

writer and teacher
Marion Dane Bauer

Social / Emotional Learning Guide: *Little Cat's Luck*

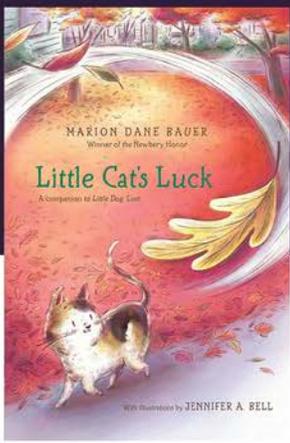
Why a Social / Emotional Guide?

Increasingly teachers, counselors, parents and librarians have come to understand that learning involves the whole student. A student with a high self-esteem is far more likely to take in new information than a student who thinks he's incapable of learning or believes he is worthless. Similarly, if a child is worried about bullies or problems at home, he or she may have considerable difficulty concentrating on school work. Stories are amazingly powerful tools to address a myriad of issues that children must navigate. In fact, some books actually provide a road map for the young reader. And the beautiful part of helping kids through books is that the adult can help the child without ever calling him out. In other words, the young reader can identify with the characters' feelings, feel them along with the character, without ever admitting ownership.

In stories, the reader becomes emotionally attached to the main characters and **lives through** the character's experiences. By living vicariously through the characters, the reader may also develop problem-solving skills. And because books elicit both emotions and intellect – the two ingredients necessary for growth – the child may change right along with the characters. This process is grounded through discussion with an adult who has the tools to ask questions that enlighten the reader or bring him deeper into the characters feelings.

Marion Dane Bauer's book, *Little Cat's Luck*, is written with warmth, humor and wisdom, and is rich with possibilities to help children grow. With themes such as attitude, self-esteem, bullying, diversity, cooperation, betrayal, and community involvement, Marion Dane Bauer delivers a delightful book for children ages 6 to 10, one that lends itself beautifully to helping kids grow.

Please use this guide in a way that works for you and your readers. I have included many more discussion questions than you may choose to use so that you have options. Plan to use this guide over several periods of discussion, after a read-aloud, or for a book discussion group.



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BOOK SUMMARY

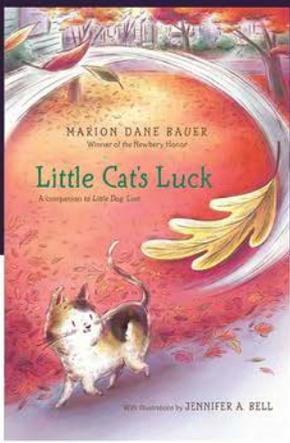
Patches is an indoor cat who wants to find a special place all her own. She doesn't know why she wants this place or what she'll do with it when she finds it, but she feels compelled. As she sits in her watching window, she contemplates that the big outside must have lots of special places. She watches a golden leaf float by that **dares** her to catch it if she can. The special place she wants suddenly becomes a **longing** so fierce that, without thinking, she leaps at the window and right through the screen to the grass below. She tries to catch the leaf but there are more leaves and they keep moving. Then she remembers her mission to find a special place and her journey in the big outdoors begins.

On her adventure, she tries to get information and food from Gus, the meanest dog in town, gets lost and becomes exhausted, catches a mouse that she doesn't eat, befriends a squirrel, and late at night finally finds her special place—Gus's dog house. Just after taking up residence in the dog house, Patches has inexplicable pain in her stomach and calls out for help. Gus realizes that she is in his dog house and is furious, until he discovers the tiny kitten to which Patches has given birth. She has two more kittens. Looking at them Patches realizes she has to find a way to feed them. She needs to find home.

Squirrel organizes the community of birds, rabbits, other squirrels and even bats, to try to find Patches' home: a house with a nice sitting window and a tree out front. The determined animal army searches but comes back without a location. Too many houses meet that description. Then Patches remembers that there are berry bushes in her front yard and that the mouse she caught held a berry in his mouth. She leaves her kittens under the supervision of Gus to find the mouse. The mouse remembers the house perfectly and it *is* Patches' home. She is reunited with her girl and they all return to the dog house to bring the kittens home.

To Patches' horror, Gus has decided to keep the kittens for himself and to hold her as prisoner so she can feed them. She wails and pretty soon humans start showing up. His boy convinces Gus to let the kittens go and a postmaster makes them comfortable in his mail carrier for the trip home.

Everyone can hear Gus howling and howling for the next two days, until finally he is quiet. He manages to get out of his fenced-in yard and finds Patches' house. Once in, he doesn't threaten Patches but apologizes for his behavior. Her family ends up keeping him and he obeys the rules.



DISCUSSION GUIDE

We've provided discussion topics and possible answers (no answer is incorrect, different answers make for a lively discussion) in the indented paragraphs below. Choose the questions you feel will interest and inform your group of readers. You need not read the answers out loud to your group—they are there to prompt you with your own answers.

THE ADVENTURE BEGINS

Patches has a **fierce longing** to find a special place even though she doesn't know what she wants it for. Have you ever had a fierce longing for someone or something? Think about a time that you may have **surprised yourself** by wanting something so badly and weren't sure why it was so important to you.

Maybe it's a person you've longed to be with, or a thing you've wanted.

After she's plunged through the screen, trying to catch the golden leaf, Patches stops and licks her nose, something a cat does when she's **upset**. What do you think is upsetting Patches?

She realizes that she doesn't know where she is, and that she's all alone.

But she also realizes that in the big world there must be hundreds of special places. So when she plunges to the ground she isn't **scared**. What does she feel instead?

*She feels **lucky**. Lucky that the golden leaf called her. Lucky that the screen released her. Lucky that the whole blue-and-gold world lay stretched out before her.*

What does this tell us about Patches? What is her outlook on life?

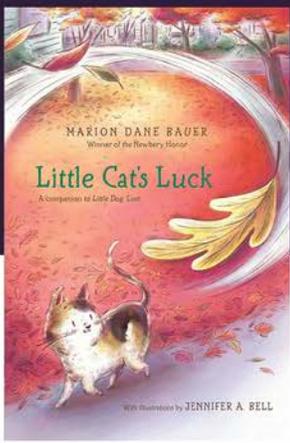
*It shows that Patches has a **positive attitude** about life. It shows that she's **adventurous**. She's willing to take risks to get what's important to her.*

What's another way Patches could have chosen to look at her circumstances?

*She could have **panicked** because she's never been outside before and focused on all the things that might go wrong. She could have forgotten about wanting to find a special place and scurried back to the safety of her house.*

The golden leaf dared her. Did she jump through the window because she was dared or because of her longing?

Probably both



If someone dared you, would you take the dare?

It's best to ask yourself why that person is daring you and how it might affect you.

If it's something silly that's one thing. If it could result in you getting physically hurt or hurting someone else, that should be an automatic no.

PATCHES MEETS GUS, THE MEANEST DOG IN TOWN

Even though Patches knows that Gus is saying "Go! Get away from here, right now! Go! Go! Go!" Patches walks right up to the fence. What does that show us about Patches?

*It shows us that she's **tenacious, determined** to get the information she needs. It also shows that she doesn't believe he'll really hurt her.*

Do you think Patches would be this **confident** if she had been abused by another dog or a person?

No! She would be afraid and would stay away.

Gus called her an ugly thing but Patches doesn't react to that. Why doesn't she react?

*Because, like all cats, she knows she's beautiful so she figures Gus can't possibly be talking about her. **She likes herself. She believes in herself. She has a positive self-esteem.** When you know inside that you are a good, loving, worthwhile person, you also know that you are beautiful. Hurtful words can flow over you without hurting you.*

Why do you think Gus said something so mean?

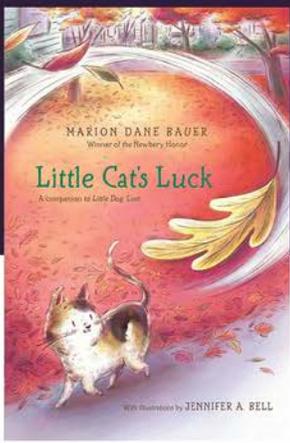
He wanted to hurt her feelings so she'd go away.

Gus was astonished that Patches would persist in asking questions about a special space. So he demands that she leave "THIS INSTANT" Because she's not a foolish cat, Patches leaves but she notices the kibble and water and thinks she may have to come back. Is Patches brave or foolhardy to even consider going back?

ABOUT GUS

The author shares with us how Gus became an outside dog. Do you remember what his behavior was like when he was a house puppy?

*He was **disobedient, destructive**, he wouldn't take baths, knocked things over, and ate food off the table. He pretty much **took over** the household with his antics.*



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Do you think Gus could have been a good house pet if he'd received good **discipline**?

Just like baby humans, baby animals come into this world with no idea what it means to behave.

They need help learning what's expected. Gus needed consistent discipline when he was little to prevent him from becoming an unmanageable, big dog.

Did the family do the right thing by putting him in the yard?

They probably had little choice once he had grown into a large dog.

Gus isn't the kind of dog to talk about his feelings, but we can imagine how he felt when he was sent to the yard to live. How do you think he feels when he's **all alone** and only sees his boy when the boy comes to feed him?

Lonely, hurt, sad, mad. He probably feels like a failure.

Gus doesn't say that he feels lonely, hurt, sad, or mad but throughout the book we see how he feels through his actions. How does Gus act when he is isolated in a fenced-in yard?

*He barks, tells everyone to go away. He becomes a **bully** and **terrorizes** the neighborhood with his barking and snarling. He pushes everyone away, which he likes because it makes him feel **powerful**. His behavior keeps him lonely and he never gets the attention he really needs. He never gets petted or praised which must make him feel unlovable and bad about himself.*

Bullies pretty much always have low self-esteem.

Why would low self-esteem make someone bully another person or animal?

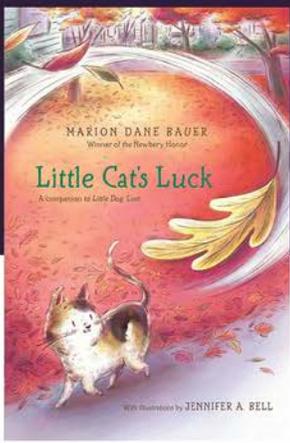
PATCHES MEETS A MOUSE

After looking and looking all day for her special place, Patches is tired, thirsty, hungry and her paws are sore. She has somehow circled back to Gus's corner. She realizes that she has no idea where her house is. It starts to rain. She takes shelter under the mail box outside the post office and falls asleep only to be awakened by a mouse stepping on her whiskers. Patches grabs the little mouse easily but doesn't eat it even though she's really hungry. Why?

They start up a conversation and the mouseling says please.

What is it about having a conversation with a mouse that makes it hard for Patches to eat him?

It makes the mouse real. Patches begins to respect his life.



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Gus can still be heard barking and Patches wonders if he'll ever sleep. Mouse says that when he does sleep it's not in the dog house but as close to the house as possible to be near his boy. What does that tell us about how he feels about his boy?

*He feels affection, caring. He probably misses the boy and wants to be closer. It tells us that he's not as **hard hearted** as he acts.*

Gus's boy hasn't paid much attention to Gus. Why do you think Gus still cares about his boy?

When the mouse asks if she owns a human, Patches says "of course."

It's interesting that the pets seem to think they own humans and we think humans own pets. Is this a discussion you'd like to have with your group? About respect for those pets who are a part of our lives?

When Patches tells the mouse about his girl, she explains that a golden leaf came dancing and she got lost. The author points out that cats are not inclined to **take responsibility** for their own mistakes. What would Patches say if she were telling what really happened?

I leaped through a screen to chase a golden leaf, ran around and played and couldn't figure out where I was.

Why doesn't Patches want to take responsibility?

*Maybe she doesn't want to admit that jumping out of the window was **impulsive**. She didn't give any thought to what might happen or to how she'll find her way home.*

Patches thinks fondly about her girl which makes her purr. Again, the author doesn't tell us how Patches is feeling but shows us through Patches' actions. How do you think Patches feels?

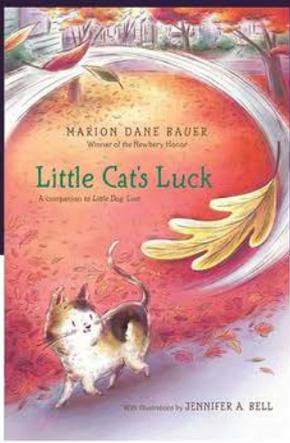
Patches and Gus have something in common. She misses her girl and he misses his boy.

Patches begs the moon for help, telling the moon that she's looking for a special place, that she's lonesome and damp and much too hungry to sleep. Patches gets an answer but not from the moon.

PATCHES MEETS A SQUIRREL

A small red squirrel answers her cry. She offers Patches an acorn, but it's much too hard for Patches. How do you think Patches felt when the squirrel did his best to help her get food?

The squirrel is trying his best to take care of Patches because he is kind and caring. Patches must appreciate that because she is feeling lonely and lost.



Patches lowers her head when she admits that she caught a mouse and let it go. She seems ashamed or embarrassed by this, but red squirrel understands why she couldn't kill a mouse that says please. Do you think there is power in the word "please"? Tell us about a time when "please" made a difference.

PATCHES GOES AFTER GUS'S FOOD

As hungry as Patches is, once she crawls under the fence and takes her first bite of Gus's kibble, she's distracted by the amazing thing she sees—a special place. And that place is Gus's dog house.

Once inside Patches gets a very big surprise—her tummy starts clenching and she doesn't know what's going on with her body. How would you feel if you were away from the people who loved you and you didn't know what was happening?

Scared, terrified. Longing for help.

She starts yelling something. What does she yell?

Help! Please!

Gus hears her. But he does nothing at first. Why?

He thinks it has nothing to do with him. In fact his boy has practically nothing to do with him. He thinks very lowly of himself. He doesn't see how he could help.

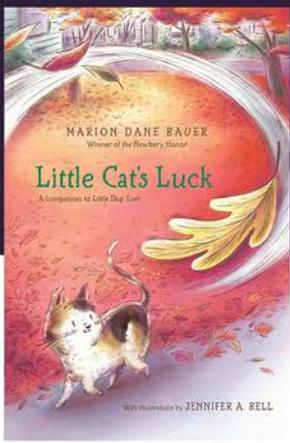
But when Patches yells "please," and then "anybody," Gus has a **change in heart** and jumps up to find who is in distress. What are the thoughts that bring him to this decision?

He realizes that he's certainly an anybody, a somebody, and therefore maybe can help.

But when he hears the sound again, he realizes that it is coming from his dog house. Now he's furious. He's angry to see the cat in his house, but sees the silvery bag that has come out of her, and watches, curious. Patches is taken over by a **powerful force** that makes her want to lick and lick the bag until a kitten emerges. What is this powerful force?

*We call this **instinct**. It's like a secret code we carry deep inside to help us know what to do to keep babies alive.*

Do you think that the special place she longed for was instinct, too? That this helped her prepare a space for her kittens?



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Patches still thinks she might be eaten but when she see Gus's face gazing at the baby as though it's a miracle, she asks if Gus would like to name him. She doesn't want to be eaten by Gus, of course, but do you think she might have another reason?

Maybe she can see the softer side of Gus. They have just shared a momentous experience and Patches can see that Gus is in awe.

How does Gus react to the question?

His voice gets very small. And at first he can't even speak. We can tell that Gus would never have imagined anyone being so kind to him or asking him to do something so important as giving a name to a baby.

Gus didn't even think he was important enough to help when he heard Patches' cries for help earlier. Do you think his self-esteem is getting better?

Yes

Gus gives the kitten a name. Do you remember what it is? Why did he choose that name?

Moonshadow

THE SQUIRREL RETURNS AND THEY MAKE A PLAN

The squirrel comes down to see what's going on.

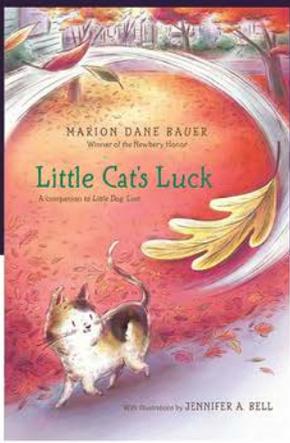
Patches has two more kittens. The second one is an orange tabby who she names herself. She calls him Little Thomas because she now understands that his visit and the adventure they shared that day produced the kittens. Finally, a tiny calico girl is born. Patches gives the squirrel the chance to name her.

What does the squirrel name this cat?

Gustina.

How do you think Gus felt about this?

*Proud, **worthwhile**, special. It must have felt great to be appreciated. It must have helped his self-esteem.*



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Patches misses her girl and is sad. The squirrel and Gus are sad too. How do they show their sad feelings?

Gus's long ears hang even lower than before and the squirrel's tail goes limp and flat.

Patches realizes that she must eat the right food to nourish her kittens and, though Gus is happy to share, his kibble isn't right for cats.

The squirrel decides to involve his network. He goes off to gather other squirrels, rabbits, birds, and even bats. Meanwhile Gus watches over Patches and the kittens while they sleep.

The author tells us that Gus is happier than he's been in a long time. She says that the **main ingredient for happiness is what?**

Love. Gus first loved his boy and that gave him happiness. Now he loves Patches and the kittens, too.

Why can loving and being loved make you feel happy?

Finally they hear the sound of squirrels, rabbits, flocks of birds, and one sleepy bat who have all come to help Patches find her girl. Patches tells them the few things she knows about. They all head out to find a yard with a golden leaf tree and a sitting window.

How did Patches feel about all this help?

She felt "... warmed to the tip of her tail at having so many good friends." (85)

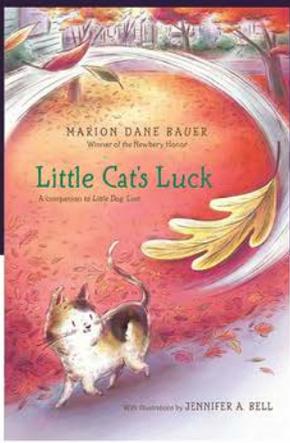
Sadly the animal troupe isn't successful in finding the house because too many houses match the description Patches gave them. We can tell they're **discouraged** by the way the author describes their return. How does the author describe their actions upon returning?

The rabbits walk slowly with only an occasional hop. "They flopped to the ground and said not a word." The birds don't sing but twitter softly among themselves. And the red squirrel and friends drag their tails.

To be discouraged means that you might give up trying to find a solution because you' don't think you can make it happen. When you're discouraged and sad, how do you show it?

The author tell us that "**Patches's heart dropped like a stone.**" (86) What does that mean to you?

Patches thinks she was **foolish** to leave home. What does it mean to feel foolish? Do you think Patches was foolish? Can you tell us about a time when you felt foolish? What made you feel better?



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But Patches remembers something—the red berry the mouseling carried, and the fact that there were red berries in her front yard. She leaves her kittens in the care of Gus while she finds the mouse. The mouseling is happy to take her to the place where she found the berries, and the whole group is finally in Patches' front yard.

Are you surprised that Patches would leave her kittens in Gus's hands?

*She is a very **trusting** cat. What does it mean to be trusting? First, Patches trusted Gus even though he called her ugly and told her to go away. Now she trusts Gus with her greatest treasure because he shows her his heart.*

Who are the people or animals you trust?

As soon as the little girl hears her cat mewing at the door she runs to Patches, takes her inside, and closes the door. But Patches must get back to her babies.

Once again the animals come to her rescue. They make lots of racket to get the little girl's attention and when she opens the door to see what's going on, the mouse scurries up her leg and arms and down the other side. The girl is so startled that she lets Patches go. Of course, Patches runs back to the kittens with the animals and the girl close behind.

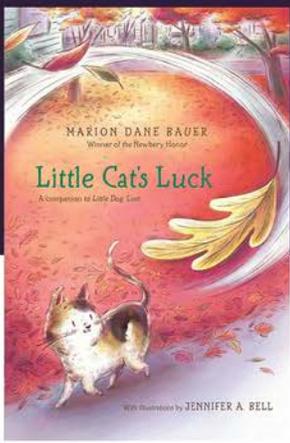
They're in for quite a surprise when they get back. Gus refers to the kittens as "mine." He intends to keep them and he intends to force Patches to stay so she can feed them.

Imagine how **betrayed** Patches must feel! What else do you think she is feeling?

Anger, hurt, disappointment, panic?

Heartbroken, terrified that her kittens will no longer be hers, longing for her kittens. Feeling betrayed means that someone acted in a way you believe made you feel foolish or hurt. They may have told your secret to someone else or perhaps they didn't do something they said they would do, something important to you. Can you think of a time you felt betrayed? How did you work that out with that person?

Patches can do nothing else so she stands and cries "Help!" "Police?" "Somebody!" And lots of people respond. Gus's boy comes running out, too, demanding that Gus let the kittens go. Gus makes a face that says, "Make me! I dare you!"



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Gus is shocked to hear Patches sound scared when she says, “You can’t do this.” “Of me? He thought. Could this dear little cat be afraid of me? In a very soft voice he says he is sorry and that all he wanted was for Patches and her kittens to stay.

What does this tell you about Gus?

*It tells us that he wants to change. He no longer wants to intimidate or cause fear. He wants to have someone to care about. He wants to be someone **trustworthy**. What are the ways you can be trustworthy?*

When Gus realizes that he must give the kittens back to Patches, he shows us how sad he is. Does anyone remember how he shows sadness?

Gus’s ears went so flat and limp that they touched beneath his chin

How can you tell when people are very sad?

Patches shows how proud she is of her kittens by turning on her loudest mother-motor purr. What have you seen people do to show that they are proud?

Who were some of the neighbors how helped see Patches and her babies off?

Clerks from Piggly Wiggly, the customers, Joe from Joe’s Gas and Grill, the three mail carriers

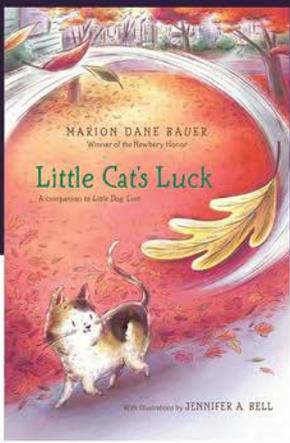
Just like the community of animals, these people cared. They cared about something from a different species. Think of ways you’ve seen people care about animals. Think of ways that you’ve seen animals care about people. Think of ways you’ve seen people helping in your town or school. Has someone ever received special help (house burning down, illness, flooding)? What does the book tell us about people and animals caring for each other?

The author seems to be saying that all living things matter, that both humans and animals deserve respect and caring.

Gus howled his grief for two days. He howled so loud that Patches could hear him. And when the howling stopped Patches knew that Gus was going to find her. She even knew that when he did, he’d barge into the house when anyone answered the door.

When Patches looks into Gus’s eyes what does she see?

She sees no meanness or selfishness.



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What does that tell us?

Gus is changing.

He tries to apologize but it dribbles away. “You wanted somebody to love,” Patches says.

*What does this tell us about Patches? She has **compassion** and **understanding** and she cares about Gus.*

When the adults try to get Gus to go home, what does Patches do?

She lays a paw on his leg and says MINE. What does this tell Gus? Why is that important?

Now the family works out a plan for Gus to stay, but it is Patches who makes sure he listens to authority.

Now that the story is over, look back and list all of the times that Patches was lucky and all the times she had a good attitude. Did the story turn out the way it did because of luck or attitude?