feel to listen to someone older tell a story from their life?

My Name, My Family

Sam begins by explaining where each part of his name – Samuel Arthur Thaiday – comes from, and the family story behind it. Names often carry history and connection.

- Do you know the story behind your name, or your family name? Who were you named after, or what does your name mean?
- Ask your family about your family history. Did your family travel from somewhere else to be here today?
- Make a visual family story map – it could show a family tree, a journey, or the places that give your family a sense of belonging and identity.

ACROSS THE CURRICULUM: SUSTAINABILITY

The Lesson of the Story

- At the heart of *How the Fish Got Their Bones* is a deal: 'Men and fish had made a deal that stood the test of time ... Never being greedy – just take one for yourself.' The fish gave themselves as food, and in return people promised to take only what they needed and to share. When the two boys catch twenty fish and refuse to share even one with the old man, they break that promise – and from then on, fish have bones.

As a class, retell the story and talk about the moral: 'Don't live your life with greed. Be kind to the environment and take just what you need.'

- What was the rule, or deal, between the people and the fish? Why do you think such a rule existed?
- What did the boys do wrong? Was it only that they were rude to the old man, or was it something bigger?
- The boys eventually shared the fish with their neighbours – so why were they still punished? (Think about why they shared, and how they treated the old man.)
- What does 'take just what you need' mean to you? Can you think of times when people take more than they need?

Caring for the Environment

- Sam has said this story carries 'a powerful environmental message'. Taking only what we need, and making sure there is enough left for others and for the future, is a way of caring for the world around us.
 - Why is it important not to take too many fish from the sea or rivers? What might happen if everyone took twenty fish each time?

- What are some ways people today take 'more than they need'? Think about food, water, plastic or energy.
- What is one small thing you and your class could do to take care of your local environment – a beach, river, park or playground?

As a class, choose one 'take just what you need' goal for the term (for example: no food waste at lunchtime, or a litter-free playground).

Track how you go and talk about what was easy and what was hard.

Sharing and Generosity

- The boys' dad tells them, 'that's too much for us, let's share with families down the street.' Sharing and looking after one another is a strong value in Torres Strait Islander cultures and in many cultures around the world.
 - Can you share a time when someone was generous to you, or when you shared something with someone else? How did it feel?
 - Why do you think the old man asked the boys for a fish, even though he was a rule maker who could simply take one?
 - How would the story have ended differently if the boys had shared a fish straight away?

ENGLISH

Language: Rhyme, Rhythm and Reading

- Sam loves stories with 'rhythm and flow – books with a rhyme or a beat to them', because as a child he found them easier and more fun to read. *How the Fish Got Their Bones* is written in rhyming verse with a strong beat.

Sam says he 'struggled to read in general' as a child, and that rhyme and rhythm helped him. Rhyming stories can make reading feel less like hard work and more like a song.

- Read a page aloud together and clap or tap along to the beat. Can you feel the rhythm?
- Find the rhyming words in a verse (for example, time / line, or feast / least). Can you think of other words that would rhyme too?
- Why do you think rhyme and rhythm can make a story easier or more fun to read?
- Perform a verse as a class – with actions, claps or a beat. How does reading aloud change the way the story feels?

Comprehension

- Use these questions to explore the story's sequence and meaning:
 - At the start of the story, what was life like for the fish?
 - How many fish did the two boys catch? How is the number written on the page, and why do you think it is written that way?
 - What did the boys say to the old man? How do you think the old man felt?
 - What happened when the families cooked and ate the fish?
 - Who was the old man really? Why is he described as 'a rule maker, a keeper of the ways'?
 - In your own words, what is the moral of the story?

Vocabulary

- Discuss the meaning of words from the story and add them to a class word wall: greed, gluttony, generous, protein, savour, respect, custodian, environment, consequence, moral.

THE ARTS: VISUAL LITERACY AND VISUAL ARTS

Reading the Pictures

- Tori-Jay Mordey is a First Nations artist with Torres Strait Islander and English heritage. She drew the illustrations digitally, and the characters are loosely based on her own cousins, nieces and nephews. Her pictures help tell the story alongside the words.
 - Look at how the colours change through the book – bright blues and greens under the sea, glowing sunsets, deep shadows. How do the colours change the mood on each page?
 - The old man sometimes seems to glow with light. What might the artist be telling us about who he really is?
 - Look at the boys' faces and bodies when they refuse to share, and their neighbours' expressions when they discover the bones. How does the artist show how they are feeling?
 - Could you understand the story just by looking at the pictures, without the words? What does that tell you about how pictures tell stories?

The Courage to Create

- Making art and sharing it can feel scary – it takes courage to show others something you have created. Tori-Jay's illustrations are bold, bright and full of feeling. Talk as a class about how being brave enough to create and share is its own kind of strength.

ACTIVITY

Draw the Fish

Choose a fish, sea creature or animal that you love and illustrate it in your own bold, colourful style. Don't worry about making it 'perfect' – Tori-Jay says she enjoys exaggerating and playing with her characters. Display everyone's artwork together so the class can celebrate being brave and creative.

BRINGING IT TOGETHER: 'MY OWN STORY' PROJECT

Sam hopes this book inspires readers to ask questions, seek knowledge and create stories of their own. This culminating project brings together everything in these notes – listening to Elders, finding a lesson, writing a story, and finding the courage to illustrate and share it.

1. **Listen.** Talk to an Elder or older family member and listen to one of their stories, or a lesson they were taught (see 'Story Collectors').
2. **Find the lesson.** Decide on a message you care about – it might be about sharing, kindness, looking after the environment, family, or something you are passionate about.
3. **Create your story.** Write a short story that carries your message. You could try writing it in rhyme, like Sam, or as a 'how' or 'why' story that explains how something came to be.
4. **Illustrate it bravely.** Draw the pictures for your story in your own style. Remember: it takes courage to create and to share.
5. **Share it.** Read or perform your story for the class, a buddy class, or your family. Celebrate everyone's stories together.

Sam wrote his stories down so the messages would not be lost, and so he could pass them on to his own daughters. When you create and share your story, you are doing the same thing – keeping a story alive and passing it on.

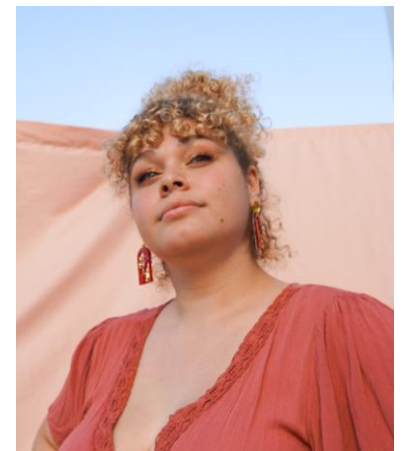
ABOUT THE AUTHOR

SAM THAIDAY is a hugely popular NRL legend of Torres Strait Islander and Australian descent. Sam spent his entire career with the Broncos. In 2012, he was awarded the Captaincy and went on to win the Dally M Award for Best Second Row Player. Sam was also named in the Indigenous Rugby League Team of the Century. He retired from NRL at the end of the 2018 season, cementing himself in an elite club of players having played over 300 games for one club. Sam now has a career in media, and sports commentary for the NRL. In 2025 he was crowned King of the Jungle on *I'm a Celebrity . . . Get Me Out of Here!* while raising vital funds for charity. *How the Fish Got Their Bones* grew out of his cultural journey of connection and the stories he wants to pass on to his daughters.



ABOUT THE ILLUSTRATOR

TORI-JAY MORDEY is a First Nations Australian artist and illustrator based in Meanjin/Brisbane. Her Torres Strait Islander and English heritage is often reflected in her contemporary Indigenous art practice – digital illustrations, drawing, painting, printmaking, film and mural art. In her work, Tori-Jay enjoys exploring human connection in relation to love, loss and identity, often drawing in a surrealistic cartoon style that is vibrant and playful. The characters in this book are loosely based on her own cheeky cousins, nieces and nephews.



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ADDITIONAL RESOURCES AND LINKS

ONLINE LINKS IN FULL

Allen & Unwin teaching resources

allenandunwin.com/learn

AIATSIS Map of Indigenous Australia

aiatsis.gov.au/explore/map-indigenous-australia

Torres Strait Regional Authority

tsra.gov.au