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

Monster Mission

Written by

Eva Ibbotson

Published by

Macmillan Children's Books

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

Please print off and read at your leisure.

Lovereading4kids.co.uk

MONSTER MISSION

EVA IBBOTSON

MACMILLAN CHILDREN'S BOOKS

Chapter One

Kidnapping children is not a good idea. All the same, sometimes it has to be done.

Aunt Etta and Aunt Coral and Aunt Myrtle were not natural kidnappers. For one thing, they were getting old and kidnapping is hard work; for another, though they looked a little odd, they were very caring people. They cared for their ancient father and for their shrivelled cousin Sybil who lived in a cave and tried to foretell the future – and most particularly they cared for the animals on the island on which they lived, many of which were quite unusual.

Some of the creatures that made their way to the Island had come far across the ocean to be looked after, and lately the aunts had felt that they could not go on much longer without help. And 'help' didn't mean grown-ups who were set in their ways. Help meant children who were young and strong and willing to learn.

So on a cool blustery day in April the three aunts gathered round the kitchen table and decided to go ahead. Some children had to be found and they had to be brought to the island, and kidnapping seemed the only sensible way to do it.

'That way we can choose the ones that are suitable,' said Aunt Etta. She was the eldest; a tall,

bony woman who did fifty press-ups before breakfast and had a small but not at all unpleasant moustache on her upper lip.

The others looked out of the window at the soft green turf, the sparkling sea, and sighed, thinking of what had to be done. The sleeping powders, the drugged hamburgers, the bags and sacks and cello cases they would need to carry the children away in . . .

'Will they scream and wriggle, do you suppose?' asked Aunt Myrtle, who was the youngest. She suffered from headaches and hated noise.

'No, of course not. They'll be unconscious,' said Aunt Etta. 'Flat out. I don't like it any more than you do,' she went on, 'but you saw the programme on TV last week.'

The others nodded. When they first came to the Island they hadn't had any electricity, but after his hundredth birthday their father's toes had started to turn blue because not enough blood got to his feet and they had ordered a generator so that he could have an electric blanket. After that they thought they might as well have an electric kettle, and then a TV.

But the TV had been a mistake because of the nature programmes. Nature programmes always end badly. First you see the hairy-nosed wombats frisking about with their babies and then five minutes before the end you hear that there are only twelve breeding pairs left in the whole of Australia. Or there are pictures of the harlequin frogs of Costa Rica croaking away on their lily leaves and the next minute you are told that they're doomed because their swamps are being drained. Worst of all are the

rainforests. The aunts could never see a programme about the rainforests without crying, and last week there had been a particularly bad one with wicked people burning and slashing the trees, and pictures of the monkeys and the jaguars rushing away in terror.

'What if *we* became extinct?' Aunt Coral had wondered, blowing her nose. 'Not just the wombats and the harlequin frogs and the jaguars, but *us*.'

The others had seen the point at once. If a whole rainforest can become extinct why not three elderly ladies? And if they became extinct what would happen to their work and who would care for the creatures that came to the Island in search of comfort and of care?

There was another thing which bothered the aunts. Lately the animals that came to the Island simply wouldn't go away again. Long after they were healed they stayed on – it was almost as if they knew something – and that made more and more work for the aunts. There was no doubt about it, help had to be brought in, and quickly.

So now they were deciding what to do.

'How do we find the *right* children?' asked Myrtle as she looked longingly out at the point where the seals were resting. One of the seals, Herbert, was her special friend and she would very much rather have been out there playing her cello to him and singing her songs.

'We shall become *Aunts*,' said Etta firmly, settling her spectacles on her long nose.

The others looked at her in amazement. 'But we *are* aunts,' they said. 'How can we *become* them?'

This was true. There had been five sisters who had come to the Island with their father many years ago. They had found a ruined house and deserted beaches with only the footprints of sandpipers and dunlins on the sand, and barnacle geese resting on the way from Greenland, and the seals, quite unafraid, coming out of the water to have their pups.

They had started to repair the house, and planted a garden, and then one day they had found an oiled seabird washed up on a rock . . . Only it turned out not to be an oiled seabird. It was oiled all right, but it was something quite different – and after that they realized that they had been called to the Island by a Higher Power and that they had found their life's work.

But one of the sisters, Betty, had not cared for the Island. She hated the wind and the rain and the fish scales in her tea and the eider ducklings nesting in her bedroom slippers and she had gone away and got married to a tax inspector in Newcastle upon Tyne and now she lived in a house with three kinds of toilet freshener in the loo, and sprays to make her armpits smell nice, and not a fish scale in sight.

But the point was that she had two children. They were horrible, but they were children. She called the boy Boo-Boo and the girl Little One (though they had proper names of course). But horrible though they were, they were children and because of this her sisters had become aunts since all you have to do to become an aunt is have nephews and nieces.

Which is why now the sisters looked so surprised and said: 'But we *are* aunts.'

'Not that kind,' said Etta impatiently. 'I mean the

kind that live in an office or an agency and call themselves things like *Useful Aunts* or *Universal Aunts* or *Aunts Inc*. – the kind that parents pay to take their children to school and to the dentist, or to sit with them when they are ill.'

'Why don't the parents do it themselves?' asked Myrtle.

'Because they're too busy. People used to have real aunts and grandmothers and cousins to do it all, but now families are too small and real aunts go to dances and have boyfriends,' said Etta, snorting.

Coral nodded her head. She was the arty one, a large plump person who fed the chickens in a feather boa and interesting jewellery, and at night by the light of the moon she danced the tango.

'It's a good idea,' she said. 'You would be able to pick and choose the children – you don't want to end up with a Boo-Boo or a Little One.'

'Yes, but if the parents are truly fond of the children we shouldn't do it,' said Myrtle, pushing back her long grey hair.

'Well of course not,' said Etta. 'We don't want a hue and cry.'

'But if the children are nice the parents *would* be fond of them,' said Myrtle. 'And if they aren't we don't want them either.'

Etta sniffed. 'You'd be surprised. There are children all over the place whose parents don't know how lucky they are.'

They went on talking for a long time but no one could think of anything better than Etta's plan – not if the position of the Island was to be kept secret, and there was nothing more important than that.

There was one more aunt who would have been useful – not the one with the three kinds of toilet freshener, who was no use for anything – but Aunt Dorothy, who was next in age to Etta and would have been just the sort of person to have on a kidnapping expedition. But Dorothy was in prison in Hong Kong. She had gone out there to stop a restaurant owner from serving pangolin steaks – pangolins are beautiful creatures and are getting rare and should never be eaten – and Dorothy had got annoyed and hit the restaurant owner on the head with his own wok, and they had put her in prison. She was due out in a month but in the meantime only the three of them could go on the mission and they weren't at all sure about Myrtle because she was not very good out in the world and when she was away she always pined for Herbert.

'Are you sure you wouldn't rather stay behind, Myrtle?' said Coral now. But Myrtle had decided to be brave and said she thought that she should come along and do her bit.

'Only we won't say anything to Daddy,' said Etta. 'After all, kidnapping is a crime and he might worry.'

Captain Harper lived upstairs in a big bed with a telescope, looking out to sea. They had mostly given up telling him things. For one thing, he was stone deaf so that explaining anything took a very long time, and for another, as soon as he saw anybody he started telling them stories about what life had been like when he was a boy. They were good stories but every single aunt had heard them about three hundred times so they didn't hang around if they could help it.

But they did go and tell the Sybil. She was the old cousin who had come to the Island soon after them. Sybil was bookish and one day she had read a book about Greek mythology and about a person called *the* Sybil (not just Sybil) who was a prophetess and could foretell the future. So she had started prophesying about the weather, mumbling on about depressions over Iceland and the wind-chill factor and really she didn't get it wrong much more often than the weathermen on the telly. Then she had gone on to other things, and had gone to live in a cave with bats because that was where prophetesses were supposed to live, and had stopped washing because she said washing would weaken her powers, so that she was another person one did not visit for too long.

When the aunts told her that they were going to the mainland to kidnap some children the Sybil got quite excited. Her face turned blue and her hair began to stand on end and for a moment they hoped that she was going to tell them something important about the journey.

But it turned out that what she was foreseeing was squally showers, and what she said was 'take seasick pills', which they had decided to do anyway for the boat.

They still had to make sure that their cook, who was called Art, knew exactly what to do while they were away on their mission. Art was an escaped convict who had been washed up in a rowing boat on their shore. He had killed a man when he was young, and now he wouldn't kill anything with arms or legs or eyes – not even a shrimp – but he made excellent porridge. Then they gathered

together all the things they would need: chloroform and sleeping powders and anaesthetizing darts which they used for stunning animals that were injured so that they could set their limbs. All of them had things to carry the children away in: Aunt Etta had a canvas holdall and Aunt Coral had a tin trunk with holes bored into it and Aunt Myrtle had her cello case. As they waited for the wind to change so that they could sail the *Peggoty* to the next island and catch the steamer, they were terribly excited.

It was a long and difficult journey – many years ago the army had tried to use the Island for experiments in radio signals and so as to keep its position secret they had changed the maps and forbidden boats to come near it. In the end they hadn't used it after all but it was still a forgotten place and the aunts meant to see that it stayed that way.

'Of course it won't be a real kidnap because we shan't ask the parents for a ransom,' said Etta.

'It'll be more of a child snatch,' Coral agreed.

But whether it was a kidnap or a child snatch, it was still dangerous and wicked, and as they waved goodbye to the Island their hearts were beating very fast.