What inspired you to write Sammy in the Sky?

Sammy was our family’s first dog. He was a lovable, loyal hound. He licked our daughter Emma’s cheeks when we brought her home from the hospital and slept by her crib at night. As the two of them grew older, Sammy became Emma’s faithful friend, the dog who allowed her to dress him up in floppy hats and lay still as she rested her dolls and teacups against his belly.

When Sammy turned twelve, we learned he had cancer. Emma was not yet five and had no idea what cancer or death meant. After Sammy started having trouble breathing and getting up off the floor, we talked about putting him to sleep to relieve his pain. Emma struggled to understand. “Will he wake up again?” she asked.

For a while Sammy seemed to get better, but then one winter night he gasped for air and we knew he would not live until the morning. We sat by his side and allowed Emma to say good-bye. “You’re the best hound dog in the whole wide world,” she told him, repeating a phrase her daddy had often uttered about his beloved hound.

In the weeks and months that followed Sammy’s death, Emma continued to ask questions. “Why can’t he come back?” she wanted to know.

She had never lost a pet or a family member, and Sammy’s death left her confused and inconsolable. Her younger sister, Nora, did not understand why Sammy went away. “You come down here!” Nora shouted up at the sky.

As my daughters continued to ask questions about Sammy and his death, I wrote down their words and feelings. A journalist for twenty-eight years, I knew I had a story to tell and I also knew there were not enough children’s books that dealt honestly with death, grief, and loss.

“Sammy in the Sky will be in a bookstore one day,” I assured my daughters.

It took six years and plenty of persistence to get the book published, but I never gave up on the promise I made to my girls.

How did painter Jamie Wyeth get involved in illustrating the book?

After I had written and rewritten Sammy in the Sky several times, I began sharing it with friends, teachers, librarians and schoolchildren. They loved the story and agreed that it was needed to help other children cope with their own losses. Still, I could not find an agent. At the time — early 2005, before Marley and Me sparked an interest in dog books — few agents were interested in selling a story about the death of a dog.

A fellow journalist and friend suggested that I ask the renowned painter Jamie Wyeth to illustrate the book. “You’re crazy,” I told her. But then I realized that, like my family, Jamie lived in Maine, and he also loved dogs. His grandfather, N. C. Wyeth, was also revered for his brilliant illustrations in several classic novels.

I figured the worst Jamie could do was say no, and phoning strangers was something I was used to; I had made far more difficult calls during my journalism career. So I dialed Jamie’s number expecting to get his assistant. A male voice greeted me. “Jamie?” I asked. Nervously, I explained...
that I had written a story about the death of our dog and wanted to know if he would consider illustrating it. Jamie told me to send the story along; he would read it and get back to me.

Months passed, and I did not hear from Jamie. I continued rewriting the story and reworked the ending. Several weeks after I sent Jamie the revised version, I received an envelope with Wolf Man and Frankenstein stamps and my address printed in striking blue ink. Jamie’s letter explained that he had read *Sammy in the Sky* and “was quite moved” and would like to explore the possibility of illustrating the story. We met later that summer and talked about finding a publisher. Thankfully, I later found a wonderful agent, Diane Freed (another Mainer), who helped us connect with Candlewick Press, a publisher known for its high-quality and award-winning books.

**Do you think this book will help children cope with losing a pet or someone they love?**

I hope the book helps teachers, parents, and children talk more openly about death and loss. *Sammy in the Sky* illustrates how one girl overcame her grief, how she grew to understand that she will always hold Sammy in her heart. Grieving over a pet, friend, or family member is a natural, inevitable process. If you feel grief, you must have at one time felt love, and that love needs to be honored and remembered.

**How did you feel about Jamie’s illustrations?**

Since this was my first children’s book, I had no idea of how the process worked or how Jamie would share my vision of the story and create images from my words. I was thrilled with Jamie’s paintings. His illustrations evoke every emotion presented in the story: love, joy, grief, and reconciliation.

His paintings capture a special bond between Sammy and the young girl, the unconditional love between a child and a dog. One of my favorite illustrations shows Sammy licking the girl’s face. She is grinning, and so is Sammy. I think of every dog I have ever loved when I look at that painting.

**BARBARA WALSH** is a Pulitzer Prize–winning journalist who has worked for newspapers and magazines in Florida, Massachusetts, Maine, and Ireland. *Sammy in the Sky* was inspired by her family’s first dog, Sammy, a loyal and loving hound who died in 2003. She is also the author of *August Gale: A Father and Daughter’s Journey into the Storm*, a biography and memoir for adults. Barbara Walsh lives in Maine with her husband, Eric, her daughters, Emma and Nora, and their coonhound, Jack, a rescue dog from Tennessee.