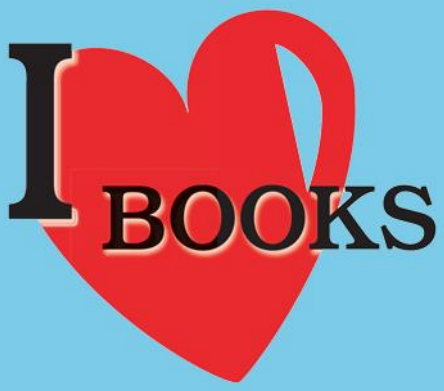


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Opening extract from

Animalcolm

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Published by

HarperCollins Children's Books

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First published in hardback in Great Britain by HarperCollins *Children's Books* 2016
HarperCollins *Children's Books* is a division of HarperCollins*Publishers* Ltd
1 London Bridge Street
London SE1 9GF

The HarperCollins *Children's Books* website address is
www.harpercollins.co.uk

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Hardback ISBN: 978-0-00-818514-5
Trade paperback ISBN: 978-0-00-818515-2

Printed and bound in the UK by
Clays Ltd, St Ives Plc

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CHAPTER ONE

Enormous furry ears

"Happy birthday to you,

Happy birthday to you,

Happy birthday dear… Maaaallllcolm!"

Now, this is normally the moment at which the birthday child – whose name in this case (as you may have worked out) is Malcolm – would blow out the candles on their cake.

But the Baileys – that was his full name, Malcolm

Bailey – had a family tradition, which was that they *also* sang 'Happy Birthday' when giving the children their birthday presents. So this song wasn't being sung at a party, and it was not accompanied by a cake. It was just Malcolm's mum and dad (Jackie and Stewart), his grandpa (Theo), his teenage sister (Libby) and his little brother (Bert), on the morning of his eleventh birthday, standing in a circle, in the living room, round a box, covered in wrapping paper (which actually did have printed candles on it).

Malcolm waited for the singing to finish. It was a bit of an annoying tradition, to be honest, because what he *wanted* to do was tear open that wrapping paper. Because he knew that inside the box was what he really, really wanted: a laptop computer.

He had given his parents the exact specification. An FZY Apache 321. Hi-Def screen. 4.0 GHz processor speed. Quad speakers with Nahimic virtual



surround sound. The fastest and coolest and baddest laptop on the planet. He could almost see it in his hands, touch its LED display backlit keyboard.

"…Happy birthday

Toooo…

You!"

Smiling at his family, Malcolm reached over to pick up his present.

Finally, he thought.

"For… he's a jolly good fellow!
For he's a jolly good fellow!"

Malcolm leant back, away from the present, still smiling, but through gritted teeth. *Do they normally do this bit?* he thought.

"For he's a jolly good fellow…
And so say all of us!"

"Great! Great singing, guys! Good job! Thanks!" said Malcolm, reaching forward for the present again.

"And… so say all of us!
And so say all of us!

For he's a jolly good fe-eh-llowwww…

And…

So say all of us!!"

His mum and dad and grandpa and sister and brother harmonised – surprisingly well, actually – on the word *us*, making Malcolm think the song must, at last, be over. Not wishing to be disappointed again, he waited five seconds, in case it wasn't. But everyone was just smiling. In fact, his mum was nodding, encouragingly, at the present.

Great, thought Malcolm. And tore open the wrapping.

Oh yes! That computer! With its shiny sleek aluminium cover! And its hyper-sensitive touch pad! And its enormous furry ears!

Malcolm frowned, screwing up his noticeably blue eyes. *Its enormous furry ears…?* He didn't remember reading that specification when he was

flicking through photos on BaddestComputer.Net.

But before he could quite work out what was going on, all the others were bending over and putting their faces very, very close to what was being revealed as the wrapping came off.

Which was not, in fact, a computer, or even a cardboard box containing a computer, but… a cage.

"Isn't he the cutest thing?" his mum was saying.

"Look at that sweet face!" his dad was saying.

"OMG! I want to stroke him," his sister was saying.

"I want to eat him!" his little brother was saying.

"He reminds me of Lord Kitchener!" his grandpa was saying.

"Sorry," said Malcolm. "What *is* this?"

"Well, Malc…" said Jackie.

"Mum!"

"Sorry."

"I've *told* you, Mum."

Malcolm didn't like being called Malc. He wasn't

sure why. Possibly because it rhymed with talc, and thus made him think of talcum powder, which was something he had once seen his grandpa putting down his pants.

"Sorry, M."

That was what his mum, who liked to give her children nicknames, sometimes called him instead of Malc. Malcolm was all right with that.

"He's a chinchilla," she continued.

"And not just any chinchilla!" said Stewart. "He's an Andean Lanigera!"

"Pardon?" said Malcolm.

"That's the breed. It means he's from the Andes, in South America. That's the best type! The ones that make perfect pets!!"

Malcolm looked down at the little creature.

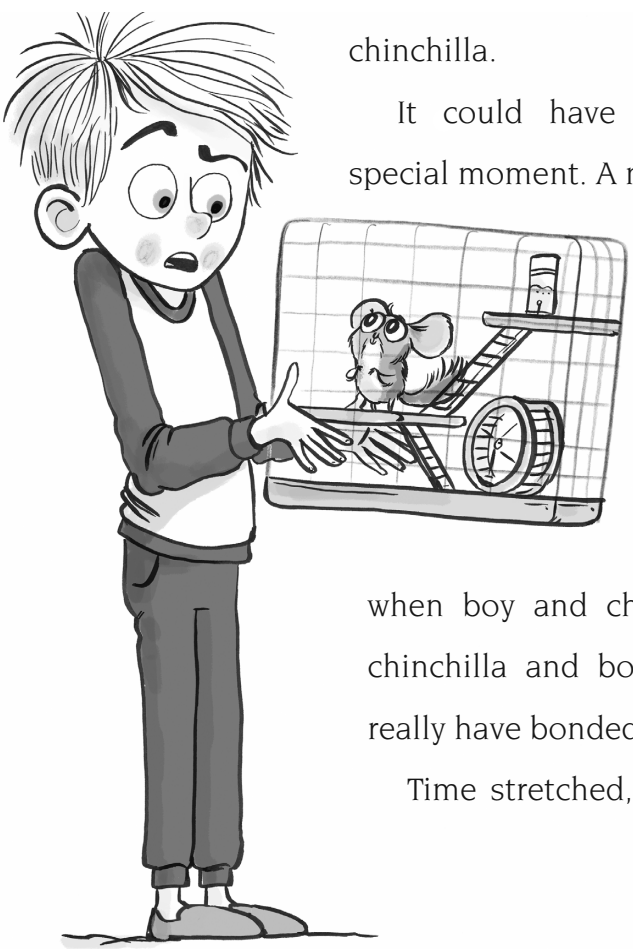
It was mainly white, with bits of speckled grey round its nose. It had round, sticky-out ears and a big fluffy tail. It was sitting up on its back legs

looking up at him, hopefully.

The chinchilla, like Malcolm, had very blue eyes. Those blue eyes seemed to widen as they saw Malcolm, like the animal had realised, instinctively, exactly whose pet it was meant to be.

Malcolm looked back at the chinchilla.

It could have been a special moment. A moment



when boy and chinchilla, chinchilla and boy, could really have bonded.

Time stretched, as blue

eyes met blue eyes, through the bars of the little cage.

But then, Malcolm turned away, shaking his head and tutting.

"Right… OK…" he said. "So where's… my Apache 321?!"