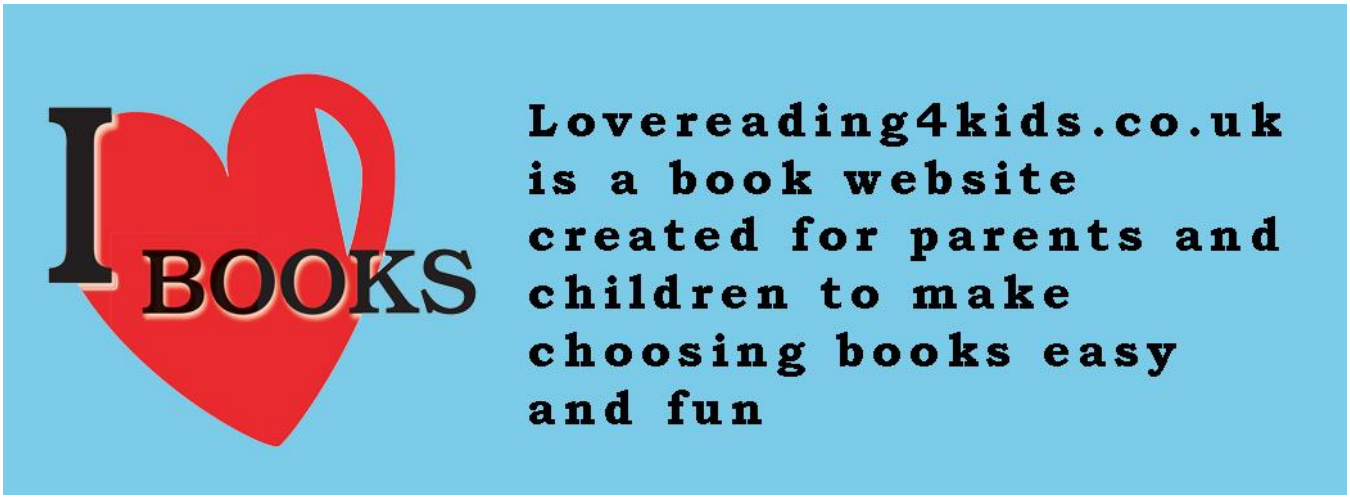


Opening extract from

The Great Cycle Challenge

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From Hero to Zero

Fergus Hamilton was an ordinary nine-year-old boy. He liked monster films (but only from behind the sofa), marmalade sandwiches (but only on white bread), and his dog Chimp (but only when he wasn't stealing his sandwiches). He didn't like school uniform (but he wore it), tidying his room (but he did it), or the way his mum tried to kiss him sometimes at the school gates (but most times he let her).



Yes, he was ordinary in almost every way, except one. Because, for a small boy, Fergus Hamilton had an extraordinarily big imagination.

Some days he imagined Chimp was a specially trained bomb disposal dog who helped him scout out unexploded World War Two missiles, instead of sniffing for socks under the sofa, which was what he was doing right now.

Some days he imagined he was an intrepid explorer living in an ice cave in the Antarctic, instead of a schoolboy living in the flat above his grandpa's junk shop on Napier Street.

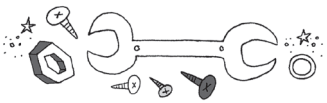
Some days he imagined his dad lived with them, instead of in Kilmarnock, which was where Mum

said he was, or in King Woebegot's prison in a parallel universe called Nevermore, which was where Grandpa said he was, and where Fergus himself had ended up only a few weeks ago. All he'd done was spin the pedals on his new birthday bike backwards three times and WHAM BAM! Suddenly he was no longer on Carnoustie Common but in the middle of an enchanted forest being chased by the Knights of No Nonsense and the Hounds of Horribleness. That had definitely been weirder than anything Fergus had ever dreamed of before.



Or maybe not. Because today Fergus was imagining he was on the winning team in the Great Cycle Challenge, edging past his arch-nemesis Wesley Wallace in the final few seconds to take the trophy for Hercules' Hopefuls, as the crowd went wild and Steve "Spokes" Sullivan himself declared Fergus Hamilton to be the best boy cyclist in the whole wide world.

But if there was one thing Fergus knew for sure, that really *was* a dream, and a hopeless one at that.



"If the wind changes you'll stay like that," said a voice from behind the *Evening News*.

"Huh?" asked Fergus, who had been absent-mindedly scratching Chimp, who was absent-mindedly chewing a shoe.



Grandpa lowered the sports pages and frowned at the boy. "Come on, sonny, you've got a face on you as long as the back straight. Why so glum?"

"You know why," protested Fergus. "Because the Great Cycle Challenge is in less than three weeks and so far not a single person has signed up for tomorrow's team tryouts."

"That's not true," said Grandpa. "Daisy put her name down the minute the poster went up."

"Daisy doesn't even have a bike," sighed Fergus. "And if she did her mum wouldn't let her ride it. She's not even allowed to play netball without a helmet."

"True," said Grandpa. "I bet the poor lassie has to wear that thing to eat her tea in case a pea pings off her fork."

"Or a tattie twangs her on the ear," said Mum, fastening her watch onto her nurse's uniform, ready for her night shift. "See you later, love," she added, kissing Fergus on the top of his head before he had time to duck.

