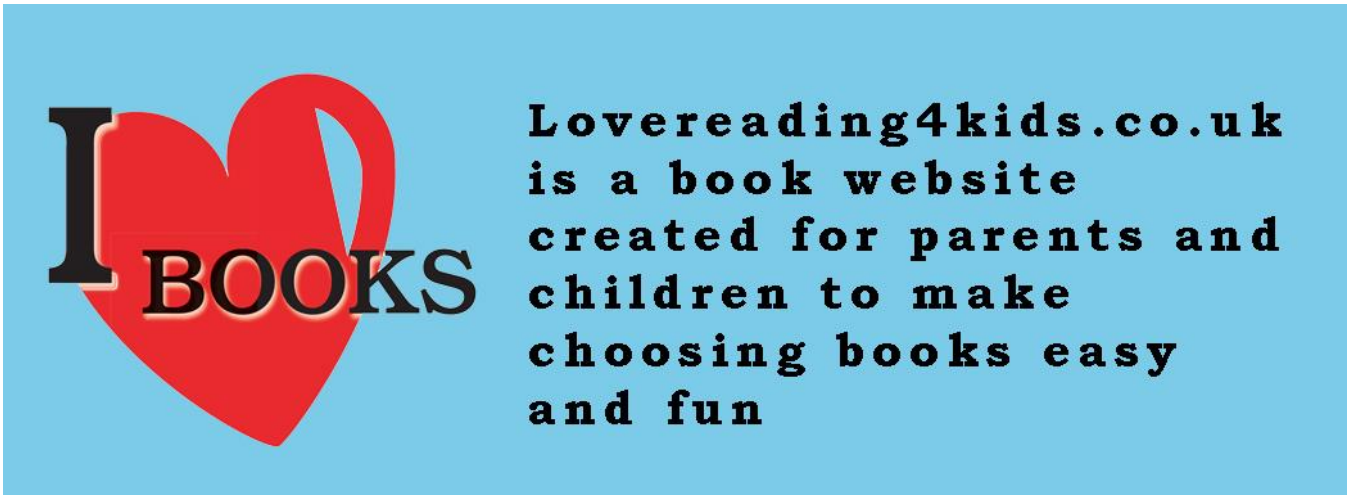


Opening extract from

A Seven Letter Word

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Monday, 11 May
Dear Mum,

It's me, Finlay.

I've had this brilliant idea to empty out all the words in my head on to paper. That way, they might stop driving me bonkers, buzzing around with no way of getting out.

I'm writing in the journal I found in the box of your things that I managed to save from Dad's manic FUMIGATION [16] session when you left. I hope you don't mind; you never wrote anything in it.

Seeing as I'm using your journal, I thought it made sense that I write directly to *you*.

For starters, I know you'll appreciate the Scrabble scores I'm giving for the best words. I practise every day just like you taught me, and my vocabulary is improving all the time. I've come on a lot since we used to play together.

I wish I could show you, Mum. I think you'd be proud.

Course, I didn't have to write to you, I know that. I could've wrote to . . . well anybody, really, but I don't know that many people since we moved house.

It's much easier to get your feelings out when you know someone well. Or *used* to know someone well. And daft as it sounds, it helps me feel closer to you.

I still think about us every single day, our family.

I know none of us were perfect. Probably I could've

been better behaved, and when you used to ask if I'd tidied my bedroom or done my homework, I wish now I'd listened.

But I didn't know what was going to happen, did I? I didn't try harder because I thought things were safe. I thought things would always be the same.

I break up from school next Friday, for spring half-term holiday. I don't know how I'm going to fill every day stuck at home for a whole week but it's going to help, now I can write to you.

Only, if I wrote how I speak, I'd need a full sheet of this journal for every sentence and you'd soon get fed up with that.

See, I'm a different lad to the one you left behind.

I can see OK, can hear perfectly fine and I can write really well. But the thing is, I can't speak. It's not just the odd word any more.

I'm a st-st-stutterer.

STUTTER [7] – that's one seven-letter word I wish didn't exist, fifty points extra or not.

Hilarious, isn't it?

It's like the word is there in my mouth, fully formed, and then, just as it's ready to leave my lips . . . POP! It ricochets and bounces around my gob.

Except it's not funny at all, because there's not a damn thing I can do about it.

Worst of all, people think I'm totally and utterly

stupid. I mean, speaking is the most natural thing in the world to do. And that's the hardest thing to take, I suppose, because I want to be bright and clever and ARTICULATE [12]. Like you.

I'm not telling you this to make you feel bad, Mum, honest.

You see, I've made my mind up to write anything I want to down here. My journal letters to you will be UNCENSORED [13].

If I'm going to write the truth, it's the only way.

And anyway, you'll never get to read any of this stuff because like Dad says, when you left, you were gone forever from our lives.

He says you might as well be dead.

Love,

Finlay x



SCRABBLE IS A POPULAR WORD GAME THAT IS PLAYED WITH ONE HUNDRED TILES.

Tuesday

I hear Dad clattering about downstairs, which means breakfast is nearly ready.

I wrap Mum's journal up in my pyjama top and slide it into my T-shirt drawer.

I check Neville's water bottle and then I go downstairs before Dad shouts at me, save him having one of his coughing fits. He usually leaves the house before I get up, but today he's fitting a kitchen in a house just two streets away, so he's leaving a bit later.

Dad is puffing away and stirring something on the cooker. He turns round and puts two plates down on the table, angling his head so fag ash doesn't drop from his mouth.

Breakfast is the same as last night's tea: egg and beans but without the chips.

He puts another plate down with three pieces of buttered white toast on it. Mum used to slice them

diagonally into triangles. Silly, I know, but toast always seem to taste nicer, cut like that.

I make two mugs of tea and we both sit down.

Dad has forgotten the ketchup and gets up again. I really fancy some brown sauce but he has his back to me at the cupboard.

'D-Da-Da—'

It's just a flipping three-letter word: D-A-D.

It's even rubbish points on the Scrabble board because it's so simple.

DAD. *Just say it.*

'Da-Da-Dad.'

He turns around with the bottle of ketchup in his hand.

I look at him. He looks back at me.

'I w-want s-some –'

I always worry that Dad will get annoyed but he hardly ever does.

I stop and swallow hard. I still haven't finished the sentence.

My lower back is wet. My throat hurts.

'Bloody hell, Finlay.' Dad strides over. 'Are we going to get this food down us while it's still hot, or what?'

I nod.

'Here, ketchup.' He plonks it down on the table. 'Is that what you're after?'

I don't say anything.

We start to eat. Dad pushes his plate to the right-hand side a touch, so he can spread his paper out better.

The wall clock has a loud tick and I can hear the grill pan creaking and snapping as it cools.

Dad laughs out loud at something he's just read and I get a good view of the chewed-up egg and chips that's still sitting on top of his tongue.

'What?' He stops chewing and looks at me.

I want to tell Dad about the new two-letter Scrabble words I learned last night and about my decision to write to Mum. I want him to tell me it's OK that I couldn't get the words out earlier.

I look down at my plate and I don't say anything.

'Pass that egg over here if you don't want it then, lad,' he says, with his mouth still full.



OF THE ONE HUNDRED LETTERED TILES IN PLAY, TWO ARE BLANK.

The school bus is late and within a few minutes, a big queue has formed behind me.

There's a light drizzle and a bit of a chill in the early morning air but the weather is getting warmer.

My rucksack feels heavy and uncomfortable on my back. There are four thick library books in there, all overdue. I'm just debating whether to start walking to the next bus stop when I hear his voice behind me.

'F-F-Finlay!'

There's a pounding of feet as Oliver Haywood and his mob approach the bus stop.

I don't realize I've stopped breathing until I start to feel a bit dizzy. I take in a gulp of air but I don't turn around. They've never caught the bus from this stop before, it's like they've come here just to start on me.

Oliver calls out again, louder this time.

'F-flipping heck, it's F-Finlay.'

They ignore the queue and walk straight to the front

to gather round me. They all wear their ties done loose with sloppy knots and Oliver has a swirly design shaved into one side of his hair. He's got this concerned look on his face.

'You OK, F-Finlay? It m-must be fl-flaming f-freezing, stood here.'

Everybody laughs. Even the other kids who hardly know me.

'This is really serious,' Oliver says, in a worried voice. 'It looks like F-Finlay M-McIntosh has turned deaf, as well as dumb. Do you reckon he needs a bit of a shock to bring him out of it?'

People jeer and laugh, making one big, mixed-up sound. Bright eyes and neat teeth flash all around me.

There's a very small tuft of grass at the bottom of the bus-stop pole that has somehow managed to survive the pounding of thousands of boots and shoes. I imagine myself shrinking down next to it so I'm almost invisible.

For a second or two, the noise around me fades far away.

I don't expect the blow that sends me careering head first into the steel pole. A sharp pain bounces around the inside of my skull. I can feel Oliver pulling at my rucksack and all I can think is that my Scrabble tile bag is in there, the one Mum made before she left.

Someone pulls my left arm back – the noise level ramps up – and I feel the rucksack completely slip off one

side. I don't even think about it, I just fling my other arm up quick before the rucksack can completely slip off and smash my elbow backwards to push everyone away. My bag smacks hard into someone behind me. Before I even realize what I've done, Oliver's on the ground, groaning and clutching his shoulder.

I forgot about the library books. I just clobbered Oliver with the full swinging weight of them.

The laughter stops. I glance around and lots of eyes look back at me; some are glaring, some curious, and some even have a hint of admiration.

There's a heavy diesel rumble and a whoosh of air brakes. I've never been so glad to see the school bus. The doors hiss and open, and I jump on, flashing my bus pass at the driver and sitting down heavily, as far away from the pavement windows as I can.

As the bus pulls away I glance back to see Oliver staggering to his feet and glaring in at me, his face tight and pinched as he rubs his shoulder and shrugs off his mates who are trying to help him.

Just before I look away, he slides one finger across his throat in a cutting motion.



THE SCRABBLE BOARD IS MADE UP OF SMALLER, INDIVIDUAL BOXES THAT MAKE UP ONE LARGE, SQUARE GRID.

Soon as I get home from school, I'm just waiting until I can clear away the tea and escape upstairs.

'That's a nasty bruise on your forehead,' Dad says, putting down his mug and peering at me. 'How did you come by that?'

I press the swelling a bit too hard and flinch.

'I tr-tripped,' I say. 'A-at the b-b-b—'

'Bus stop?'

I nod.

'Like the arm of your blazer got torn at the bus stop?' Dad frowns.

I look away.

I've spent all day waiting to be called to the Head of Year's office for hurting Oliver. When he reports me, I'll probably get excluded from school.

Dad clears his throat. 'I didn't fall off a Christmas tree, you know, lad. If somebody's giving you bother, I want to know about it.'

'I-I'm f-fine,' I say. I stack our greasy plates in the sink and edge towards the hallway. Dad means well but he doesn't understand how things work at school.

Upstairs in my bedroom, I turn on my computer.

While it's booting up I watch the 5.45 train zip past on its way to Lincoln. Our house is right next to the railway tracks, so even though we've got double glazing, you can still really hear it.

I can see the bobbing heads of all the commuters heading home at the end of their long day. I bet they're thinking about what they're going to have for tea or watch on TV later, they might be planning how they'll spend their wages at the end of the month. I'd much rather be at work than at school.

When me and Dad first moved to Colwick, I used to sit right here in my bedroom for hours, logging the times of the trains. I even designed a proper sheet, so it looked neat and professional.

I didn't do anything with the pages and pages of numbers, but it felt really important at the time. If I missed logging a train, I felt all panicky. Like something bad was going to happen.

One night Dad asked me what I was doing, so I showed him the lists. After that he bought me a computer – and that's when I found out there was a whole online community out there, playing Scrabble.

Me and Mum used to play Scrabble all the time. If Dad was watching football in the living room, me and Mum would set the board up on the kitchen table.

Now I play online with different people from all over the world. This week, there's been Todd from Kansas, Markus from Germany, Jasminder from India, and Sarah from London. Secretly, I think that Markus might be cheating. Some of the words he comes up with, even I haven't heard of.

There's no chit-chat or messing about, we just get on with playing the game. The other players don't know anything about me at all. They haven't got a clue that I can't even say my own name or string a sentence together.

I'd like to be that boy in real life.

You know where you stand, playing Scrabble online; there are never any surprises.

Except tonight.

Tonight when I sit in front of the screen, there's a player waiting for me. Which wouldn't be that unusual, apart from the fact it's not one of my regular group. It is someone completely new.

A message window pops up.

Hi . . . I'm Alex. Want to play?

Why not? Fresh competition is always good.

OK, I reply. **I'm Finlay.**

We begin play and Alex is quite good. But I have a decent rack of tiles.

A scratching noise distracts me but it's only Neville, pootling out of his little house. Hamsters are what you call *crepuscular* animals, which means that Neville is usually out and about during the twilight hours. Depending on his mood, he is awake between about eight in the evening until three or four in the morning, and that's when I get to chat with him about my day.

'Evening, Neville,' I call.

He looks over and twitches his nose. He's my best friend and I don't care if that sounds crazy. Neville doesn't give a toss how I speak and I don't care that he doesn't speak at all. We understand each other perfectly.

Soon, Alex's score is lagging. We're both coming up with standard words and there's nothing unusual about the game at all.

Until the message box pops up again, twelve minutes in.

I'm knackered from football training, but I'm not making excuses, you're really good. How long have you been playing, Finlay?

Chit-chat is frowned upon during both face-to-face and online play. No talking, which suits me just fine.

I stare at the message box and the words in it. It has blocked off part of the board.

It's my turn. I was planning to play M-O-C-K-E-D,

using the D of one of Alex's words and placing the K, worth five points, on a double-letter square. But I've already forgotten the exact letter layout and the total points I'll score.

Before it affects my game any more, I click on the tiny cross up at the top right and close the message box down. I play my letters and wait for Alex to play his word.

Within seconds, the box pops up again.

How long have you been playing for, Finlay?

I tap in my reply.

Since I was six.

Maybe he'll stop chattering now.

Another couple of turns each and then I play my next word that gets me forty-two points and brings the score to 278–199, my favour.

That's when the box appears again.

You're REALLY good! Soz for delay, went to make a cuppa but could only find this weird lapsang souchong stuff ☺ !

My stomach lurches. I'd forgotten about that tea, the strong smell of it. Mum used to drink it all the time. I thought it smelt of old kippers.

Great to find an online pal, Alex types.

I'd hardly call us mates, we've only been playing for nineteen minutes.

Got no mates at sch, he says. **Glad I've met you!**

I think about telling Alex I know how that feels but

I'll sound like a loser. I like how he seems to be looking up to me.

That must be tough, I reply.

Another turn each and that should complete the game.

Where do you live? he asks. **Just rough area.**

Alarm bells start jangling in my head.

Be great if we could be mates in real life, he continues.

Might as well be straight about it, whether it offends him or not.

Sorry, don't exchange personal details, I type.

He's getting Scrabble confused with a chat forum.

No probs. I'm not a 40-year-old psycho . . . honest!

I grin at that. Maybe I'm being too paranoid. Alex seems all right, but he'll never improve his game if he keeps chattering on.

The Scrabble clock clicks to 20:00 minutes. Game over.

My fingers hover over the keyboard to say goodbye but the message box has disappeared. He's already logged off.

I sit on the floor in front of Neville's cage, open the door and scoop his warm body into my hand.

'Do you think I've found a new friend, Neville?' I ask him.

I settle him on my stretched-out legs and he sits back

on his hind paws and looks up at me. 'Don't look at me like that.' I grin. 'We're n-not all anti-social like you. Having friends is a good thing when you're a human.'

Syrian hamsters, like Neville, are solitary animals. They'll fight if they have to share their cage, sometimes to the death. But Russian hamsters become very close with their mates and get depressed if they're separated. Which is quite nice, I think, in a funny sort of way.

I would be like a Russian hamster if I were a rodent. There's no fun in being lonely all of your life.