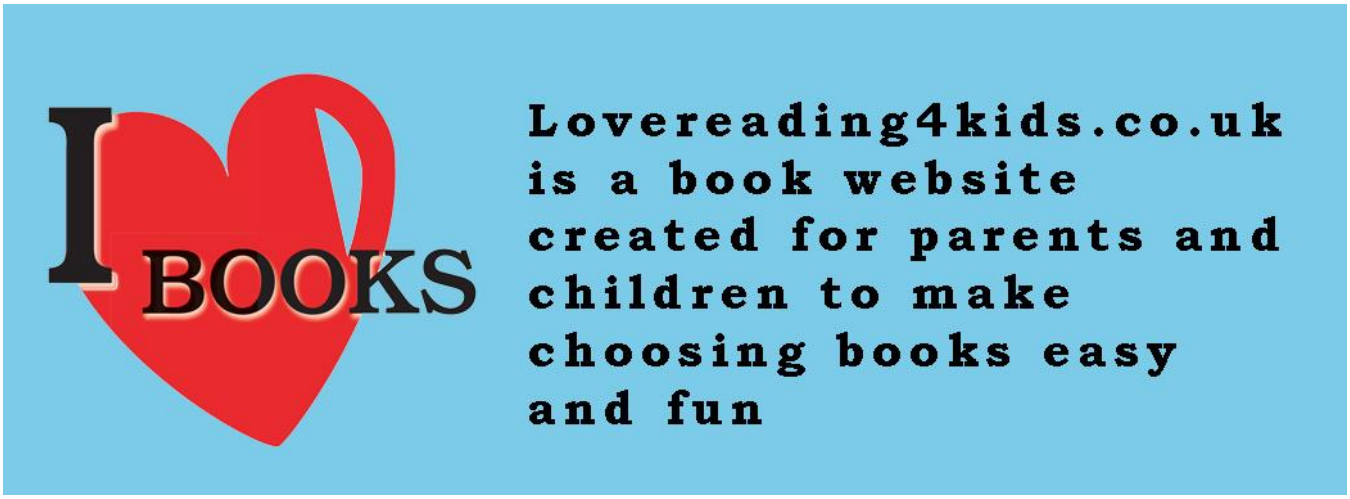


Opening extract from

Walter Brown and the Magician's Hat

Written by

Karen Inglis

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1 – The Birthday Surprise

As dawn broke on the morning of Walter Brown's tenth birthday he hadn't the faintest idea that his life was about to change forever. Like most other boys his age he was still fast asleep in bed.

The wall beside him was covered with posters showing distant galaxies and planets, the sun, the moon and, of course, Earth. On the opposite wall hung a poster of his favourite football team, Southbridge Wanderers, and a team photo from his local soccer club. Walter, meanwhile, lay flat on his back underneath his duvet, only his gentle breathing stirring the still morning air.

Despite appearances, astronomy and football were the furthest things from Walter's mind at this

precise moment. So, for that matter, was his tenth birthday. Walter was far too busy dreaming his favourite dream – the one where he was in the circus ring with Great-grandpa Horace, helping him perform magic.



As ever, the benches all around brimmed with row upon row of smiling faces disappearing high into the shadows of the Big Top. As always, the smiling faces were all screaming and shouting, ‘More, Grandpa Horace! More!’ And now, as in every dream, Great-grandpa Horace turned slowly to Walter in his black top hat and gave him a friendly wink. ‘Let’s do the last trick again shall we, Walter?’ The audience cheered as Walter gave a broad grin, picked up a silver-tipped wand from the table in front of him and passed it into his great-grandpa’s tiny white-gloved hands.

In fact, Walter had never met Great-grandpa Horace. He had died when Walter was a baby. But his mum had an old box full of newspaper cuttings, and black and white photographs taken during the 50 years he had spent travelling around Europe with the circus. His tricks were so unusual they made headline news in every city he visited – like the time he turned a horse into a snake, or when he managed to magic sweets into the hands of all the children in the audience, and another time when he made someone's dad vanish and reappear on the other side of the Big Top. The newspapers said they'd heard that even the Magic Circle couldn't explain how he did it but, being very secretive (and probably a bit jealous), they would never comment.

At the age of five Walter announced he wanted to be a magician. And though astronomy and football had since taken over, his fascination with magic had never quite left him.

Had Walter been awake just now, he might have wondered why his dream had returned so vividly this particular morning. But, of course, he wasn't and so he dreamed on – for a short while at least.

A clock downstairs chimed once. Moments later Walter's door creaked open, shedding a beam of light from the hallway across the floor and onto his bed. A

tall, fluffy, black tail passed silently through the doorway. The owner of the proud tail, which now glided serenely across the room towards Walter's bed, was Walter's cat, Sixpence.

The creak of the door and the shaft of light had already begun to stir Walter. When Sixpence jumped onto his bed Walter turned over and groaned as small lumpy paws padded over his legs, across his ribs and up towards his head. The loud purring in his ear was the final straw.

'Oh, Sixpence! It's the middle of the night!' Walter mumbled in a sleepy grump. 'Why can't you just stay on the mattress and off me? Now settle down and go to sleep!'

'*Not* on your life,' retorted Sixpence (except that Walter couldn't hear her). 'I've been waiting for this moment for five years!'

Sixpence continued purring loudly, then started nudging her head repeatedly against Walter's ear. 'Come on, Walter. Wake up! It's your birthday! We've got things to do!' Despite the nudging and the purring, and even a bit of licking, Walter was already falling back into a deep sleep. 'I don't believe this!' cried Sixpence. 'It's the boy's tenth birthday, the most important one of his life, and all he wants to do is sleep!'

Sixpence leapt off the bed, and stalked over to a pile of presents in the corner of the room. She sat down, took in an enormous breath, and let out a loud, grating 'Miauowww!' It worked. Walter sat up in bed rubbing his eyes.



'Are you all right, Sixpence?' he croaked, half asleep and half cross. But then, peering over, he saw the pile of presents in the grey morning light and remembered. 'Hey! It's my birthday! Well *done*, Sixpence!'

Walter scrambled out of his bed across to Sixpence. He glanced at his bedside clock and groaned – it was only just gone 6.30 and no one would be up before 8. He thought about waiting (for about two seconds), but the temptation was too great.

Walter ripped the packaging off the first present. His face lit up. 'Wow! Southbridge Wanderers' new football strip. *Very* nice!' He held the red and white striped shirt up against himself and tried a few air kicks with his bare feet.

He tore the wrapping off the next present – a junior chemistry set. *Create a world of fizzing and exploding science experiments right in your own home!* said the blurb on the front of the box.

'Awesome!' said Walter, his eyes wide as he studied the list of contents and experiments. (His dad was chemistry teacher at the local college – no prizes for guessing whose idea this was!)

As he picked up the next present Sixpence meowed loudly and flicked her tail from side to side. '*Nooo*! Not that one!' she said (unheard), instead peering hard at a tall rectangular box at the back of the pile.

'Hey, it's from Todd!' said Walter, beaming. He'd recognise that handwriting anywhere. He

blinked and swallowed hard. It had only been three weeks since his best friend had moved from next door, but already it felt like a year. 'Wow! A book on the Northern Lights,' he whispered as the paper fell away.

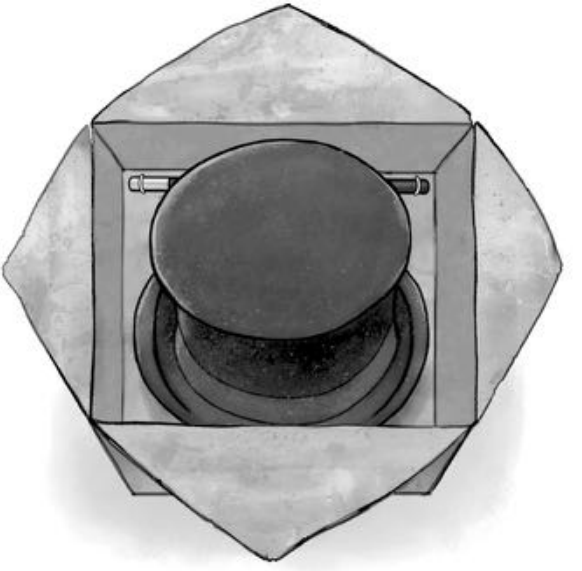
'B-o-r-i-n-g!' said Sixpence with a yawn as Walter began to leaf through the pages, gasping at each new photograph.

But then the cat's black fluffy fur began to bristle and stand on end as Walter finally reached to the back of the pile for the tall box with the silver paper. Walter tore at the wrapping, adding it to the growing pile, which now surrounded Sixpence. The last piece of paper fell to the ground to reveal a battered purple box with the words *Handle With Care* written in faded black ink diagonally across its side.

'I wonder what this is, Sixpence?' Walter held the box at eye level and shook it gently from side to side. Something inside rattled. He sniffed the box. It was definitely old – like the inside of a wardrobe that hadn't been opened for 20 years. 'Time to find out!' he said eagerly.

Walter placed the box on his desk and pulled up the dog-eared flaps that criss-crossed over the top

end. As he peered down inside he took a quick inward breath as he found himself staring at a slightly tatty black top hat.



'Check this out!' he cried. Carefully, he reached in and lifted out the hat. As he did so, a slip of yellow paper fluttered out unnoticed and landed on the carpet. Sixpence moved to take a sitting position beside it.

Still holding the hat aloft, Walter peered inside the box. At the bottom, previously hidden by the hat, lay a pair of white-grey gloves. But that wasn't all. Wedged along one side, held in with a metal wire, was a faded black stick with a silver end.

Walter's heart began to race. He placed the top hat carefully on his bed and, with arms trembling, lifted out the gloves and slipped them on. Then he unhooked the stick from its resting place.

'A magician's outfit,' he breathed, his mouth widening into a smile. He held up the wand between his white-gloved fingers and turned to reach for the hat. As he did so, he spotted the square of yellow paper on the carpet beside Sixpence. 'What's that, Sixpence?' He leant forward, picked up the note and quickly unfolded it. The message in looped and shaky handwriting was addressed to him:

