

Helping you choose books for children



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Opening extract from
Stoneheart

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BELLY OF THE WHALE AND THE MONKEY'S TEETH

George never spent any time wondering why he wanted to belong. He just did. Things were like that. You were in or you were out, and in was a lot safer. It wasn't the sort of thing you questioned. It was just there.

On the class trip before this one they'd been to the War Museum and learned all about trench warfare. George had thought that's what life felt like: just keeping your head below the parapet so you wouldn't get hit.

Of course that was last year, in the past, like all the other things about being a kid. He still thought about them sometimes. He still remembered what being a kid was like. But he was over that. He was twelve. Real Twelve, not 'Only Twelve', as his father had called it the

exactly older, just a bit more worn and rumpled than his classmates – rather like his clothes. His clothes were all thrown in the same washing machine, colours and whites together, and though his mother said it made no difference, it did. It made everything pale and grey and washed out, and that's exactly what George felt like most of the time.

It was certainly what he felt like today, and not being able to see properly was making him feel more insignificant than usual; all he could make out was the whale's belly and the back of his classmates' heads as they clustered round a museum guide showing them something interesting. George tried to push forward, but all he got was an elbow in his ribs. He sidled round the pack and tried to get another view, careful not to push anyone.

He found a place where he could nearly hear and edged closer, peering through the thin gap between a circular stand full of pamphlets and a boy about four inches taller than him. As he rattled the stand with his shoulder and reached to steady it, the boy turned and registered him.

George found himself smiling at him on reflex. The boy didn't return fire on the smile. He just looked away without comment. George wasn't too worried about being blanked. In fact he was relieved. The boy was the

on and decided he'd stick to it. There were teachers present, anyway. What's the worst that could happen?

The boy calmly reached backwards and toppled the stand, right into George. He stepped back, but there wasn't enough room, so he batted at the metal column with his hands to protect himself. It hit the floor with a loud metallic crash, spilling pamphlets all across the tiling around George.

The room went suddenly very quiet. Faces turned. The boy turned with them, innocent-looking amazement quickly morphing into shocked surprise.

'Chrissakes, Chapman!'

The cluster of boys around him dissolved into hooting anarchy, and the three adults, two teachers and a guide, were left looking for the culprit. And with everyone else doubled up and pointing, there he was, head above the parapet, feet bogged down in a landslide of bright-coloured paper booklets.

Mr Killingbeck fixed him with a sniper's eye, crooked a bony trigger finger at him and fired a one-word bullet.

'Chapman.'

George felt his face reddening. Killingbeck snapped his fingers at the other boys.

'The rest of you clear Chapman's mess up! You -- follow me.'

‘That was unforgivable, boy. You behaved like something wholly uncivilized. Like that ape over there.’

The bony finger jabbed at a monkey in a glass cage, baring its teeth in the grimace that would be the last message it ever sent to the world. George knew what it felt like.

‘You’re uncivilized, Chapman. What are you?’

George just looked at the monkey, thinking how strong and frightening its teeth looked. More like fangs really.

Killingbeck worked his mouth.

George found the blob of Plasticene in his pocket and began kneading it with his fingers. It still had the knobbly contours of a face he’d made on the bus.

‘I think it’s worth something more than sullen silence, Chapman. I think it’s worth an apology for a start.’

George’s thumb coasted over the open mouth in the Plasticene face and wedged it a bit wider.

‘Get your hands out of your pockets.’

George smashed the nose on the Plasticene and pulled his hand out of his pocket.

‘You’re going to say sorry if you have to stand there all day. Do you understand?’

George worked the Plasticene in his fist.

‘Or you can tell me who you say did it. Do you understand?’

crunch and crack and almost taste the blood. The feeling was so immediate, so nearly real that he was suddenly frightened by it as it hung black and treacly in his mind. He'd *never* had a thought like that. The shock made him reel inside and forget he wasn't speaking.

'Sir?'

'Well?' Killingbeck's voice jerked him back into the now, back between the rock and the hard place. He didn't know what he was going to do. But he suddenly knew from the prickling in his eyes that there was one treacherous possibility.

George was not going to cry. And knowing what he *wasn't* going to do suddenly made it all clear. He knew what to do, what to say. And he knew to say it very slowly, very calmly so as not to let the thing rising in his throat choke him.

'I understand that's what you think I should do, sir.'

Killingbeck looked at him with the surprise of a hungry man whose dinner just bit back. His mouth stopped chewing at the next thing he was going to say.

'I just don't agree with it.'

The pupils in Killingbeck's eyes irised down to the size of full-stops.

George knew he'd made a mistake. He knew, with a sudden flash of intimacy which scared him more than the

the drizzle that was soaking the steps in front of the museum.

The guards didn't give him a second look.