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

Opal Plumstead

Written by

Jacqueline Wilson

Illustrated by

Nick Sharratt

Published by

Doubleday Children's Books an imprint of Random House Children's Publishers UK

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

Please print off and read at your leisure.

Lovereading4kids.co.uk



1

'Do you believe in ghosts?' Olivia asked.

We were wandering through the graveyard, trying to find some privacy. Olivia had bought a pennyworth of Fairy Glen toffee chews and we were desperate to eat them. We had to be careful, though. Last week Miss Mountbank had caught us sucking sherbet on our way home from school. She'd pounced on us from a great height, her unfortunate nose more like a hawk's beak than ever, and had smacked us both on the back so violently that we choked. I spilled

sherbet all down my school tunic. It was even worse for Olivia. She snorted in surprise and inhaled half her packet. She coughed uncontrollably, her eyes streaming, slime dripping out of both nostrils.

'How dare you eat in school uniform, you uncouth little guttersnipes!' Mounty shrieked.

She gave us detention the next day, shutting us in the classroom and making us write *I am disgustingly greedy and a disgrace to the whole school* in our best copperplate handwriting. She made Olivia write it out two hundred times. She gave *me* an extra fifty lines – 'Because you of all girls should know better, Opal Plumstead.'

I was top of the class. I couldn't seem to help it. It meant that some teachers liked me and made me their pet, while other teachers like Mounty seemed to resent me bitterly. I tried hard to make the other girls like me, but most of them despised me. They considered it shameful to be such a swot – though what else did they expect from a scholarship girl? I had been dreadfully lonely, but now I had Olivia and she was my best friend.

Olivia Brand came to St Margaret's last term and didn't quite fit into any of the little gangs of girls. She wasn't pretty enough to be popular – she was quite plump so that the pleats on her tunic were stretched out of place. She had a very prominent forehead. She looked as if someone were permanently pulling hard

on her long frizzy plait. She wasn't from a desperately wealthy family. Her father was a buyer at Beade and Chambers, the big department store in town. This meant that Olivia was shunned by the lawyers' and doctors' daughters. She was very young for her age, liking to play little-girl games. When she was particularly happy, she would break into a lumbering skip. She was scornfully ignored by the sophisticated girls, who already had proper figures and pashes on boys.

For the first few days of term Olivia had blundered around by herself. She didn't make any overtures of friendship to me and I was too proud to. It was actually Mounty who brought us together. She paired us up in housecraft and had us sharing a worktop while we made rock cakes. We measured and mixed together, and I grinned sympathetically when Olivia couldn't resist having a sly nibble at our raisin allowance. We ended up with very bland rock cakes with scarcely any flavouring – but we'd become firm friends.

Now we went round arm in arm and wrote little notes to each other in class and walked home together every day. Olivia was given a weekly allowance. It was supposed to be for books and stationery and ribbons and stockings, but she spent most of it on sweets. She was a generous girl and shared them scrupulously with me, though I didn't

get an allowance of any kind and couldn't reciprocate.

'Never mind – you're my best friend,' said Olivia. 'Of *course* we go even-stevens.'

She shook the bag of Fairy Glen toffees as if it were a tambourine until we skirted the church and threaded our way between the gravestones. I liked reading the quaint inscriptions and admired the stone angels, but Olivia seemed suddenly disconcerted.

'*Do* you believe in ghosts?' she repeated. She was peering around warily, staring at a broken sepulchre.

'Perhaps I do,' I said. 'Shush! Let's listen for them.'

'Ghosts don't *talk*,' said Olivia, giggling nervously.

'I think they might, if we're very receptive. Hush now, let's see.'

I made an elaborate show of putting my finger to my lips. Olivia clamped her hand over her mouth to stop herself spluttering. We waited.

A bird sang in the tree, repeating the same three trills again and again. Leaves rustled slightly in the breeze. There was a very distant rumble of traffic. Nothing else.

Then we heard a faint keening sound.

Olivia gasped and clutched me. 'Did you hear that?' she whispered.

'*Listen!*' I hissed.

Silence. Then it came again, soft, sad, yearning.

‘Oh, there it is again. Quick, Opal, let’s run. I don’t like it,’ Olivia cried.

Then she saw my face. ‘It was *you*!’ she said, and thumped me with her satchel.

‘Of course it was me, idiot!’ I said.

I hummed again, and Olivia put her hands over her ears.

‘Stop it! It sounds so creepy. Stop, or I won’t share my toffee chews.’

That shut me up effectively. I mimed buttoning my mouth and hitched myself up on a tomb, swinging my legs.

‘All right, I’ve stopped now. Come on,’ I said, patting the space beside me.

‘I’m not sitting *there*, right on top of a dead person,’ said Olivia.

‘Well, they can’t *do* anything, can they? Not if they’re dead.’ I looked again at the broken sepulchre, the stone lid crumbling away. ‘Though perhaps I wouldn’t sit on that one. They *might* just reach out a very bony hand and grab our toffee chews.’

‘*Stop* it! I’m warning you, Opal Plumstead. I’ll eat them all myself. Look!’ Olivia sat down on the sandy pathway, undid a banana chew, and stuffed it into her mouth. She crammed in a raspberry chew as well, to emphasize her point.

‘You’re getting your tunic filthy – look,’ I said.

'Don't care,' said Olivia indistinctly, her cheeks bulging.

'Let's sit on the grass,' I suggested.

'How do I know that the dead people haven't wriggled about a bit *under* the grass. The plots are so overgrown, you can't work out exactly where the graves are.' Olivia unwrapped another banana chew. They were my favourites. Sometimes there were only a couple in a whole bag.

'Pax!' I cried quickly, jumping off the tomb. I sat down beside her, not caring if I made my own tunic dirty, though I knew Mother would be angry.

Olivia ignored me, slowly unwrapping the banana chew, the tip of her tongue sticking out in anticipation. I edged closer to her, putting my hands up like paws and making beseeching panting noises.

'All right, you wicked greedy beast,' said Olivia, and she posted the banana chew into *my* mouth.

'Thank you!' I said, chewing vigorously, my whole mouth filled with the wonderful sweet banana flavour.

'You're such a tease. If you weren't my best friend, you'd be my worst enemy,' said Olivia. 'Just don't go on about g-h-o-s-t-s any more.'

'I don't believe in them, not really,' I said. 'I think when you're dead, that's it. You just moulder away in your coffin.' I pulled a silly corpse face, and Olivia shoved me again.

'What about angels?' she said, looking up at the stone figures around us, all standing on their white tiptoes, wings spread, as if about to fly away. 'I believe in angels. They're in Heaven.'

'I'm not sure I believe any of that any more,' I said. 'I think it's all just a trick to make us meek and good. Never mind if your life is awful now, if you have to toil away twelve hours a day in a factory and live on bread and dripping, you will be rewarded when you die and go to Heaven. Only what if Heaven doesn't exist?'

'Shush! You are dreadful. God could smite you down right this instant,' said Olivia. She looked up fearfully, as if she seriously thought a giant hand were about to punch its way through the clouds and pulverize me.

I swallowed the last of my banana toffee chew and looked at the bag hopefully.

'Another?' said Olivia.

'Oh, yes please!' I delved into the paper bag and found a strawberry chew this time. 'Well, you don't have to worry about Heaven, Olivia. If it *does* exist, you'll fly straight there, flippity-flap, because you're so good.'

'You will too,' said Olivia. 'You're ever so good. You always come top at school.'

'Yes, but that's just because I can do the lessons. That's nothing to do with being a good *person*. I'm not

at all good at home. My mother says I'm a very bad girl.'

'Why, what do you do?' Olivia asked, looking very interested.

'It's not really what I do, it's what I *say*. I don't think the same way as Mother and Cassie,' I said. 'I'm always saying the wrong thing and vexing Mother. She fusses so over the slightest little thing – and yet she lets Cassie get away with murder. When I point this out, she says I'm just jealous of Cassie and I've got an unfortunate nature.'

Olivia sucked at her toffee chew. 'I wouldn't blame you if you were a bit jealous of Cassie,' she said. 'I mean, *I* would be if she were my sister.'

I had invited Olivia to tea after we'd vowed eternal friendship. She had clearly been expecting my sister Cassie to be another version of me, only slightly older – pinched and pale and plain, with mouse-coloured hair and little oval glasses. She was taken aback by Cassie, in all her irritating abundance: her long thick wavy fair hair, her big brown doe eyes, her round rosy cheeks, her extraordinary curves, her flamboyant gestures, her peals of laughter. Olivia sat opposite her at the tea table totally struck dumb; she could scarcely eat. She gazed at Cassie as if she were a turn at the music hall. I tried not to mind. I was used to Cassie having this effect on everyone. I found I *did* mind all the same. Rather a lot.

It hurt that even my very best friend was in awe of Cassie. She looked so dazzling that no one else seemed to notice how infuriating she was – the way she acted all the time, widening her eyes, licking her lips, winding a curl round and round her little finger. I saw her practising in the looking glass, peering at herself this way and that, her hand at her waist to emphasize the curves above and below.

No one else saw her first thing in the morning, scratching herself and yawning, sniffing at yesterday's stockings to see if they really needed washing, sticking her finger in the jam jar when Mother wasn't looking. No one else objected to the way she talked. She drivelled on and on about herself, debating what sort of shampoo she should use on her wretchedly abundant hair. She congratulated herself on having naturally pearly skin. She told us all about the fine gentlemen who winked at her admiringly on her way to and from Madame Alouette's. Mother encouraged her. She still brushed Cassie's hair for her, a hundred strokes every night, and made her little oatmeal messes to apply to her famous pearly skin. Mother tutted disapprovingly at the tales of winking gentlemen – but she seemed proud of their attention too.

'You've got the looks that will turn every man's head, Cassie,' she said, preening as if they were her looks too. 'But don't you go wasting yourself on the

first Tom, Dick or Harry who comes along. You can aim much higher than any local lad. You just bide your time, my dear. No winking back, no giggling, no saucy remarks. You can't go getting a reputation now, or no one will want you, stunner or not. You need to act like a little lady at all times.'

'I'm not the slightest bit jealous of Cassie,' I told Olivia.

I was lying. I found Cassie incredibly irritating, and I didn't want to be like her, so lazy and vacant, never wanting to read a book or look at a painting. I certainly didn't envy her working at Madame Alouette's milliner's shop, stitching away at flimsy silks and satins and having to bob and curtsy to fancy ladies. I didn't want to be her in the slightest – but in my secret heart of hearts I had to admit I wanted to look like her. I didn't want the attention of all the silly young men. I didn't even want Mother fussing over me. But I did wish that Father would look at *me* with such helpless admiration in his eyes. He'd always seemed dazzled by Cassie too. But poor Father was so sad and self-absorbed now, he didn't look at any of us when he was at home. He kept his head bent and his eyes lowered and he hardly ever spoke.

'Cassie will make a lovely angel,' said Olivia. 'I can just see her in a long white dress with a halo above her gorgeous hair.'

'Cassie's no angel,' I said sourly, but the image was

in my head too. I rummaged in my school bag and found a notebook. I started sketching, showing Cassie with a devout expression, eyes wide, lips pursed, a halo attached to her hair like a little gold sunhat. I exaggerated her hair, letting it tumble all the way down to her bare feet, and I drew several young men prostrated before her, kissing her toes.

Olivia peered at my page and spluttered with laughter. 'Oh, Opal, you're such a hoot. That's *exactly* Cassie. You're so good at art.'

'Tell that to Miss Reed,' I said.

I loved to draw and paint, but art was my worst subject at school. I was used to getting ten out of ten in all my other lessons, but Miss Reed awarded me seven at best, and often gave me a disgraceful nought out of ten. She hated the way I drew.

'You've got the skills but you don't apply yourself seriously. Art isn't a *joke*, Opal Plumstead,' she said. She had some problem with her teeth and always unintentionally spat a little saliva at you if you stood face to face with her.

I *did* take art seriously, but I hated drawing the boring vases and boxes and leaf sprays she arranged as still-life compositions. I tried to sketch each object accurately, but my pencil had a will of its own. I executed the vase perfectly, but drew an exotic genie leaping out of it in a puff of smoke. I attempted the box and mastered its perspective, but then drew ropes

of beads and gold coins spilling from its carefully shaded depths. I managed the leaf spray, noting every line on each separate leaf, then drew a miniature Jack climbing up the beanstalk I'd grown for him.

'I will *not* have you drawing this nonsense!' Miss Reed spluttered, and failed me each time. In fact, she sent me directly to Miss Laurel, the headmistress, when I drew the genie, because I'd pictured him in a loincloth and she felt this was obscene.

Miss Laurel lectured me at length, though the corners of her mouth had twitched when she saw my offensive drawing. 'You're a bright girl, Opal, and you generally work hard. Why do you have to be deliberately subordinate in your art lessons?' she asked.

I pondered. It was easy enough to do the work properly in all my other lessons. It was as if I set a little machine clicking away in my head. It solved the mathematical problem of the men digging holes in a field; it parsed the passage of English; it could trace the rivers and lakes in Africa without wavering. But somehow I couldn't *draw* mechanically. My mind took over and wanted its own way. I considered trying to say this to Miss Laurel but knew she wouldn't consider this an adequate explanation.

'I'm very sorry, Miss Laurel,' I said instead.

She shook her head at me. 'Then stop plaguing poor Miss Reed,' she said. 'And you're simply

short-changing yourself, you silly girl. You need to get perfect marks in every subject if you want to matriculate. You seem like an ambitious girl. This is your chance to better yourself. You don't have to end up as a shop girl or a servant. If you really worked hard, you could even be a teacher at St Margaret's one day.'

A teacher like Miss Reed, Miss Mountbank, Miss Laurel herself! I didn't *want* to be a teacher, though everyone seemed to assume that this would be my ideal career, because I was good at lessons and had the knack of passing exams.

'What do you want to be when you grow up, Olivia?' I asked now.

She took another toffee chew and threw one to me. 'Mm, chocolate! I think I'll have my own sweet emporium. Imagine being able to munch and crunch all day long. No, I'll marry a man with a sweet shop, and then I won't have to stand on my feet and serve people. I'll just lounge on the sofa with a huge box of chocs and be the lady of the house. And I'll have two children, a boy and a girl, and we'll keep several servants to do all the work and it will be so jolly.'

'You'll be jolly *fat*, lying around all day stuffing yourself with sweeties,' I said, pulling her plait.

'Don't,' said Olivia, looking fussed. 'Do you think I'm fat now?'

'What?' I *did* think her fat, but I knew I couldn't

say so. 'Of course not, you loopy girl. You're just . . . comfortable.'

'Mother says I'm getting very tubby,' said Olivia. 'She's bought me this awful corset for Sundays. It's unbelievably uncomfortable. I can barely talk when I've got it on. It flattens my tum a bit, but I bulge out above and below it in a totally disgusting way. I couldn't even *move* after I'd tucked into my roast beef and Yorkshire pudding. Does your mother make you wear a corset for best, Opal?'

'I've got nothing to push up or push down,' I said, peering at my flat chest and sighing. '*My* mother keeps on berating me as if I'm being wilfully defiant in not growing bosoms, just because Cassie had a figure when *she* was fourteen.'

'Does Cassie wear a corset?' Olivia asked.

'Yes, but it's not one of those really *fierce* ones. It hasn't got proper bones.' I'd secretly tried it on, but it just looked ridiculous on me and I hated the cloying smell of Cassie on it, of powder and musk.

'Mother says I should be mindful of my figure now. She's stopped letting me have second helps of anything. She's so mean.'

'I'd swap her for my mother any day,' I said.

'Why do mothers have to be so difficult?' said Olivia. 'I shall be so lovely to *my* children. I shall let them eat their favourite meals every single day, always with second helps, and I'll buy my little girl an

entire family of dolls and my boy will have a toy fort with a battalion of little lead soldiers. I will play with them all day long while the cook makes our meals in the kitchen and the maid does all the housework.'

'I hope you will let your servants have their favourite meals and give *them* second helps too,' I said.

I had been to tea with Olivia and observed her family's single servant, a skinny little mite with untidy hair tumbling out of her cap and dark circles like bruises under her eyes. I'd talked to her, asking her name and age and when she had left school as she served us lopsided sandwiches and little scones like stones. She had blinked nervously and mumbled her replies.

'I'm Jane, miss, and I'm thirteen years old, and I only went to school when I was small, miss, because I had to help Ma at home with the little ones.'

I was shocked to discover that Jane was younger than us. I wanted to find out more about her, but Olivia's mother was frowning at both of us. Poor Jane's hands started to tremble. She very nearly dropped a plate of bread and butter and poured half the tea onto the tablecloth. She murmured a desperate apology and fled the room.

'Oh dear,' said Olivia's mother. 'We've unsettled her.' She raised her eyebrows and said to me in a tone of gentle reproof, 'We don't usually ask personal

questions of servants, Opal – at least, not when they're performing their duties.'

I felt my cheeks burn. I was terrified that Jane might be punished, all because of me. It seemed such a heartless rule. It was as if they weren't acknowledging that Jane was a girl, just like Olivia and me – and yet the whole family made a huge fuss of their two smelly spaniels, chatting to them in baby talk, rolling them over on their backs and petting them in a hugely embarrassing way.

Olivia had put her arm round me when we were ushered off to play cribbage in the parlour.

'Don't take too much notice of Mother – she can be very stuffy,' she whispered. 'And she's really very kind to Jane. She's training her carefully and she hardly ever gets cross when she makes mistakes.'

I wondered what it would feel like to be Jane. I knew I didn't want to be a teacher – but I certainly didn't want to be a servant, either.

'Oh Lordy, there are only three toffee chews left,' said Olivia now.

'You have them. They're your sweets, after all,' I said, though I hoped she wouldn't take me seriously.

'No, no, fair dos,' said Olivia. She gave me one – banana flavour! – and popped a strawberry chew in her own mouth. Then she bit hard into the remaining toffee.

'Careful! Mind your front teeth. You won't get that

husband of yours if you've got a great gap in your mouth,' I said. 'Here, let me.'

I had a go at severing the sticky toffee and was more successful than Olivia. We both chewed happily.

'What about *your* husband?' asked Olivia. 'What will he be like?'

'Oh, I don't think I want one,' I said.

'You have to have a husband!'

'No I don't. I don't think it would be congenial at all, having to flap around after a man. I'm not very keen on men, anyway,' I said airily, trying to sound sophisticated.

'Wait until you fall in love,' said Olivia, grinning.

'I don't believe in falling in love,' I told her. 'I don't believe in love itself. I think it's just a comfort story for adults. Children get to believe in fairies and Father Christmas – adults believe there's one true person out there. Your eyes meet, and that's it, you're in love.'

'But it's true. Of course you fall in love!' said Olivia. 'Look at Romeo and Juliet. See, even your boring old Shakespeare believed in true love.'

We were studying Shakespeare at school, but in the silly bowdlerized version considered suitable for young ladies. I'd taken a proper volume of Shakespeare's tragedies out of the library and had learned many passages by heart because I thought they were so beautiful. I'd chanted them at Olivia when I wanted to annoy her.

'Shakespeare was writing *poetically*. *Romeo and Juliet* is beautiful because of the words. It's ridiculous as a *plot*. It takes place over a matter of days – in which they're supposed to fall in love so passionately that they risk everything and then die for each other,' I said scornfully.

'You don't think it's like that for real people?' asked Olivia.

'No, I don't.'

'So why do so many people have sweethearts?'

'Because the young men *desire* the young women,' I said grandly, though I couldn't stop myself blushing.

I had very little clear idea what sweethearts did when that desire was consummated. Neither did Olivia. I knew that because we'd whispered and giggled over the conundrum many times. We both got the giggles now, choking over the last of our toffee chews.

'But there's more to love than that,' Olivia gasped at last. 'Haven't you ever felt all swoony over someone?'

'No!'

'Not Mr Andrews?' Olivia suggested slyly, smoothing out our sweet wrappers.

He was our music teacher, and he was tall and dark. He told us stories about all the tormented composers and played us extracts from their work on his Edison phonograph. I *did* like Mr Andrews very much.

‘Go on! I bet you’d like to kiss Mr Andrews,’ said Olivia.

That set us giggling again.

‘Certainly not! Think how that moustache would tickle,’ I said. ‘Anyway, Mr Andrews has got a wife – I’ve seen her – and he seems very fond of her.’

‘There! Husbands and wives love each other, silly,’ said Olivia, twisting each toffee paper round her little finger, turning them into tiny glasses.

‘They’re fond at first – that’s the passion. But it wears off. Think of our parents, Olivia – your mother and father and mine.’

We thought.

Olivia sighed, looking depressed. ‘Well, I’ll love my babies, even if I don’t always love my husband,’ she said. ‘Let’s drink to that.’ She gave me a toffee-wrapper glass and we touched them together and pretended to drink. Then Olivia consulted her pocket watch. ‘Cripes, look at the time! We’re going to be in trouble.’

We stood up and ran helter-skelter out of the graveyard, all the way to our respective homes.