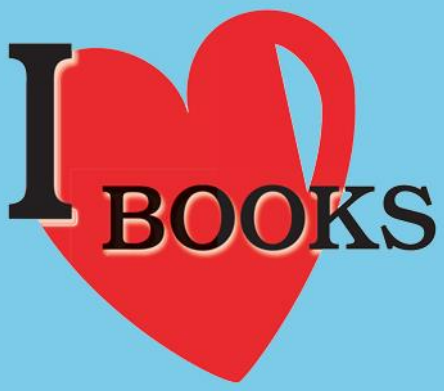


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Opening extract from

Archie Greene and the Alchemist's Curse

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The Vanishing Fruitcake

As dragons go, the one looking down at Archie Greene from the roof of Oxford's Bodleian Library wasn't a particularly big one. Archie still regarded it with suspicion. It might be made of stone at the moment but he had seen gargoyles come to life before. A raven perched on the dragon's head observed the boy below with its flinty black eyes. The raven sat so still that it, too, appeared to be carved from stone.

At that moment, Archie felt a prickling, tickling sensation in the palm of his right hand. He glanced at the small tattoo-like mark there in the shape of a needle and thread. It was the firemark he'd received when he started his apprenticeship as a magical bookbinder. Normally, it didn't bother him, but today it was itching.

Archie was twelve and small for his age, with spiky brown hair, but otherwise looked perfectly normal. The only clue that there was anything out of the ordinary about him, apart from the firemark on his hand, was the colour of his eyes. One was emerald green and the other was silvery grey – a sign of magical ability.

It was the end of the summer holidays and Oxford was teeming with parents buying school uniforms for their children. Not having a mother or father of his own, Archie couldn't help but watch with curiosity.

Glancing up the high street, Archie saw another telltale sign – a girl with pigtails emerged from a stationery shop clutching a new pencil case. It was nearly time to go back to school, and in the past Archie would've been shopping for cheap secondhand uniforms with his gran.

But not this year! At the beginning of the summer everything had changed for Archie. He had discovered cousins he never knew existed, and he had found out that he was descended from the Flame Keepers of Alexandria, a secret community devoted to finding and preserving magical books.

This term Archie would be receiving a very different sort of schooling – as an apprentice at the Museum of Magical Miscellany. The museum was

Oxford's best-kept secret. It was hidden beneath the Bodleian Library.

Over the summer, Old Zeb, the museum's bookbinder, had been teaching Archie how to repair magical books.

With the start of the new term, Archie would be learning more advanced bookbinding, including how to cast spells. Then, when he received his next firemark, he'd start one of the other two magical apprenticeships – finding or minding.

Magical books fascinated Archie. Gran had always said that books were in his blood, and over the summer he'd found out why. Since starting his apprenticeship he had discovered a very rare talent: he was a book whisperer, which meant he could talk to magical books.

Archie didn't understand how book whispering worked or what he was supposed to do with his unusual ability. But he loved being an apprentice at the museum, surrounded by books and friends.

'Why are you looking so pleased with yourself?' asked Bramble Foxe, Archie's eldest cousin, who had stopped to look in a shop window with him. Bramble was nearly fifteen, with green eyes and long, dark, curly hair. She was on her second apprentice skill at the museum, as a minder, having completed her training as a finder and received her second firemark.

'I was just thinking about everything that's happened since I came to Oxford,' he said, grinning. And a lot had happened.

A magical book he had been sent on his twelfth birthday had turned out to be *The Book of Souls*, a book of dark magic written by a warlock called Barzak. It was one of the Terrible Tomes, the seven most dangerous magical books ever written. Luckily, Archie had managed to thwart Barzak's plans to unleash the dark magic, and had imprisoned the warlock inside the book.

That was only a few weeks ago and Archie still felt a tingle of fear when he thought about it. It had been a very close call. It had also been very exciting!

'I can't wait to start learning spells,' Archie said, turning to Bramble.

'Just one of the many benefits of being an apprentice at Mothballs,' she replied.

'Mothballs' was the apprentices' nickname for the museum – because it smelled of old parchment and mothballs. They used the nickname to keep it a secret from the Unready – people who didn't know about magic. Only those who were descended from magical families knew that magic existed.

Archie and Bramble were on their way to the museum now. They were eager to find out what they would be learning this term.

'Just think,' said Archie as they left the high street and walked down a secluded cobbled street. 'As long as Thistle passes his Flame test, he'll begin his apprenticeship, too.'

Thistle Foxe was Archie's other cousin, and tomorrow was his twelfth birthday, which meant he would be tested by the Flame of Pharos.

'I know. I can't believe my little brother is all grown up,' Bramble replied.

Archie's apprenticeship was at a magical bookshop, the Aisle of White, attached to the museum. Archie and Bramble could see the bookshop in front of them as they turned into a courtyard. A small, insignificant-looking building with a green front door, it had a sign above it in flaking white and gold paint that read:

The Aisle Of White:
Purveyor Of Rare Books.
Proprietor: Geoffrey Screech.

The bookshop served as a place to sort the magic books (unbeknownst to their owners) from other books that people came to sell. It was the only part of the museum that was open to the Unready.

Archie said goodbye to Bramble in front of the bookshop. She worked in the main museum, which was on the other side of the courtyard and strictly

off limits to the non-magical world. Apprentices went through a secret entrance in Quill's Coffee & Chocolate House.

Archie opened the door to the bookshop and a bell clanged noisily. The Aisle of White was bigger than it appeared on the outside. Dark wooden bookcases stood in columns dividing the shop into a series of aisles. The shelves were full of old books, but the magical ones were kept behind a velvet curtain at the back, waiting to be mended or sent to the museum for classification.

The shop was lit by flickering candlelight. It smelled fusty – of candle wax, cobwebs and old paper.

Geoffrey Screech, the owner, was standing behind the counter writing in a ledger in his neat handwriting. A slight man, with thinning grey hair and a goatee beard, Screech wore a green waistcoat and a yellow bow tie. It was his job to check if any books that came into the shop were magical.

'Morning, Archie,' Screech said, glancing up.

Inside an open cardboard box on the counter was a book. 'New arrival?' Archie asked.

'Came in yesterday,' said Screech. 'One of the Unready clearing out the attic. He had no idea it was magical, of course. Anyway, it needs to go down to Old Zeb.'

Archie peered at the slim volume. It had a patterned cover with panes of diamonds in red, green and black. Tied around it was a piece of thick twine.

Archie caught a glimpse of Screech's assistant, Marjorie Gudge, in one of the aisles, putting books on the bookshelves. A short woman with thick glasses, Marjorie was in charge of the non-magical books.

Picking up the cardboard box, Archie hurried through the black velvet curtain at the back of the shop towards Old Zeb's mending workshop. He glanced at a bookcase behind the curtain as he passed. It was full of repaired magical books waiting to go to the museum.

'Morning, Archie,' said a papery voice.

'Hello,' Archie replied, glancing at an old book of potions on the shelf. 'And how are you today?'

'Much better now that the rip in my cover is mended,' said the book appreciatively.

A chorus of other papery voices chimed in, wishing Archie a good morning and inquiring after his health.

Archie smiled to himself. This had become a daily routine. The books talked to him because he was the only one who could hear them.

'Good morning to you all,' he said. 'Sorry, I can't stop to chat today. I've got to get down to the mending workshop.'

As Archie moved on down the corridor, he heard a rustling sound from inside the box he was carrying.

'So you can talk to books?' said the curious magical book, who'd never encountered a book whisperer before. 'Where are you taking me?'

'To Old Zeb, the bookbinder,' said Archie.

'Someone tied me shut with this horrible piece of twine,' complained the voice. 'It's too tight. I can't breathe. Take it off, would you?'

Archie smiled to himself. Some magical books couldn't be trusted. He'd been tricked before.

'We'll see what Old Zeb says,' he said.

The book was quiet as he walked along the passageway, which ended in a spiral staircase leading downwards.

Archie took a lantern from a shelf and, balancing it on top of his box, he began to descend. At the bottom of the stairs he stepped into a long, dark corridor, lit by flaming torches. The air smelled damp and earthy.

Three arched doors led off the corridor. Each was a different colour: the first was green, and the second was blue. Archie walked past these. The mending workshop was behind the third door, the red one. Beyond it, the passageway disappeared into shadows, and on several occasions Archie had thought he could

see a fourth, black door, but it was too dark to be certain.

He knew better than to go exploring down here. His curiosity had landed him in trouble before. Once he had heard strange noises coming from behind the second door and had sneaked a peek behind it, only to discover a fierce magical creature – a stone griffin called a bookend beast – guarding the entrance.

Archie pushed open the red door and stepped inside. The mending workshop was a large room with a workbench down the middle and the Word Smithy set into one wall. All sorts of bookbinding tools were scattered along the bench and hanging in racks.

Old Zeb was standing by the Word Smithy, the Flame of Pharos burning brightly inside the little furnace. He was a tiny old man, no more than four feet tall, with white hair that stood up in tufts, a hooked nose and dazzling green eyes. In the brief time Archie had known the old bookbinder, he'd grown very fond of him.

Damaged books were piled up on the workbench waiting for the old man to repair them, and it was Archie's job to assist the bookbinder and then take the books to the museum for cataloguing.

'Ah, mornin', Archie,' Old Zeb wheezed. 'And what have you got there?'

'New arrival,' replied Archie. 'Looks like a broken clasp.'

'Good lad. Well, pop it on the end of the bench,' said Old Zeb, his eyes sparkling. 'We'll get to it later. Now, I expect you want to hear your report and find out what you'll be learning next?'

Archie nodded.

'Thought so,' said the old man, 'but first things first. Marjorie has made us a cake to celebrate the start of the new term.' He smiled, indicating a large fruitcake in a round tin.

'Stick the kettle on, there's a good boy.'

Old Zeb never did anything without a cup of tea first. Archie filled up the copper kettle and put it on top of the Word Smithy. As he did, he felt his palm prickling again. The itching was getting worse. It had never bothered him this much, even when his firemark had first appeared.

'Mmmm, you can't beat Marjorie's fruitcake,' said Old Zeb a little while later as he swallowed a mouthful and washed it down with a slurp of tea.

He handed Archie a scroll. 'Your report,' he said. 'Go ahead and open it!'

Archie unrolled the parchment and began to read.

> Archie is a likeable and enthusiastic boy. He is a talented bookbinder with a real flair for the

subject, which should serve him well in the magical realm. His timekeeping could be better, but he makes a lovely cup of tea. Overall, a great start – well done, Archie!

Old Zeb beamed at him. 'You're a natural – just like your dad!'

Archie felt a surge of pride. Old Zeb had taught his father when he was an apprentice at the museum. Archie had never really known his parents. His mother and father, and his elder sister, had disappeared when he was still a baby. His gran, Granny Greene, had told him they had been lost at sea when a ferry had sunk in the English Channel.

Old Zeb was speaking again in his high, scratchy voice. 'So far, you've learned about the different types of magical books. You won't forget about poppers in a hurry, eh?' He gave Archie an amused look.

Poppers were magical books with spells that popped out when they were opened. When he had first started, Archie had opened a popper and released the spell for a knight called Sir Bodwin the Bold, even though Old Zeb had warned him not to touch anything without supervision. Fortunately, the bookbinder had seen the funny side of the situation. Archie smiled at the memory.