Helping your children choose books they will love

I reading

Lovereading4kids.co.uk is a book website created for parents and children to make choosing books easy and fun

Opening extract from

W.A.R.P. The Reluctant Assassin

Written by

Eoin Colfer

Published by

Puffin Books an imprint of Penguin Books Ltd

All Text is Copyright © of the Author and/or Illustrator

Please print off and read at your leisure.

Lovereading4kids.co.uk

To Finn, Seán, Grace, Jeremy and Joe

PUFFIN BOOKS

Published by the Penguin Group

Penguin Books Ltd, 80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL, England
Penguin Group (USA) Inc., 375 Hudson Street, New York, New York 10014, USA
Penguin Group (Canada), 90 Eglinton Avenue East, Suite 700, Toronto, Ontario, Canada M4P 2Y3 (a division of Pearson Penguin Canada Inc.)
Penguin Ireland, 25 St Stephen's Green, Dublin 2, Ireland (a division of Penguin Books Ltd)
Penguin Group (Australia), 707 Collins Street, Melbourne, Victoria 3008, Australia (a division of Pearson Australia Group Pty Ltd)
Penguin Books India Pvt Ltd, 11 Community Centre, Panchsheel Park, New Delhi – 110 017, India
Penguin Group (NZ), 67 Apollo Drive, Rosedale, Auckland 0632, New Zealand (a division of Pearson New Zealand Ltd)
Penguin Books (South Africa) (Pty) Ltd, Block D, Rosebank Office Park, 181 Jan Smuts Avenue, Parktown North, Gauteng 2193, South Africa

Penguin Books Ltd, Registered Offices: 80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL, England

puffinbooks.com

First published 2013
001

Text copyright © Eoin Colfer, Artemis Fowl Ltd, 2013

W.A.R.P. logo copyright © Disney Enterprises, Inc., 2013.
Designed by Tyler Nevins and reprinted by permission of Disney•Hyperion

All rights reserved

The moral right of the author and illustrator has been asserted

Printed in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

Without limiting the rights under copyright reserved above, no part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in or introduced into a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means (electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise), without the prior written permission of both the copyright owner and the above publisher of this book

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

HARDBACK
ISBN: 978–0–141–34175–0

TRADE PAPERBACK
ISBN: 978–0–141–34176–7

NOT FOR RESALE

Text copyright (c) Eoin Colfer, courtesy of Penguin Books

1

The Killing Chamber

Bedford Square. Bloomsbury. London. 1898

There were two smudges in the shadows between the grandfather clock and the velvet drapes. One high and one low. Two pale thumbprints in a black night made darker still by blackout sheets behind the thick curtains and sackcloth tacked across the skylights.

The lower smudge was the face of a boy, soot blackened and slightly shivering inside the basement chamber. This was young Riley, brought this very night on his first killing as a test.

The upper smudge was the face of a man known to his employers as Albert Garrick, though the public had once known him by a different name. His stage name had been the Great Lombardi, and many years ago he had been the most celebrated illusionist in the West End, until during one performance he actually sawed his beautiful assistant in half. Garrick discovered on that night that he relished taking a life almost as much as he enjoyed the delighted applause from the stalls, and so the magician made a new career of assassination.

Garrick fixed his flat murderer's eyes on Riley and gripped his shoulder, long bony fingers pressing through

Text copyright (c) Eoin Colfer, courtesy of Penguin Books

the fabric of the boy's coat, pinching the nerves. He didn't say a word but nodded once, a gesture heavy with reminder and implication.

Think back, said the inclined chin, *to your lesson of this afternoon. Move silently as the Whitechapel fog and slide the blade in until your fingers sink into the wound.*

Garrick had instructed Riley to haul a dog carcass from the Strand to their Holborn rooms and then practise his knife work on the suspended remains so he would be accustomed to the resistance of bone.

Novices have the mistaken impression that a sharp blade will slip in like a hot poker through wax, but it ain't so. Sometimes even a master like myself can come up against bone and muscle, so be ready to lever down and force up. Remember that, boy. Lever down and force up. Use the bone itself as your fulcrum.

Garrick performed the move now with his long stiletto blade, tilting his wide, blackened forehead at Riley to make certain the boy took heed.

Riley nodded, then took the knife, palming the blade across to the other hand as he had been taught.

Garrick nudged Riley from the shadows towards the large four-poster bed, on which lay the nearly departed.

Nearly departed. This was one of Garrick's witticisms.

Riley knew that he was being tested. This was a real killing, a fat purse paid in advance. Either he snuffed out his first candle or Albert Garrick would leave an extra corpse in this terrible, gloomy chamber and swipe himself a new apprentice from the gutters of London. It would pain him to do it, but Garrick would not see any other option. Riley must learn to do more than fry sausages and polish boots.

Text copyright (c) Eoin Colfer, courtesy of Penguin Books

Riley swept his feet forward, one at a time, tracing a wide circle with his toes as he had been taught, searching for debris. It slowed his progress, but one crackle of discarded paper could be enough to awaken his intended victim. Riley saw in front of him the blade in his own hand, and he could hardly believe that he was here, about to commit the act that would damn him to hell.

When you have felt the power, you can take your place as my junior in the family business, Garrick would often say. *P'raps we should have cards of business made up, eh, boy? Garrick and Son. Assassins for hire. We may be low, but we're not cheap.*

Then Garrick would laugh, and it was a dark, faraway noise that caused Riley's nerves to throb and his stomach to heave.

Riley moved forward another pace; he could see no way out of it. The room seemed to close in around him.

I must kill this man or be killed myself. Riley's head started to pound, till his hand shook and the blade almost slipped from his fingers.

Garrick was instantly at his side like a ghost, touching Riley's elbow with one crooked icicle of a finger.

'From dust thou art . . .' he whispered so softly that the words might have been formed from the gusts of a draft.

'And unto dust thou shalt return,' mouthed Riley, completing the Biblical quote. Garrick's favourite.

My own last rites, he'd told Riley one winter's night as they looked out on Leicester Square from their booth in an Italian restaurant. The magician had polished off his second jug of bitter red wine and his gentleman's accent had started to slide off his words like fish from a wet slab.

Text copyright (c) Eoin Colfer, courtesy of Penguin Books

Every man Jack of us crawled forth from the filth and dust, and unto that stuff we shall return, mark you. I just send 'em back quicker. A few heartbeats early so that we may enjoy life's comforts. That is the way of our situation and if you have no steel in you for it, Riley, then . . .

Garrick never completed his threat, but it was clear that the time had come for Riley to earn his place at the table.

Riley felt the cracks between each board through the thin soles of his shoes that had been painstakingly shaved down on the lathe in Garrick's workshop. He could now see the mark in the bed. An old man with a thatch of grey hair jutting out from under a puff quilt.

I can't see his face. He was grateful for that much.

Riley approached the bed, feeling Garrick behind him, knowing his time was running out.

Unto dust. Dispatched to dust.

Riley saw the old man's hand resting on the pillow, the index finger a mere nub due to some old injury, and he knew that he could not do it. He was no murderer.

Riley cast his eyes about while keeping his head still. He had been taught to use his surroundings in times of emergency, but his mentor was behind him, observing Riley's every move with his eerie, non-blinking intensity. There would be no help from the old man in the bed. What could a grey-hair possibly do against Garrick? What could anyone do?

Four times Riley had run away and four times Garrick had found him.

Death is the only way out for me, Riley had thought. *Mine or Garrick's.*

But Garrick could not be killed, for he was death.

Text copyright (c) Eoin Colfer, courtesy of Penguin Books

Unto dust.

Riley felt suddenly faint and thought he would sink to the cold floor. Perhaps that would be for the best? Lie senseless and let Garrick do his bloody work, but then the old man would die too and that knowledge would weigh on Riley's soul in the afterlife.

I will fight, decided the boy. He had little hope of survival, but he had to do something.

Plan after plan flitted through his fevered brain, each one more hopeless than the next. All the time, he moved onwards, feeling the frost of Garrick on his neck like a bad omen. The man on the four-poster grew clearer. He could see an ear now, with holes where a row of rings must have once pierced.

A foreigner perhaps? A sailor?

He saw a ruddy jaw with tallowed runs of flesh tucked underneath and a lanyard that ran to a strange pendant lying on the quilt.

Look for every detail, was one of Garrick's lessons. *Drink it all in with yer eyes and maybe it will save your life*.

No chance of saving my life, not tonight.

Riley took another sweeping step and felt his forward foot grow curiously warm. He glanced down and to his surprise and confusion saw that the toe of his shoe glowed green. In fact a cocoon of light had blossomed round the frame of the sleeping man, its heart an emerald blaze emanating from the strange pendant.

Garrick's words gusted past his ear. 'Hell's bells. Trickery! Dirk him now, boy.'

Riley could not move, petrified as he was by the spectral light.

Text copyright (c) Eoin Colfer, courtesy of Penguin Books

Garrick pushed him further into the strange warm glow, which immediately changed hue, becoming a scarlet hemisphere. An unnatural keening erupted from somewhere in the bed, piercing and horrible, rattling Riley's brain in the gourd of his skull.

The old man in the bed was instantly awake, popping up like a wind-up Jack from his box.

'Stupid sensor malfunction,' he muttered, his accent Scottish, his eyes rheumy and blinking. 'I have a pain in my . . .'

The man noticed Riley and the blade emerging from his fist like an icicle. He allowed his hand to trail slowly down towards the glowing teardrop pendant resting on his scrawny chest, then tapped the centre twice, silencing the dreadful wail. The pendant's heart displayed a glowing series of numbers now, seemingly written in phosphorous. Flickering backwards from twenty.

'Now there, lad,' said the old man. 'Hold on to those horses. We can talk about this. I have funds.'

Riley was transfixed by the pendant. It was magical certainly, but, more than that, it was familiar somehow.

Garrick interrupted Riley's thoughts with a sharp prod in the ribs.

'No more delay,' he said briskly. 'Make your bones, boy. Unto dust.'

Riley could not. He would not become like Garrick and damn himself to an eternity in the pit.

'I-I . . .' he stuttered, wishing his mind would supply the words to extricate both himself and this strange old man from these dire straits. The man raised his palms to show they

Text copyright (c) Eoin Colfer, courtesy of Penguin Books

were empty, as though fair play was on offer in this dark room.

'I'm not armed,' he said. 'All I have is unlimited currency. I can run you up whatever you need. Easiest thing in the world to print a few thousand pounds. But, if you harm me, men will come to make sure you didn't take my secrets – men with weapons like you have never seen.'

The old man spoke no more, as there was a knife suddenly embedded in his chest. Riley saw his own hand on the hilt and for a sickening moment thought that his muscles had betrayed his heart and done the deed, but then he felt the tingle of Garrick's cold fingers releasing his forearm and he knew that his hand had been forced.

'There it is,' said Garrick as the warm blood coated Riley's sleeve. 'Hold on tight and you will feel the life leave him.'

'It wasn't me that did it,' Riley said to the man, the words trickling from his lips. 'It was never me.'

The old man sat stiff as a board, the pendant's chord fraying against the dagger's blade.

'I do not believe this,' he grunted. 'All the people on my tail and you two clowns get me.'

Garrick's words crawled into Riley's ears like slugs. 'This is not credited to your account, boy. Mine was the hand that found the gap between this pigeon's ribs, but there are circumstances here, I'll give you that. So, I may allow you another chance.'

'I do not believe this,' said the old man once more, then his pendant beeped and he was gone. Literally gone. Fizzling into a cloud of orange sparks that were sucked into the pendant's heart.

Text copyright (c) Eoin Colfer, courtesy of Penguin Books

'Magic,' breathed Garrick, his tone approaching reverence. 'Magic is real.'

The assassin stepped sharply back, protecting himself from whatever the consequences of the vaporization might be, but Riley did not have the presence of mind to follow. Still holding the dagger, all he could do was watch as the cloud spread along his arm, dematerializing him quicker than a beggar could spit.

'I am going,' he said, and it was true, though he could not know where.

He saw his torso turn transparent and his organs were visible for a moment, packed in tight behind translucent ribs, then all the workings were gone too, replaced by sparks.

The gas that Riley had become was sucked into the pendant's heart. He felt himself go in a vortex that reminded him of being tumbled by a wave on Brighton beach and of a boy watching him from the shore.

Ginger. I remember you.

Then Riley was reduced to a single glowing dot of purest energy. The dot winked once at Garrick, then disappeared. The old man and the boy, both gone.

Garrick reached for the pendant, which had fallen to the sheets, thinking, *I have seen this device before, or one like it. Many years ago . . .* But his fingers touched only a smear of soot left behind where the strange talisman had been.

'All my life,' he said. 'All my life . . .'

He mouthed the rest but did not say it aloud, as he was alone in this room of wonders.

All my life I have searched for real magic. And now I know it does exist.

Text copyright (c) Eoin Colfer, courtesy of Penguin Books

Garrick was a man of turbulent emotions which he usually kept tucked inside his heart, but now warm tears of happiness trickled down his face spilling on to his lapels.

Not simply conjuring. Real magic.

The assassin sank to the ground, his long spindly legs folding so that his knees were level with his ears. Blood soaked through the seat of his expensive breeches, but he cared not one jot, for nothing would ever be the same again. His only fear was that the magic had gone from this place forever. To have been so close and to have missed out by a whisker would indeed be devastation.

I will wait here, Riley, he thought. *The Chinese believe that magic often resides in a place, so waiting is my only card to play. And, when the men come with their fabulous weapons, I will avenge you. Then I will take the magic and bend it to my will and there will be none who can stop me.*

Text copyright (c) Eoin Colfer, courtesy of Penguin Books