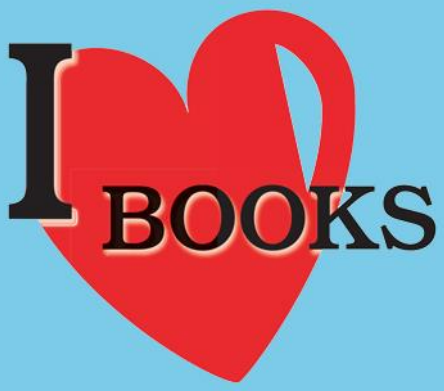


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Written by

Frances Hardinge

Illustrated by

Chris Riddell

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1
EXILES

The boat moved with a nauseous, relentless rhythm, like someone chewing on a rotten tooth. The islands just visible through the mist also looked like teeth, Faith decided. Not fine, clean Dover teeth, but jaded, broken teeth, jutting crookedly amid the wash of the choppy grey sea. The mailboat chugged its dogged way through the waves, greasing the sky with smoke.

'Osprey,' said Faith through chattering teeth, and pointed.

Her six-year-old brother Howard twisted round, too slow to see the great bird, as its pale body and dark-fringed wings vanished into the mist. Faith winced as he shifted his weight on her lap. At least he had stopped demanding his nursemaid.

'Is that where we are going?' Howard squinted at the ghostly islands ahead.

'Yes, How.' Rain thudded against the thin wooden roof above their heads. The cold wind blew in from the deck, stinging Faith's face.

In spite of the noise around her, Faith was sure that she could hear faint sounds coming from the crate on which she sat. Rasps of movement, breathy slithers of scale on scale. It pained Faith to think of her father's little Chinese snake inside, weak with the cold, coiling and uncoiling itself in panic with every tilt of the deck.

Behind her, raised voices competed with the keening of the gulls and the *phud-phud-phud* of the boat's great paddles. Now that the rain was setting in, everybody on board was squabbling over the small sheltered area towards the stern. There was room for the passengers, but not for all of the trunks. Faith's mother Myrtle was doing her best to claim a large share for her family's luggage, with considerable success.

Sneaking a quick glance over her shoulder, Faith saw Myrtle waving her arms like a conductor while two deckhands moved the Sunderly trunks and crates into place. Today Myrtle was waxen with tiredness and shrouded to the chin with shawls, but as usual she talked through and over everybody else, warm, bland and unabashed, with a pretty woman's faith in others' helpless chivalry.

'Thank you, there, right there – well, I am heartily sorry to hear that, but it cannot be helped – on its side, if you do not mind – well, your case looks very durable to me – I am afraid my husband's papers and projects will not endure the weather so – the Reverend Erasmus Sunderly, the renowned naturalist – how very kind! I am so glad that you do not mind . . .'

Beyond her, round-faced Uncle Miles was napping in his seat, blithely and easily as a puppy on a rug. Faith's gaze slipped past him, to the tall, silent figure beyond. Faith's father in his black priestly coat, his broad-brimmed hat overshadowing his high brow and hooked nose.

He always filled Faith with awe. Even now he stared out towards the grey horizons with his unyielding basilisk stare, distancing himself from the chilly downpour, the reek of bilge and coal-smoke and the ignominious arguing and jostling. Most weeks she saw more of him in the pulpit than she did in the house, so it was peculiar to look across and see him sitting there. Today she felt a prickle of pained sympathy. He was out of his element, a lion in a rain-lashed sideshow.

On Myrtle's orders, Faith was sitting on the family's largest crate, to stop anybody dragging it out again. Usually she managed to fade into the background, since nobody had attention to spare for a fourteen-year-old girl with wooden features and a mud-brown plait. Now she winced under resentful glares, seared by all the embarrassment that Myrtle never felt.

Myrtle's petite figure was positioned to impede anybody else trying to insert their own luggage under cover. A tall, broad man with a knuckly nose seemed about to push past her with his trunk, but she cut him short by turning to smile.

Myrtle blinked twice, and her big, blue eyes widened, taking on an earnest shine as if she had only just noticed the person before her with clarity. Despite her pink-nipped nose and weary pallor, her smile still managed to be sweet and confiding.

'Thank you for being so understanding,' she said. There was the tiniest, tired break in her voice.

It was one of Myrtle's tricks for handling men, a

little coquetry she summoned as easily and reflexively as opening her fan. Every time it worked, Faith's stomach twisted. It worked now. The gentleman flushed, gave a curt bow and withdrew, but Faith could see he was still carrying his resentment with him. In fact, Faith suspected that her family had antagonized nearly everybody on the boat.

Howard shyly adored their mother, and when she was younger Faith had seen her in the same honeyed light. Myrtle's rare visits to the nursery had been almost unbearably exciting, and Faith had even loved the ritual of being groomed, dressed and fussed over to make her presentable for each encounter. Myrtle had seemed like a being from another world, warm, merry, beautiful and untouchable, a sun-nymph with a keen sense of fashion.

However, over the last year Myrtle had decided to start 'taking Faith in hand', which appeared to involve interrupting Faith's lessons without warning, and dragging her away on impulse for visits or trips to town, before abandoning her to the nursery and schoolroom once more. Over this year, familiarity had done its usual work, picking off the gilded paint one scratch at a time. Faith had started to feel like a rag doll, snatched up and cast down according the whims of an impatient child with an uncertain temper.

Right now the crowds were receding. Myrtle settled herself down on a stack of three trunks next to Faith's crate, with an air of deep self-satisfaction.

'I do hope the place that Mr Lambent has arranged for

us has a decent drawing room,' she remarked, 'and that the servants will do. The cook simply cannot be *French*. I can scarcely run a household if my cook can choose to misunderstand me whenever she pleases . . .'

Myrtle's voice was not unpleasant, but it trickled on, and on, and on. For the last day her chatter had been the family's constant companion, as she shared it with the hackney-carriage driver who had taken them to the station, the guards who had stowed the family's luggage in the trains to London and then Poole, the surly custodian of the chilly inn where they had spent the night, and the captain of this smoky mailboat.

'*Why* are we going there?' interrupted Howard. His eyes were glassy with tiredness. He was at the fork. Ahead lay either compulsive napping or helpless tantrums.

'You know that, darling.' Myrtle leaned across to stroke wet hair out of Howard's eyes with a careful, gloved finger. 'There are some very important caves on that island over there, where gentlemen have been discovering dozens of clever fossils. Nobody knows more about fossils than your father, so they asked him to come and look at them.'

'But why did *we* come?' Howard persisted. 'He did not take us to China. Or India. Or Africa. Or Mongia.' The last was his best attempt at Mongolia.

It was a good question, and one that a lot of people were probably asking. Yesterday a flurry of cards carrying excuses and last-minute cancellations would have turned up in households all over the Sunderlys' home parish like

apologetic, rectangular snowflakes. By today, word of the family's unscheduled departure would be spreading like wildfire.

In truth, Faith herself would have liked to know the answer to Howard's question.

'Oh, we could never have gone to those places!' Myrtle declared vaguely. 'Snakes, and fevers, and people who eat dogs. This is different. It will be a little holiday.'

'Did we have to go because of the Beetle Man?' asked Howard, screwing up his face in concentration.

The Reverend, who had shown no sign of listening to the conversation, suddenly drew in his breath through his nose and let it out in a disapproving hiss. He rose to his feet.

'The rain is easing, and this saloon is too crowded,' he declared, and strode out on to the deck.

Myrtle winced and looked over at Uncle Miles, who was rubbing the sleep from his eyes.

'Perhaps I should, ah, take a little constitutional as well.' Uncle Miles glanced at his sister with a small, wry lift of the eyebrows. He smoothed down his moustache at the corners of his smile, then followed his brother-in-law out of the saloon.

'Where did Father go?' asked Howard in piercing tones, craning his neck round to peer out towards the deck. 'Can I go too? Can I have my gun?'

Myrtle closed her eyes briefly and let her lips flutter in what looked like a small, exasperated prayer for patience. She opened her eyes again, and smiled at Faith.

‘Oh, Faith, what a rock you are.’ It was the smile she always gave Faith, fond but with a hint of weary acceptance. ‘You may not be the liveliest company . . . but at least you never ask questions.’

Faith managed a flat, chilled smile. She knew who Howard meant by ‘the Beetle Man’, and suspected that his question had been dangerously close to the mark.

For the last month the family had been living in a frozen fog of the unsaid. Looks, whispers, subtle changes in manner and gently withdrawn contact. Faith had noticed the alteration, but had been unable to guess the reason for it.

And then, one Sunday while the family were walking back from church, a man in a brown homburg hat had approached to introduce himself, with much bobbing and bowing and a smile that never reached his eyes. He had written a paper on beetles, and would the respected Reverend Erasmus Sunderly consider writing a foreword? The respected Reverend would not consider it, and became ever more coldly irate at the visitor’s persistence. The stranger was ‘scraping an acquaintance’ in breach of all good manners, and at last the Reverend flatly told him so.

The beetle enthusiast’s smile had drooped into something less pleasant. Faith still remembered the quiet venom of his reply.

‘Forgive me for imagining that your civility would be the equal of your intellect. The way rumour is spreading, Reverend, I would have thought that you would be *glad*

to find a fellow man of science who is still willing to shake you by the hand.'

Remembering those words, Faith's blood ran cold again. She had never dreamed that she would see her father insulted to his face. Worse still, the Reverend had turned away from the stranger in furious silence, without demanding an explanation. The chill haze of Faith's suspicions began to crystallize. There were rumours abroad, and her father knew what they were, even if she did not.

Myrtle was wrong. Faith was full of questions, coiling and writhing like the snake in the crate.

Oh, but I cannot. I must not give way to that.

In Faith's mind, it was always *that*. She never gave it another name, for fear of yielding it yet more power over her. *That* was an addiction, she knew that much. *That* was something she was always giving up, except that she never did. *That* was the very opposite of Faith as the world knew her. Faith the good girl, the rock. Reliable, dull, trustworthy Faith.

It was the unexpected opportunities that she found hardest to resist. An unattended envelope with the letter peeping out, clean and tantalizing. An unlocked door. A careless conversation, unheeding of eavesdroppers.

There was a hunger in her, and girls were not supposed to be hungry. They were supposed to nibble sparingly when at table, and their minds were supposed to be satisfied with a slim diet too. A few stale lessons from

tired governesses, dull walks, unthinking pastimes. But it was *not* enough. All knowledge – any knowledge – called to Faith, and there was a delicious, poisonous pleasure in stealing it unseen.

Right now, however, her curiosity had a focus and an urgent edge. At that very moment, her father and Uncle Miles might be talking about the Beetle Man, and the reasons for the family's sudden exodus.

'Mother . . . may I walk on the deck a little while? My stomach . . .' Faith almost made herself believe her own words. Her insides were indeed churning, but with excitement, not the boat's jarring lurches.

'Very well – but do not answer anyone who talks to you. Take the umbrella, be careful not to fall overboard, and come back before you catch a chill.'

As Faith paced slowly alongside the rail, the faltering drizzle drumming on her umbrella, she admitted to herself that she was giving in to *that* again. Excitement pumped dark wine through her veins and sharpened all her senses to painful edges. She wandered slowly out of sight of Myrtle and Howard, then dawdled, acutely aware of each glance directed her way. One by one these gazes wearied of her and slid off once more.

Her moment came. Nobody was looking. She sidled quickly across the deck and lost herself among the crates that clustered at the base of the boat's shuddering, discoloured funnel. The air tasted of salt and guilt, and she felt alive.

She slipped from one hiding place to another, keeping

her skirts gathered close so that they did not flare in the wind and betray her location. Her broad, square feet, so clumsy when anybody tried to fit them for fashionable shoes, settled silently on the boards with practised deftness.

Between two crates she found a hiding place from which she could see her father and uncle a mere three yards away. Seeing her father without being seen felt like a special sacrilege.

'To flee my own home!' exclaimed the Reverend. 'It smacks of cowardice, Miles. I should never have let you persuade me to leave Kent. And what good will our departure do? Rumours are like dogs. Flee from them and they give chase.'

'Rumours are dogs indeed, Erasmus.' Uncle Miles squinted through his pince-nez. 'And they hunt in packs, and on sight. You needed to leave society for a while. Now that you are gone, they will find something else to chase.'

'By creeping away under cover of darkness, Miles, I have *fed* these dogs. My departure will be used in evidence against me.'

'Perhaps it will, Erasmus,' answered Uncle Miles with unusual seriousness, 'but would you rather be judged here on a remote island by a couple of sheep farmers, or in England among persons of consequence? The Vane Island excavation was the best excuse I could find for your departure, and I remain glad that you chose to accept my arguments.

'Yesterday morning that article in the *Intelligencer* was read out at breakfast tables all over the country. If you had stayed, you would have forced your entire circle to decide whether they would support or snub you, and the way rumour has been spreading you might not have liked the decisions they would have made.

'Erasmus, one of the most widely read and respected newspapers in the nation has decried you as a fraud and a cheat. Unless you want to subject Myrtle and the children to all the barbs and trials of scandal, you cannot return to Kent. Until your name is clear, nothing good awaits any of you there.'