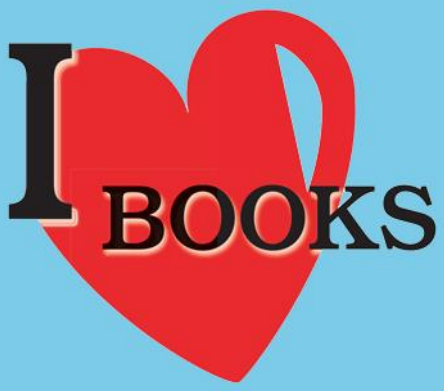


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Opening extract from

Thimble Monkey Superstar

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DAWSON CASTLE
RED TOWER
Kitchen
JAMS' ROOM
DUNGEON
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CHAPTER ONE

IN WHICH A SO-CALLED HAMSTER FORCES DAD TO DO YOGA

My name is Jams Cogan. You won't have heard of me. But everyone will hear of me one day, because I am going to be the world's greatest author.

My dad is an author. His name is Douglas Dawson. No, he doesn't have the same name as me, because he is not married to my mum. Mum is wise not to be married to Dad, because he has about 20p and lives in a fantasy world. Mum has a proper job, a job which involves going out in the morning, coming back at teatime, and getting paid a lot more than Dad. Dad is always asking her what she actually

does, but she's a bit vague about it – it's something to do with the wind, or a farm, or possibly a combination of the two.

Our home is called Dawson Castle. It's not actually a castle. Most people would call it a bungalow. But most people do not live in a fantasy world like my dad.

Not many people visit Dawson Castle. Most are put off by the moat, portcullis, dancing bears and other figments of my dad's imagination. So imagine our surprise one evening when there was a knock at the door.

'Not the Jehovah's Witnesses again!' grumbled Dad.

'When did the Jehovah's Witnesses ever visit?' asked Mum.

'Five years ago. I made a note in my diary.'

'Haven't you got better things to write

about?' asked Mum.

'Not really.'

'Shall I get it?' I suggested.

I got up, seized my walker, and hurried to the West Door at full speed. Imagine my surprise to discover our neighbours standing outside. Nothing unusual about that, you might think, except our neighbours had lived next door my entire life, and had never once spoken to us. But there they were, as clear as day, wearing forced smiles and accompanied by a small, neatly dressed monkey.

'I wonder if you could do us a great favour and look after our hamster while we are away?' enquired the female neighbour, who was not interesting enough to describe in detail.

By now Dad had arrived at the door. He

adopted his most unwelcoming face.

'We'd need to see this hamster,' he replied, hoping to stall them while he plucked up the courage to say no.



‘Why, it’s right here,’ said the male neighbour, who looked vaguely like the female. He pointed at the monkey.

Dad’s eyes narrowed. ‘Are you sure that’s a hamster?’

‘Oh yes,’ they both replied, rather quickly, in fact slightly before Dad had finished the question.

‘It looks like a monkey to me,’ Dad said.

‘It’s funny you should say that,’ said the man.

‘Why?’

‘No reason,’ replied the man. ‘It’s just funny.’

As if to show how funny, they both laughed. I may have been mistaken, but I had the distinct impression that there was a third snigger, coming from the direction of the monkey.

This was surely the time to send our two neighbours packing. But no, Dad was too polite for this.

'Is the hamster well behaved?' he asked, making it very plain he did not for one moment believe it to be a hamster.

'Ninety per cent of the time, yes,' replied the woman.

'What about the other ten per cent?'

Suddenly the man pointed dramatically upwards. 'Good heavens!' he cried. 'Isn't that a UFO?'

Dad and I looked at the sky.

'There's nothing…' I began, but when I looked back, my two neighbours, and their so-called hamster, had vanished into thin air.

'Nutters,' grumbled Dad. 'Wind down the portcullis, Jams, just in case they come back.'

I ignored him, as usual, and we went back to the Great Hall for a cup of Horlicks.

'You'll never believe what's just happened,' Dad said to Mum.

'Has it really happened,' asked Mum, wearily, 'or is it something you've made up?'

'It does sound like something I've made up,' Dad agreed, 'but despite that, it really is real.'

'Go on,' said Mum, even more wearily.

'Well,' said Dad, 'our two neighbours came round, and asked if I'd look after their hamster, but – here's the bit you probably won't believe – it was actually a monkey.'

'What, like that monkey?' Mum pointed at the armchair by the fire – Dad's armchair – where, much to our surprise, the said monkey was sitting.

'It's like that story you wrote,' Mum said. 'You know, where the girl finds a cat in her garden, and brings it in, and…'

'Nora, this is not a cat,' Dad snapped. 'It's a monkey. And it's sitting in my chair.'

'It's kind of cute,' observed Mum.

'Cute?' rasped Dad. 'It's plain ugly!'

'It's better looking than you,' said Mum.

'Well, why don't you marry it then?' Dad snapped. It was a stupid and dangerous thing to say. Mum had a habit of doing things just to annoy Dad, and there was a small but distinct possibility this could include marrying an animal.

'We don't even know if we can house-train a monkey,' said Dad, lamely.

'I think it'll be fun,' countered Mum.

'We could do with some fun,' I added.

'We have fun all the time!' Dad protested.

‘Name the last time we had fun,’ said Mum.

‘Last Thursday! Remember, we played Scrabble, and I made a seven-letter word!’

Mum shook her head sadly, as if she felt sorry for Dad, or maybe for herself.

‘I’m going up to my office,’ said Dad. ‘When I come back, I want that monkey gone!’

Dad’s office is in the Red Tower. Most people, people without imagination, would call it an attic. Dad has a bed in the Red Tower, an antique captain’s chair, a computer, and a window which looks out over the grounds of Dawson Castle, which people without imagination might call a backyard. Dad likes to sit and stare at the computer, sometimes for hours,

often without actually switching it on. Sometimes, when his eyes have glazed over, I switch it on myself and write a few stories. If Dad looks particularly depressed I tell him he wrote one of the stories himself, just to see a weak smile come to his face.

This particular evening, Dad ignored the computer and paced the Red Tower, muttering. I sat and looked thoughtful, which seemed the safest thing to do. An hour ticked by, although, strictly speaking, as my watch is digital, an hour went by completely silently. Then Dad and I went back downstairs.

Nothing could have prepared us for the sight which greeted us. Mum sat at the far end of the Great Hall, eyes closed, very still, in a half lotus position. The monkey sat a couple of metres away, facing her, in exactly

the same pose.

'What on Earth are you doing?' asked Dad.

'Yoga,' replied Mum.

'With a monkey?'

'Why not?'

'You can't do yoga with a monkey!' declared Dad.

'He's very bendy,' said Mum.

'He's a monkey!' cried Dad. 'Of course he's bendy!'

'And he listens when I talk.'

'He's just trying to get round you!'

'Stop being so jealous,' said Mum.

'Jealous!' snorted Dad. 'Of a monkey?'

'Just because you can't do a half lotus.'

'We'll see about that!' Dad stormed into the centre of the room, cast off his cardigan, and began lowering himself into



a seated position on the floor.

'Dad!' I warned. 'You know what happened last time you…'

'AAAAAAAAARRRRGH!' screamed Dad.

'Oh dear,' I sighed.

'Call 999!' cried Dad.

The monkey reached for the phone.

'Not you!' yelled Dad. 'Nora, call 999!'

Mum wearily rang for an ambulance. 'By the way, Douglas,' she said. 'I've got quiz night tonight. You'll have to take Jams with you to hospital. And Thimble.'

'Thimble?' Dad blurted. 'Who's Thimble?'

'The monkey.'

'Why did you call him Thimble?'

'It's his name.'

'How do you know?'

'He told me.'

‘How did he tell you?’

‘Sign language.’

‘He’s not done any sign language to me.’

‘You should try being nice to him.’

As Dad was reflecting on this, the ambulance arrived. Dad sat on one side, wincing with pain, and Thimble and I sat on the other, a bit like the opposing team. It seemed like a great adventure, and unlike



Dad, I was starting to enjoy having a new and unpredictable companion.