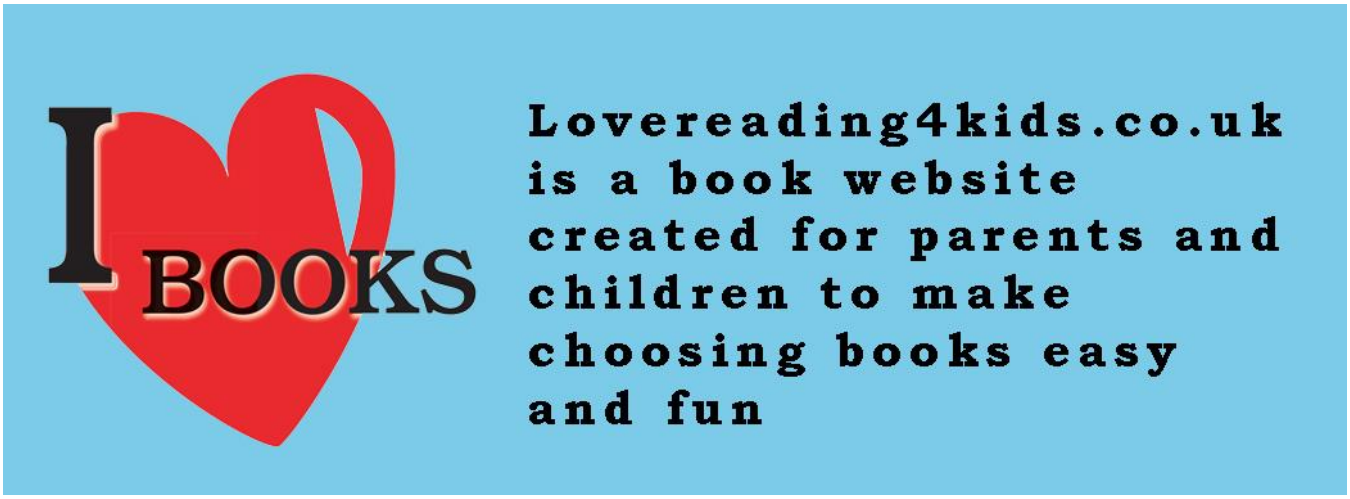


Opening extract from

Why I Went Back

Written by

James Clammer

Published by

Andersen Press Ltd

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

Please print off and read at your leisure.



WHY I WENT BACK

JAMES CLAMMER

ANDERSEN PRESS

First published in 2016 by
Andersen Press Limited
20 Vauxhall Bridge Road
London SW1V 2SA
www.andersenpress.co.uk

2 4 6 8 10 9 7 5 3 1

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may
be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted in any form,
or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording
or otherwise, without the written permission of the publisher.

The right of James Clammer to be identified as the
author of this work has been asserted by him in accordance
with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act, 1988.

Text copyright © James Clammer, 2016

Extracts from pages 3, 4, 108 and 112 of *Beowulf*, edited with
an introduction, glossary and notes by Michael Alexander
(Penguin Classics, 1995) are reproduced by permission of
Penguin Books Ltd
Copyright © Michael Alexander, 1995

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data available.

ISBN 978 1 78344 377 2

Typeset in Garamond Pro by Palimpsest Book Production Ltd, Falkirk, Stirlingshire

Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

For Katie



1

If you know anyone who knows anyone who wants to find out about magic – specifically whether it's true or not – then send them along to me, because I can tell them for sure.

I'm not talking old-fashioned stuff like rabbits out of hats or sawing the lady in half, which is so historical by now it's practically written into those same books that go on about fat old Queen Victoria in black. And I don't mean the modern stuff either, like you see on TV, where a man with a sharp suit and a beard hypnotises a bunch of builders into dressing up as women or something stupid like that.

That isn't what I'm talking about. Not at all.

Crazy, scary, ancient magic. That's what I mean. The sort of thing that if you came across it for real you'd suffocate and almost fall down with fear right deep in your deepest core and no way, no way, would you ever brush it off or forget about it. And then pretty soon it would get so big inside that you'd

have to tell someone about it, get it off your chest, as they say.

That's one of the reasons why I'm writing this down as a story, from beginning to end.

Another is so I can come back in six months' or a year's time and check my head against this account, which is 100% true by the way with nothing added and nothing taken away. I know for sure, now, that I'm different from Mum, who has this whole parallel universe going on inside her head, things that never happened and people that never existed. I know, now, that my feet are planted forever in the mud and the puddles and everything. But sometimes it's good to have proof, separately-existing proof.

Maybe you don't know anyone who's interested in magic. Maybe you're not even that bothered yourself. Feel free to bail out now, if that's the case. Stop reading, do something else instead. Only I don't think you will. Because it's the one thing everybody's interested in, right? Everybody wants *confirmation.*

And that's exactly what I can give you.

You want to hear the story?

Go.

2

It starts in the dark, in winter, with a click and a chase.

There I was, standing half-dressed and frozen solid in the middle of my bedroom, the warm square of bed behind me and the black square of window in front dribbling winter rain. I always pulled the curtain back without turning the light on because, first, I wanted to see what the weather was doing and it was easier to see in the darkness and, second, I didn't want to draw attention to myself – every other house and the whole wide world, it seemed, being wrapped snug and slumbering in the black night.

4.16, the red lights of the digital clock said. It was a regular thing, being up at this hour. How long since I'd been doing it? Two weeks? Three? Not that I liked it. I hated it. God how I hated it. I wanted to be back in that warm bed, hands between my legs, dreaming of girls like any normal fourteen-year-old boy should be.

I should probably introduce myself. I may not be the best student at St Stephen's (in fact most people think I'm a bit of a bully, which I'm happy to let them go on thinking) but I've read a few books on the sly and I know that about here's the time you Get To Meet The Main Character. You know the routine – what colour their eyes are and the shape of their nose and what size shoes they wear and all about their brothers and sisters and everything. Well, I don't have any brothers or sisters, and all that other stuff can wait, because *I'm* the main character and I'm real and more than just a shoe size.

Aidan Hale, that's my name, and if you want to know what I look like, all I can think to say is that once I heard a friend of Dad's describing me as a *skinny streak of piss*. So that gives you an idea, even if my skin isn't really yellow. And if you want to know the reason I was up at stupid o'clock, it's because I was going out to work. Just then I was working six days a week and I would have worked seven if I could've got away with it.

Or at least I was, until that *click*.

Someone was lifting the latch on the passageway gate, the brickwork passage that joins our house to next door.

Someone was coming in.

I pressed my face to the rain-dribbled windowpane, cowling my hands round to stop any reflection. The moon showed a little of its light through waste-water clouds. Out in the street a dark shape slouched by a lamppost. The slouch told you straight off that the shape was a he, and that the he was a teenager. Not too big. I felt pretty certain I could have him if it came to a fight.

Trouble was, he had a mate. And one second later the mate's coming out from under *our* passageway, wheeling *my* bike with

him. A lighter flared, cupped close in a hand that looked like a pink fleshy flower, as he hitched the bike past the clicking closing gate. The mate was quite a bit bigger than the slouching teenager. I noticed that right away. I'm always sizing people up and reckoning my chances – girls *and* boys (for different reasons of course). It's like an automatic thing with me. Maybe everyone does it, I don't know.

My bike. So what, you're asking? A bike's a bike. They break, or you grow out of them, and then you get another one. Don't you?

Not here. For a start it was brand new, almost. The Pacific Blue frame, the eighteen Shimano gears, the back suspension I'd spent ages adjusting. We didn't exactly have what those English literature writers in the classroom would call a *surfeit of funds*, which meant having anything new was special, something you wanted to hold onto. Mum had never worked because of what went on inside her head. Take where she was just then for example. It wasn't the first place the JobCentre went to when they had a vacancy, put it that way. And as for Dad – Dad was just a postman, and they don't bring in so much money even with overtime, which he hadn't done in years.

In fact (if you want to know the truth, which I've promised to tell) Dad had pretty much stopped being a postman at all, and that was why I needed the bike. Not because it was new, not really, but because without it how was I going to transport the Big Bag, the one hidden downstairs with its piles of letters already sorted into street and house order?

I watched them give the bike a quick lookover by the wet light of the streetlamp. They weren't stupid, you could tell from their body language they were scared and wanted to get out of there as fast as possible but still they couldn't resist having

a quick gloat over what they'd plundered. One of them said something and they both laughed without making a noise and that was when every part of my head started *clanging*. It was like all the veins feeding my heart and kidneys etc had short-circuited so that every last bit of blood was slamming into my eardrums instead. Those scumbags. My bike. How could they? How had they even known it was there? I *needed* that bike. I needed it to stop all the bad things that were happening to us from getting any worse.

I heard the wheels ticking softly in the black night. They were on the road. They were going, leaving. And suddenly I couldn't believe it, how I'd been standing there like I was in a trance or something, looking down at them stealing from me without doing a single thing about it. Somehow it had been too easy to watch, a scene from a film almost, what with them in the light of the lamp and me in the dark and the bedroom window between us like a screen at the multiplex.

Dressed in three maybe four seconds. I didn't bother with the outdoor gear, the big coat, the waterproof trousers. The rain wasn't as bad tonight and anyway that stuff rustled and I knew I needed to be silent. Jeans, jumper, trainers and out of the house. I was well practised at that. Dad was fast asleep as usual. It took a lot to get him out of bed these days, what with all the sleeping pills the doctor was giving him.

Down the stairs, easing the door shut behind me. Past the place where I kept the Big Bag hidden with its pre-sorted letters and packets. I thought then, the way you think through a whole complicated situation in a split second, about everything that had happened in those three weeks. The black mornings stealing out of the house, pushing the bike from the passageway. Coasting off through the dead streets praying not to see a single

person till it was time to turn round and come home. The terrible Thursday night that had started it all, Mum bent up in a corner, not responding even when you poked or prodded her, and the house filling up with police and paramedics and the woman with the careful deep voice who'd called herself a doctor, the woman who'd signed the papers.

Mum got sectioned, see.

Not everyone knows what that is. If you don't, count yourself lucky.

I turned down the road the teenagers had taken. I had to move fast if I wasn't to lose sight of them. The rain was coming down harder than I'd thought. I started to run, silent and accurate on the slick streets. I didn't care any more how big the second one was. When I caught up with them they'd both be dead and that was a fact.