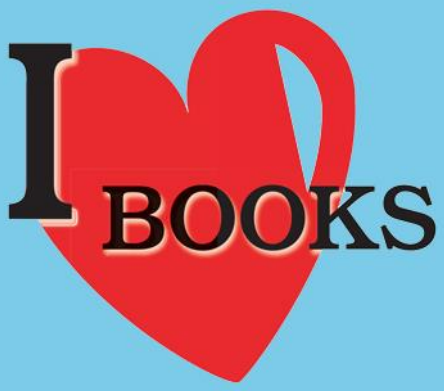


Lovereading4kids.co.uk is a book website created for parents and children to make choosing books easy and fun

Opening extract from

The Sands of Shark Island
A School Ship Tobermory Adventure

Written by

Alexander McCall Smith

Illustrated by

Iain McIntosh

Published by

Birlinn Ltd

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

Please print off and read at your leisure.



First published in 2016 by
BC Books, an imprint of Limited
West Newington House
10 Newington Road
Edinburgh
EH9 1QS

www.bcbooksforkids.co.uk

Copyright © 2016 Alexander McCall Smith
Illustrations copyright © 2016 Iain McIntosh

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

All rights reserved.
No part of this publication may be reproduced,
stored or transmitted in any form without the
express written permission of the publisher.

ISBN: 978 1 78027 394 5

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available
from the British Library

Typeset by Mark Blackadder

Printed and bound by Grafica Veneta spL


Ben MacTavish


Fee MacTavish



A trip in the submarine

There were two reasons why Ben and Fee MacTavish were lucky. The first was that they were both students on the School Ship *Tobermory*, a school that was also a ship and that sailed all over the world. They had been sent there because their parents were well-known marine scientists and often had to be away from home on their research submarine.

"I'm afraid there are no schools under water," said their father. "So it's going to have to be somewhere up above!"

Ben and Fee were twins, and were both twelve. Fee liked to point out, though, that she was two minutes older than her brother – and that, she claimed, was important.

"Even two minutes can make a big difference," she said.

To which Ben – if he heard her saying that – would reply, "Nonsense!" Which is what he often said if his sister came up with some remark with which he

disagreed. He always said *nonsense* in a polite way, of course, as he and Fee never argued and always agreed on most important matters, if not on everything.

The second reason why Ben and Fee were lucky was that they both had good friends, and these friends all got on well with one another, which is what most people hope their friends will do.

"It must be hard," Ben once said to his sister, "if you have a friend who doesn't like one of your other friends. What do you do then?"

Fee pondered this; she was glad this had never happened to her. "I suppose you make sure that you see them at different times," she said. "Perhaps you have morning friends and then you have afternoon friends. You'd see them separately that way."

"It's much easier if they all like one another," said Ben.

"Much easier," agreed Fee.

And who were Ben and Fee's special friends?

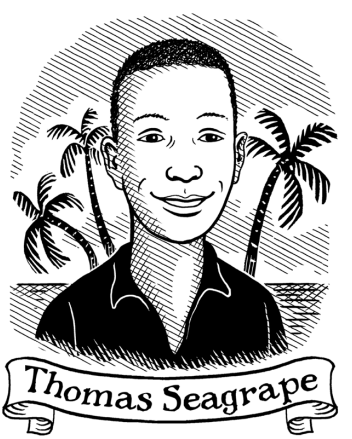
Well, in Ben's case it was Badger Tomkins, with whom he shared a cabin on the *Tobermory* on Middle Deck. Badger was an American boy who came from New York. His father and mother were successful business people who sent him away to school because they were too busy to give him much time. It made no difference to them if their son went to school in Scotland or America, or Timbuctoo, for that matter, as they hardly ever saw him anyway.



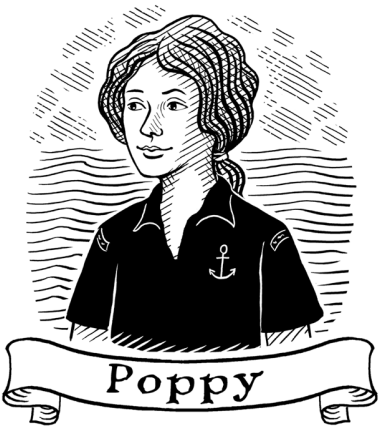
"I guess you can go where you like," said Badger's father. "There are always plenty of planes."

Luckily for Badger, who was a keen sailor, they allowed him to go to a ship school, which is how he ended up on the *Tobermory*. He felt this was by far the best thing that had ever happened to him.

Badger was the first person Ben met when he joined the ship, and it was Badger who showed him round. Ben liked the other boy's sense of humour, and his kindness too. It was important to be kind to other people, Ben thought, and Badger was always kind. He was also rather good at doing things, although he never boasted about any of the things he could do.



Then there was Thomas Seagrape, who came from Jamaica, where his mother was the captain of a small ship. Thomas was one of those people whom everybody liked the moment they



met him, as they realised that he was the sort who would never let them down. And they were right: Thomas always did what he said he would do. If he promised to help you with something, he would be there when it had to be done. People appreciated that.

He and Ben also saw things the same way. They laughed at the same jokes, liked the same food, and sometimes even felt as if they were brothers. That is always a good test of a friend: would you like your friend to be your brother or your sister? If the answer is yes, then that means that you have found a really good friend.

Fee's closest friend on board was probably a tall red-haired girl called Poppy Taggart. Poppy came from a sheep farm near Alice Springs, right in the middle of Australia. She had never been to sea when she first came to the *Tobermory*, but she had always wanted to be a sailor. Since their farm was so far from anywhere, Poppy's parents decided that because she had to go off to boarding school anyway, they might as well send her all the way to Scotland, where the *Tobermory* was based.

"That was one of the best choices they ever made," said Poppy, who loved being on the *Tobermory* – as everybody did.



Fee shared a cabin with Poppy, and so they saw a lot of each other. But she had other good friends on board, in particular Tanya Herring and Angela Singh. Tanya had been a stowaway, which is somebody who hides on a ship and is only discovered on board once the ship has left harbour. She had run off to sea after her mother died because she had been sent to live with a cruel aunt and uncle who made her work in their dog kennels. Although Tanya's father was still alive, he was always at sea and Tanya had no way to contact him except through her awful aunt and uncle. But she hoped that one day their paths would cross. Fortunately, she was allowed to stay on the *Tobermory* when she was discovered, as she had been very helpful in nursing the Captain's dog, Henry, when he had broken a leg.

Angela Singh was a bit timid at times, but was discovering her courage and hoped one day to be as brave as the rest of them. Fee liked her because she was always happy to help in the background. Some people are a bit pushy and always want to be in



charge of what is going on. Angela was not like that at all, and Fee valued that quality in her friend.

So there they were, a band of friends, all at school together on the *Tobermory*, which was now heading back to port – a place that was also called Tobermory, which is the main town on the Scottish island of Mull. As the ship came closer to shore, people began to talk about their plans for the coming school holidays.

"I'm going to have to stay on board," said Badger, rather sadly. "My Mom and Dad have sent me a message. They're having some important meetings and think it would be better for me to stay on the ship rather than come home."

Ben frowned. From what he had heard of Badger's parents, this was typical of them. They were always far too busy to pay much attention to their son, who would have loved to see more of them if only they could have found some time for him in their over-full schedules. "Won't you feel lonely?" he asked. "After all, the holidays are two whole weeks, and that's a long time to be by yourself."

Badger shrugged. "It might be a bit quiet," he said.

"But I'm not going to be all by myself, you know. Poppy isn't going all the way to Australia just for two weeks, and then there's Tanya, who hasn't really got a home to go to. There will be three of us still on board. And of course there'll be Henry – he stays on board."

"And what about Thomas?" asked Fee. "Will he go all the way back to Jamaica?"

"He's going to stay with an aunt in London," replied Badger. "He's all right. He told me that she's a great cook, and makes just the right sort of spicy Jamaican food he likes. He says he has a great time with her and his cousins."

Poppy had been down below, but now she arrived on deck, along with Tanya.

"What are you talking about?" Poppy asked.

"The school holidays," Badger replied. "I was telling Ben and Fee that I'll be staying on board, and that so will you and Tanya."

"That's right," agreed Poppy. "We can keep one another company."

Ben drew Fee aside. "Listen," he whispered. "Can't we ask them to come home with us?"

Fee sucked in her cheeks. She always did that, Ben noticed, when she was thinking hard.

"Well?" he prompted.

Fee's cheeks returned to normal. "What will *they* say?"

Ben knew that when Fee referred to *they* she was

speaking about their parents. She had always called them *they* or *them*.

"We could ask them," he said.

"But they'll still be at sea, won't they?"

Ben looked at his watch. For his last birthday he had been given a special nautical watch that displayed all sorts of information, including the movement of tides and the depth of water – which was very useful when diving. This watch also showed what day of the month it was, and this enabled him to work out where his parents' submarine would be.

"They'll be off the coast of Ireland by now," he said. "They'll be making their way back to Scotland. They were going to pick us up in Tobermory at the end of term – which is tomorrow, isn't it?"

Fee had an idea. "We could radio them," she suggested. "We could ask Mr Rigger if we could use the radio room."

Ben thought this was a good idea, but he pointed out that there was something else they had to do before they tried to contact their parents. "We need to ask Badger and the others if they want to come with us. You can't just assume that they would."

"Well then," said Fee. "Let's do that."

Ben and Fee had been having this conversation in whispers – now they turned back to their friends.

"We've had an idea," announced Ben. He nudged Fee. "You ask them, Fee."

Fee drew in her breath. "You don't have to say yes," she began. "If you want to say no, then just say it – we won't be offended."

Poppy looked puzzled. "Ask us what?"

"Yes," said Badger. "What's the big question?"

"We – that is, Ben and I …" Fee began.

"Come on," encouraged Poppy. "Get to the point!"

"All right," said Fee. "The question is this: would you – and by that I mean you, Poppy, you, Badger, and you, Tanya – would you all like to come and stay with us during the holidays?"

"Rather than staying on board," added Ben.

Poppy's eyes opened wide. "You mean it?" she asked.

"Of course," said Fee.

Poppy did not hesitate. "Then the answer's *yes*. And thanks a million!"

"Me too," said Badger. "I'd like to accept."

"And I would too," said Tanya. "I'd love to come."

"Then we can ask our parents," said Ben. "I'll go and speak to Mr Rigger about using the radio room."

Mr Rigger taught seamanship – the art of sailing, of staying afloat and of not sinking. He was a kind man with a very famous moustache, one of the best-known moustaches at sea. This moustache would twirl around in the breeze, providing a reliable way of telling which direction the wind was coming from. This is something that sailors need to know, so that



they can trim their sails to get the best possible push from the wind.

He was also in charge of the radio room, and gave lessons on how to work the radio. So when Ben asked if he could try to contact his parents, Mr Rigger suggested that the others should come along so it could be a radio lesson as well.

The radio room was Ben's favourite part of the ship. He loved the look of the equipment – the dials and lights, the switches and buttons. He watched carefully as Mr Rigger stood by the equipment; behind him were Poppy, Badger, Tanya and Fee, also watching intently.

"Right," said Mr Rigger from behind Ben's shoulder. "You turn it on by flicking that switch over there. You do it, Ben."

Ben did as he was told, and immediately lights were illuminated on the radio's front panel. Ben had memorised the frequency of his parents' radio, and he now twirled one of the dials so that it was in exactly the right place.

Mr Rigger was impressed. "Pretty good, so far," he said. "Now start your transmission."

Ben took a deep breath. He had read about how you should talk when using a radio, but it was not always easy to remember. Leaning forward, he said into the microphone, "Calling *Seabed Explorer*, calling *Seabed Explorer*." *Seabed Explorer* was the name of his parents' submarine; with any luck they would be on the surface and able to hear the call, or, if they were below, they would have their special underwater aerial out.

Mr Rigger smiled. "Not so good, Ben."

Ben blushed, trying to work out where he had gone wrong.

Mr Rigger looked at the others. "Anybody see the mistake he's making?"

Fee held up a hand.

"Yes, Fee?" said Mr Rigger.

"He hasn't pressed the *transmit* button," she said, looking reproachfully at her brother.

Ben looked down at the floor. She was right: he had forgotten the most elementary thing you have to do when using a radio. It was a very bad mistake.

"That's right," said Mr Rigger. "And he also forgot to say who he is. You must *always* say who you are. Always." He turned to Ben. "Try again, Ben."

Badger glanced sympathetically in Ben's direction. Everybody could make mistakes, he thought, and he wanted to point that out to Fee. But now was not the time.