

The James and Bob Books:

'A Street Cat Named Bob' and 'The World According to Bob' by James Bowen

Quickly scanning the bookshelves of a book shop in Heathrow Airport as I was getting ready to board a plane to the USA a few years ago, the picture of a ginger cat with a scarf tied round its neck caught my eye. Not surprising really, as I am an animal lover and have five cats of my own, but also incredibly I recognized the cat as one I had seen some months earlier accompanying a busker in Covent Garden Underground Station. The book, 'A Street Cat Named Bob', at that time was already an international best seller and had sold over a million copies in the UK alone.

Rejecting all the movies on offer during the flight, I consumed the book cover to cover, being totally captivated by the simplicity of the language and the message of love and hope that emerged from its pages. The true story of how a little ginger tom cat helped the author, James Bowen, turn his life around from being a recovering heroin addict to finding a meaning in life is uplifting and inspirational. It illustrates how strong the human animal bond can be and demonstrates with feeling the healing affect animals can have on our lives.

This book and the sequel, 'The World According to Bob', which I have just finished reading traces the story from when James first finds Bob in the hallway of his building through their remarkable life together as Bob helps James to totally recover from his addiction, to becoming the main attraction in his busking routine, to the events which lead up to James writing their story and securing a book deal with the publishers "Hodder and Stoughton".

James was born in Surrey in 1979 and following his parent's divorce, moved to Australia with his mother. He was often bullied at school and dropped out of education early. He became a self-confessed 'tearaway kid' and was later mistakenly diagnosed with ADHD, schizophrenia and manic depression. On returning to the UK in 1997 James became homeless and began sleeping on the streets, and over the next ten years fell into becoming a heroin addict.

In the spring of 2007 James made the decision that he had to get his life back and enrolled in a methadone program, and began busking in Covent Garden and living in supported housing. One evening he returned home to find a ginger cat and, assuming he belonged to another resident, returned to his flat. However, the cat was still there the next day and the following day. James became concerned and discovered he had an infected wound on his back leg. With only a few pounds to his name, James took the cat to the nearby RSPCA clinic who gave him a two-week course of antibiotics. It cost him all the money he had but he felt good about what he had done and knew that he would have to take the cat in to administer the medication whilst continuing to look for his owner. Once the cat was better he released him back onto the streets hoping he would find his own way home but instead he began following him around, even onto the bus when he left to go busking. James kept asking the cat, "do you want to go or stay with me, it's your

choice?" The answer was clear and Bob – as James named him after the character from the television drama Twin Peaks – decided he definitely wanted to be with James.

Bob is no ordinary cat, he is very intelligent and does not seem to be worried or concerned by very much, and just wants to be with James. He says, "He loves me and I love him, and together we have created a very special bond." Bob began to go with James to his regular haunts in Covent Garden and Piccadilly, travelling in the window seat of the number 73 bus and even following him onto trains in the underground during rush hour. James bought him a harness and leash for safety but mostly Bob liked to sit on James's shoulders, draped around his neck. He would even do this when James bought a bicycle and would cycle to his pitches in central London, much to the amazement of their fellow travellers. Whilst busking Bob was quite happy to sit down on a rug that James would take for him. He didn't seem to mind the crowds of people and the attraction he would cause, in fact he seemed to quite relish it. James taught Bob a few tricks which he enjoyed to do and even appeared 'to work the crowd' when James needed some extra money to make it through the week.

James then became fit enough to take on his first job selling the Big Issue magazine which helps homeless people get back on their feet. Bob became a big plus on the streets attracting regular customers who would often have a kind word for Bob and sometimes even offer James a little extra money to help him feed his furry friend. For the first time in his life James began to see a nicer, softer and more generous side of people which amazed him. Bob was helping him to heal in all kind of ways. He became the reason "I wake up for every day... he's definitely given me the right direction to live my life."

Bob was always given the choice whether to go 'work' with James especially if the weather was really bad but mostly Bob would decide to go. On one cold morning James put a scarf round Bob's neck and thereafter it became Bob's trademark. Amazingly, women began giving Bob scarves and even making them for him. People began giving him treats and bringing food. Gradually the public began uploading videos of the two of them on YouTube and tourists would visit Covent Garden specifically to see them.

Of course, not all of it was good, and there were inevitably some really rough times. Some people were not so nice and one woman was convinced that James was exploiting Bob and reported him for animal cruelty to the police. Occasionally someone would be a little too rough with Bob and he would lash out, which didn't go down too well. At one point another Big Issue seller became jealous of James and ended up getting him terminated just so that he could take over his pitch.

When James concluded his methadone treatment he inevitably suffered withdrawal symptoms which were incredibly unpleasant and difficult. During this time James said he would shout at Bob to go away and leave him alone. Bob seemed to know what James was going through and would then just wait quietly at his side. James also got very ill with a blood clot after going back to see his mother in Australia and went through a very difficult time when he could hardly walk because the pain in his

legs was so severe. But somehow having Bob by his side, giving him huge amounts of loyalty, love and compassion, gave him the strength and fortitude to keep going. During all this time Bob was giving him something other than himself to look after. James was learning for the first time how to be responsible for another life, and he had to keep going because he couldn't let Bob down. "He has simply become my best friend, and has looked after me, just as much as I have him."

In time, James and Bob attracted the attention of the Islington Tribune, which published a story of them in 2010. This was read by a literary agent who introduced James to the writer, Garry Jenkins. Together they produced an outline for a book and secured a deal with the publishers. 'A Street Cat Named Bob' has now been translated into 30 languages and spent over 76 weeks at the top of the Sunday Times bestseller list. The book 'The World According to Bob' was released in 2013 and was also a number one book on The Sunday Times bestseller list. Since that time a number of children's books about Bob have also been released. It seems people of all ages cannot get enough of the story of Bob.

As often happens with very special and intense, life changing experiences, the result not only changed James's life with Bob but has inspired James to dedicate his life to help numerous animal charities and charities that involve homelessness, literacy and animal welfare. James says he enjoys the feeling of being able 'to give back' for the first time in his life. It has also given him a chance to make people aware of the realities of living on the streets and also the plight of millions of stray animals. One such enterprise is Bob's World Cat Café Fundraiser. The aim is to raise money to open a café in London that will provide homes for homeless and abused or unwanted cats, and a safe haven for like-minded people to have refreshments whilst being surrounded by cats. So far the fundraiser has raised over 160,000 pounds. See www.igg.me/at/jamesandbobcafe.

James and Bob's story is now followed by millions on social media and they been on a number of TV shows. Amazingly, Bob is always completely calm and unperturbed by the lights and cameras. Now he is even a film star, Bob playing Bob in a film about their story. It seems this autobiography of one down-and-out and his kismet of meeting a stray tom cat continues to touch people's hearts.