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Opening extract from

Imagination According to Humphrey

Written by

Betty G. Birney

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Imagine This!

The golden dragon bent his head low and Gil Goodfriend crawled up his neck. When the dragon lifted his head, Gil was higher than Tower Peak, which was the tallest mountain in the kingdom.

It was after lunch and our teacher, Mrs Brisbane, was reading a book to everyone in Room 26 of Longfellow School, where I live.

She continued:

'Hold on,' the dragon said. 'We're going up.'

Suddenly, Gil and the dragon rose high above his village. Wind whipped through his hair. It was thrilling until the dragon suddenly veered to the right and swooped down low, grazing ten treetops

with his majestic, fire-tipped wings. One treetop caught fire, but luckily, the wind blew the fire out.

Someone in the back of the room gasped.
Mrs Brisbane kept on reading.

'Are you all right?' the dragon called to Gil. Surprisingly, he was perfectly fine.

He was perfectly fine? My whiskers wiggled at the thought of flying over fiery treetops.

Gil peered down as they soared above his house. It looked no bigger than a toy. In seconds, the whole village of Bumpshire looked like tiny dots on a white background, even though it was July.

You see, Gil's village had really terrible weather. It snowed in the summer and it flooded in the winter and they had BIG-BIG-BIG storms all the time. It was miserable, but no one knew how to make it better.

'Only you can change the weather back to normal,' the dragon said.

'I'm just a boy,' Gil said. 'Why me?'

'Yes, WHY-WHY-WHY?' I squeaked.

The dragon didn't answer.

After a few moments, Gil shouted, 'Am I ever coming back?'

The dragon's voice boomed, 'That depends on you and you alone!'

Mrs Brisbane looked up at all of my classmates.

My tail twitched as I imagined riding a dragon. Dogs are smaller than dragons but they're still pretty scary and have bad breath. At least they don't breathe fire!

'Don't stop!' Slow-Down-Simon shouted.

Mrs Brisbane closed the book. 'I'm sorry, but I have to keep you in suspense until tomorrow.'

Calm-Down-Cassie shivered. 'The dragon seems nice, but I hope I never meet a real one!'

'I agree!' I said.

Of course, since I'm a small classroom hamster, all that my human friends heard was 'Squeak.'

'BOING-BOING!' My neighbour Og jumped up and down in his tank. He's the classroom frog. Maybe he's afraid of dragons, too.

'Dragons aren't real,' Tell-the-Truth-Thomas said. 'They're only in books. You shouldn't believe everything you read in a story.'

'There *are* real dragons,' Not-Now-Nicole said.

'Eeek!' I squeaked.

Thomas laughed. 'You have a really good imagination!'

'But there were dragons a long time ago,' Cassie said. 'Right, Mrs Brisbane?'

Mrs Brisbane smiled. 'Some stories are true. They're called non-fiction. But other stories come out of the imagination. Those books are called fiction, like this book.'

'There are dragons that aren't imaginary,' Nicole said. 'My brother has one.'

'Really?' Mrs Brisbane asked.

'Really!' Nicole said.

Stop-Talking-Sophie raised her hand. 'I don't see any dragons walking around today – but that doesn't mean they never did. Why did so many people write stories about them?'

‘That’s a good question,’ Mrs Brisbane said. ‘Any ideas on why people might have imagined there were dragons?’

The room was quiet for a moment.

I had no ideas at all. I would NEVER-NEVER-NEVER want to imagine there were real scary dragons!

Just-Joey raised his hand. ‘Maybe people saw some big old bones – like dinosaur bones – and thought they were from something like a dragon. And maybe there was a forest fire and people thought the beast breathed flames that started the fire.’

‘Yes!’ Thomas said. ‘And then they started to imagine all kinds of things the dragon did.’

Mrs Brisbane nodded. ‘I think it might have happened like that.’

I still wasn’t sure.

The room was quiet until Not-Now-Nicole giggled. ‘Maybe we should get a dragon for a classroom pet. One like my brother’s.’

It had been hard enough to get used to a frog as the other pet in Room 26. Especially a frog like Og, who makes a weird sound and has some odd habits. But a fire-breathing dragon?

'NO-NO-NO!' I squeaked.

The students sitting close to our table heard me and laughed.

'Don't worry, Humphrey,' Thomas said. 'We're not getting a dragon . . . because they're imaginary.'

By that time, I wasn't even interested in an *imaginary* dragon.

'Tell us about this dragon your brother has, Nicole,' Mrs Brisbane said.

'Her name is Pearl and she's really beautiful,' Nicole said.

My classmates burst out laughing.

I didn't think what Nicole said was funny at all. She looked REALLY-REALLY-REALLY upset.

'She is *too* real! I'll prove it to you,' she said. 'I'll call my mum right now. She'll tell you.'

'Not-Now-Nicole,' Mrs Brisbane said. 'It's time for us to get out our maths books. You can explain later.'

I usually try to learn along with my fellow classmates, even though I don't have a maths book. But my eyelids got heavy and I slipped into my sleeping hut for a short nap.

When I woke up, I crawled back out and glanced across the table by the window where my cage sits.

Og was in his tank next to my cage. I think he was dozing, too, but it's hard to tell. Sometimes he closes his eyes but he's not sleeping.

(I told you, he's a little odd.)

I glanced out of the other side of my cage and was unsqueakably happy to see that there was no pet dragon blowing hot smoke at me. Whew!

Then I looked towards the front of the room.

I don't know how long I'd slept, but instead of writing numbers on the board, Mrs Brisbane was talking about writing.

'This is my favourite time in the school year,' she said. 'Today, we start being writers. I know you all brought your writing notebooks today. Will you hold them up?'

The other students all held up notebooks and each one was different.

Helpful-Holly's had big yellow sunflowers on it.

Tall-Paul's had a motorcycle on the cover, while Small-Paul's had a photo of the space shuttle.

I climbed up to the tippy-top of my cage so I could see better. I saw smiley faces, princesses, polka dots and stars.

My friends in Room 26 have a lot of interests!

'Once you start writing your ideas in your notebooks, you're on your way to being a writer,' Mrs Brisbane explained.

'What if we don't have any ideas?' Hurry-Up-Harry asked.

Some of my classmates giggled.

'I mean, what if we don't have any ideas about what to write?' Harry said.

'We all have ideas,' Mrs Brisbane said. 'The notebook is a tool to help you.'

'Like a hammer?' Fix-It-Felipe asked. I know he likes hammers, because he can fix just about anything.

More of my friends giggled.

Mrs Brisbane laughed, too. 'In a way, yes. It's a tool to help you learn how to find ideas and develop them.'

Helpful-Holly laughed. 'I think Felipe would rather have a hammer.'

'All right, enough joking, class,' our teacher said. 'To get you started, I'm going to give you

an assignment.' She paused to write on the board.

If I could fly, I would fly like a _____

'And then fill in the blank however you like,' she explained. 'You can start now, but the bell will ring soon, so bring in your completed work tomorrow.'

'Fly? Without a plane?' Cassie asked.

'You get to decide if it's a plane or a bird or anything you can imagine,' Mrs Brisbane said. 'Then I want you to write a sentence saying where you would go. This is the beginning of your assignment and eventually you will end up with a real story.'

She pointed to her head. 'Use your imaginations. And spend some time thinking about your idea before you start writing.'

I heard some sighs and dropped pencils as my friends opened their notebooks.

Hurry-Up-Harry looked confused.

Slow-Down-Simon looked grumpy.

Calm-Down-Cassie looked anything but calm.

After they wrote down the beginning that Mrs Brisbane assigned, they stopped writing. They just stared at the blank pages.

'Do we have to decide now?' Do-It-Now-Daniel asked.

'Start thinking now,' Mrs Brisbane said. 'You'll share your ideas tomorrow.'

Just-Joey shook his head. 'I never know how to start.'

Mrs Brisbane said, 'It sometimes helps if you brainstorm.'

Eeek! Brainstorm? My ears wiggled at the word. Imagine having rain and lightning and thunder in your brain!

'Take five minutes and write down any idea that comes into your head,' our teacher explained. 'Even if the idea seems silly or impossible, or if you don't even like it, write it down anyway. *No rubbing out*. When the five minutes is up, look at your list of ideas and you'll probably find at least one that you would like to write about. Then you can start. The assignment is only two sentences.'

'How long do the sentences have to be?' Sophie asked. 'Because sometimes a sentence

is long and sometimes a sentence is short and sometimes—'

Sophie didn't get to finish because the bell rang and the notebooks were quickly closed.

Most of my friends dashed for their backpacks and coats, but Sophie headed straight for Mrs Brisbane.

'I dream about flying all the time,' she said. 'Once I dreamed I flew to this island and all my friends there were parrots, but they could talk and I could understand them because parrots can talk. Oh, and you know what? Once . . .'

Mrs Brisbane glanced at the clock. 'Why don't you write about it, Sophie? I don't want you to miss your bus home.'

Sophie looked disappointed. 'I'd rather talk about it than write about it.'

'I know,' Mrs Brisbane said. 'But you'll learn.'

She pointed Sophie in the direction of the cloakroom.

While my friends dashed out of Room 26, Mrs Brisbane cleaned the board and neatly stacked the papers on her desk.

When she had her coat on and was ready to leave, she came over to the table. 'Goodnight,

Humphrey and Og. I'll see you tomorrow.'

After she left, I watched out the window and waited until all the cars and buses were gone for the day.

Then I turned towards Og's tank. 'Do you think dragons are real? Because to squeak the truth, I'm not sure.'

Og was silent.

It's HARD-HARD-HARD to know what a frog thinks about. For one thing, Og always has a goofy grin on his face. And if he does talk, he sounds more like a broken guitar string than a sensible animal like a hamster.

This time, he didn't even say 'BOING!' He just dived into the water side of his tank and began splashing.

I looked out the window again. It was getting dark.

I had something important to do, but I had to wait.

The big clock on the wall doesn't make any noise during the day, but it makes a lot of noise at night. TICK-TICK-TICK. Even an odd frog is better company than that. I waited for the other sound and finally it came.

RATTLE-RATTLE-RATTLE.

Then the turn of the doorknob and the click of the switch. The room filled with light.

Aldo had arrived!

Aldo came every night during the week to clean Room 26 and all the rooms in Longfellow School.

'Hello, my friends,' he said cheerily. 'I hope you're both well.'

'I am, Aldo. How are you?' I squeaked as I rushed to the front of my cage to greet him.

'BOING-BOING!' Og said.

'I am well,' Aldo said with a smile. 'Thank you for asking.'

He went straight to work, sweeping, dusting, mopping, and emptying the bin.

On most nights, Aldo first stops to talk or even do a trick, like balancing his broom on one finger.

But tonight, he didn't stop at all.

'I need to get home to study,' Aldo said. 'The quicker I get out of here, the sooner I can study. And the quicker I get out of college, the sooner I can start teaching. After all, I'm about to be a dad.'

I already knew Aldo had gone back to college to learn to be a teacher, and I knew he and his wife, Maria, were going to be parents. Of twins!

Aldo worked so fast, he was almost a blur.

I was unsqueakably happy when he sat down to eat dinner with us.

I was even happier when he pulled out a small piece of carrot for me.

And Og seemed pleased when he threw some Froggy Fish Sticks in his tank.

Aldo ate his sandwich almost as fast as he'd swept the floors.

'Wish me luck, fellows,' he said as he got up to leave. 'I have a really big test tomorrow.'

'Good luck, Aldo!' I called out to him as he turned off the lights.

'BOING!' Og said.

The light from street lamps streamed through the window and gave my cage a nice glow.

Once I saw Aldo's car pull out of the car park, I quickly went to work.

I'd been waiting hours for this moment.

My friends weren't the only students with

notebooks. I have one, too. I keep it hidden behind the little mirror in my cage.

It's a hamster-sized notebook that was a present from Ms Mac, a teacher I love as much as I love Mrs Brisbane. There's a tiny pencil, too.

My notebook doesn't have flowers or footballs on the cover. In fact, it's pretty plain.

But it's VERY-VERY-VERY special to me, because I write all my secret thoughts in it.

My notebook is like an old friend, and I couldn't wait to get to work.

I opened it and began to think. If I could fly wherever I wanted, where would I go?

There are a lot of places where hamsters like me can't go. We can't go on aeroplanes or field trips or to football games or restaurants.

But there are some places we can go that humans can't – tiny places like between the cracks in the floorboards or inside a little hamster ball.

If I could fly, I would fly like a . . . what?

I wrote in my notebook almost every night, but suddenly I couldn't think of a thing to say.

'Use your imagination,' Mrs Brisbane had said.

'Where are you, imagination?' I squeaked. 'Did you fly away?'

But all I heard back was silence. There was nothing like lightning or thunder in my brain!

I was wide awake, but my imagination had gone to sleep.

'Og, where would you go if you could fly?' I squeaked.

'BOING-BOING-BOING!' Og jumped up and down excitedly.

I realized my mistake.

The word 'fly' means something special to frogs, because 'flies' are things they like to *eat.*

My tummy did a flip-flop just thinking about *that*.

'Never mind,' I told him.

I started thinking about things that fly, like birds, aeroplanes, rockets . . . and flies.

Aeroplanes and rockets are huge and noisy things that go way above the clouds and who knows where?

Birds are squawky creatures with sharp beaks, although it would be nice to fly anywhere I wanted to go.

And I wouldn't want to be the kind of fly

that ends up in a frog's mouth.

The problem is, I'm HAPPY-HAPPY-HAPPY living in my cage in Room 26 and seeing my human friends every day. I really like helping my friends.

I stared and stared at that blank page and I guess I dozed off, because the next thing I knew, sunshine was streaming through the window and Mrs Brisbane was jiggling her key in the door.

I barely had time to push my notebook and pencil behind the mirror before I heard her say, 'Morning!'




My Writer's Ramblings

I have so many great ideas
All through the day,
But when it's time to write
them down,
Poof! They've flown away.