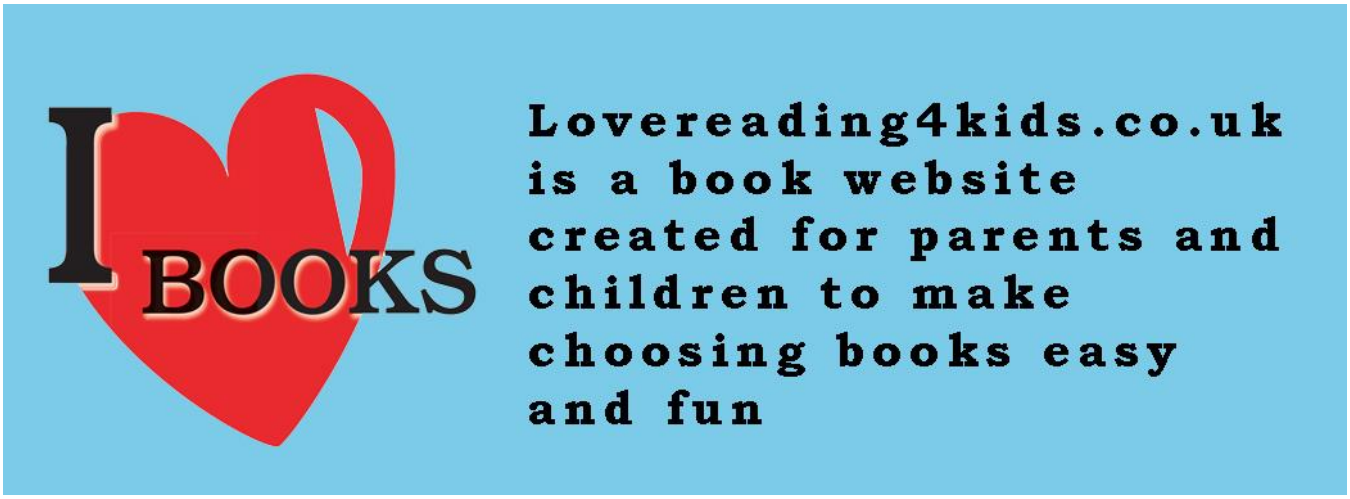


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A Dog's Life

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The House in the Country

Lindenfield in the wintertime was a bleak place. The air was chill. For weeks on end a dog could see her breath all night long, and all day long as well. Even in early spring, as winter faded, the gardens, tended by humans in warm weather, were barren and silent. And the lakes and ponds were grey, and very still. No frogs croaked, no turtles sunned, no shiny fish twined through the underwater grasses. In warm weather, things would be different. The air would hum with insect noises, and the ponds might be quiet, but they were rarely silent. Along their muddy bottoms and on their banks and in the moss and grasses

and fallen logs was a secret animal neighbourhood.

On the piece of land where the Merrions' big house rose from among gardens and walkways were all sorts of animal neighbourhoods. At the time I lived there, as a pup, there were the stone-wall neighbourhoods and the shed neighbourhoods and the garden neighbourhoods and the forest neighbourhoods and the pond neighbourhoods and the above-the-ground neighbourhoods. There was even a secret in-the-Merrions'-house neighbourhood. All were linked to form an animal world with the Merrions' house at the centre, like a stone that had been tossed in a pond. The further the ripples spread from the splash, the more animals were to be found, and the noisier and less secretive their lives were.

The time that I am talking about was not so very long ago, and yet it's my whole life ago. I haven't been back to the Merrions' house since the day I followed my brother off their property. In all my wandering I never found my way back there, but then of course, I was looking for Bone, not for the Merrions.

I really don't know much about the Merrions. I was very young when I lived on their land, and I was concentrating

on what I needed to learn from Mother. But the Merrions couldn't be ignored. This is what I do know about them:

Their grand house, the house that was the centre of our world, was not the centre of the Merrions' world. In the spring, when Bone and I were born – in an old garden shed, the one with the unused chicken coop at the back – the Merrions lived in their house sporadically. They were not like most animals I knew, returning to their nests or burrows or holes night after night or, like the owls, day after day. Instead, they would arrive at the house, always in the evening, stay for a couple of days, then pile back into their car, drive down their lane, and turn onto the big road. Mother would watch as the car became smaller and smaller and finally disappeared. Then several entire nights and days would pass before the Merrions' car would pull into their lane again.

There were five Merrions in all. I understand that human children generally are not born in litters like puppies, but one or two at a time like deer. The two Merrion parents had given birth to three young. The oldest was a boy, then there was another boy, and finally a small girl, who was the loudest of the children. Over time I learned the names of the children, but only one mattered to me,

and that was Matthias, the younger boy, the gentle one. But I did not know him until I was several months old.

The Merrions were tidy people. That was clear. Everything about their house and their property was tidy. The shutters hung straight and were repainted often. No toys littered the yard. The walks and the porches were swept clean, and the gardeners showed up regularly to edge the flower beds, mow the lawns, trim the hedges, and hang potted plants on the porches.

The Merrions did not own any pets. "Because of germs," Mother once told Bone and me. She had overheard Mrs Merrion talking to a gardener. "And hair," Mrs Merrion had added. "Germs and hair."

When Mother said this I thought of the in-the-Merrions'-house neighbourhood of animals. This consisted not only of many insects, but also of a large family of mice, two squirrels (in the attic walls), a possum who went in and out of the utility room through a hidden hole in the wall, and – in the basement – several snakes, two toads, and some lizards. There were plenty of germs and lots of hair in the Merrions' house, and this amused me. But I remembered the time I heard screaming and banging and crashing in the house and then Mr Merrion ran outside

with a bag containing a dead, bleeding bat, which he shoved into a garbage can, and I did not feel so amused.

All the creatures on the property knew how the Merrions felt about animals, and they made their own decisions about where to live. Mother had her reasons for choosing the garden shed. There were other sheds and other small buildings on the property, each with its own population, each different from the others, each connected to, but separate from the Merrions.

And that is what I know about the Merrions at the time Bone and I were born. The days were mild – spring arrived early that year – and still the humans came to their home only for brief periods of time. An animal could live quite comfortably on the Merrion property. Around the house were nothing but woods and fields and rolling hills. The nearest neighbouring house was a good hour's trot away, for a grown dog. So the animal communities thrived. There were hawks and moths and foxes and fish and deer and owls and stray cats and frogs and spiders and possums and skunks and snakes and groundhogs and squirrels and chipmunks; birds and insects and non-human animals of all kinds.

Apart from Mother and Bone and me, the main residents in our garden shed were cats and mice. There were insects, too, but they were harder to get to know. They came and went and were very small.

The shed was a good place for cats and dogs. Mother chose well when she selected it as the spot in which to raise her puppies. It was a small wooden structure that had originally been built as a chicken coop, the nesting boxes still lining one end. The door was permanently ajar, and one window had been removed, which might have made the shed too cold for puppies and kittens. However, when the Merrions bought the big house, they planned to turn the shed into a playhouse for their children, and got as far as insulating two of the walls before Mrs Merrion decided that a chicken coop was unsanitary and better suited as a garden shed. So the Merrions built a brand-new playhouse and then a bigger garden shed, both sturdier than the chicken coop, and before long, they stopped using the old shed, except as a place in which to store things the gardeners rarely used.

Mother found the shed shortly before she gave birth to Bone and me. She was a stray dog – had never lived with humans, although she had lived around them – and had

been roaming the hills and woods bordering the Merrions' property, looking for the right spot in which to give birth to her puppies. For several days she watched the Merrions' house from the edge of the woods. She watched the animals on the property, too. There were no other dogs that she could see, but there was a mother fox with four newly born kits, and sometimes, in the small hours of the morning, she heard coyotes yipping in the hills. Mother needed a place that was safe from predators, out of sight of the Merrions, and warm and dry for her puppies.

The shed seemed perfect. The first time she poked her nose through the partially open door she noticed how much warmer the inside air was than the spring air outside. She stood very still, listening and allowing her eyes to adjust to the darkness. She heard the scurrying of mice in straw, but nothing else.

The old nesting boxes for the chickens were along the wall across from the door. Mother had never seen anything like them. She crept forwards to investigate. First she surveyed them from several feet away. Then she crept closer, and finally she stuck her nose into one of the holes.

Hssss! Pttt! Something sprang out of the box, hissed and spat at Mother, then ducked inside again. It was a

yellow cat, protecting a litter of newborn kittens. Mother backed up and surveyed the boxes from a little distance. Now she could see eyes in several of the holes. More cats. Mother left them alone. She was too big to fit in the boxes anyway. Behind her, along the sides of the shed and next to the door, were a few old gardening tools, some clay pots, a few piles of straw, and a wheelbarrow filled with burlap bags and more straw. The mice had chewed holes in the bags, but the burlap still looked cosy and warm. Mother glanced up. In the rafters above she could see several abandoned nests that had belonged to barn swallows and hornets.

Mother considered the cats again, the pairs of eyes glaring at her from the nesting boxes. And then she heard a tiny rustle behind her. She swept her head towards the door in time to see a large grey cat squeeze through it. The cat stared at Mother, then hurried by her and disappeared into a hole. Mother let out a quiet woof. In response, she heard a soft growl from the cat, but nothing more.

That afternoon Mother sat patiently near the door, watching the comings and goings of the cats. As long as she didn't move about too much, the cats kept their distance. Mother watched the mice, too. They kept their

distance from the cats. When night fell, Mother crept to a pile of straw that was as far away from the cats as she could get. She curled up on it, her back to the nesting boxes, and fell asleep. She was safe, she was very warm, and the night passed peacefully.

In the morning, Mother felt she was ready to give birth to her puppies.