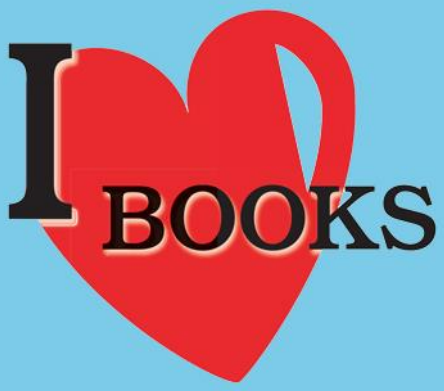


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Opening extract from

The Tigerboy

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There was a boy.

Nothing peculiar about him. His name was ordinary too, Fred. Nobody noticed him. In his gang of friends, he looked just like the others. At home, where he was the middle of a family of five children, he mixed in unnoticeably with the rest. He ate whatever was given.

Only Fred knew he was different. As he went about, doing what everybody else did, he had this idea all the time that he was different. He was special.

But he never did anything different. He slept in a room with his two brothers. He had the same toys as them. They had rabbits and he had a rabbit. They sailed boats and he

sailed a boat. They made model aeroplanes and so did he. When his elder brother brought in comics, they all read them. When his brothers went fishing, he went with them and caught fish. When they went to the woods he went to the woods. When they went to school he went to school.

Only at night sometimes he lay awake after they'd gone to sleep. How was it he was here, in this strange thing of a body, that ended at his toes and his fingers and his hair? What had happened to him before he came? Why was he only himself, and not somebody else? He lay awake thinking about this. How was it he was himself, inside this funny skin? How was it, among all the millions and millions

of people there was only one of him, and he was it? And he would lie there, clasping and unclasping his hands slowly and thinking, So this is me! And he would whisper, This is you, Fred.

Then one night it began.

His left foot began to itch. He scratched. The more he scratched the more it itched. 'I've got a flea,' he thought. But it wasn't just one place, one bite. It was all over his foot equally, above and below, and right up to his ankle-bone.

After a while his foot was so sore with scratching he had to stop. He seemed to have got the upper hand of the itching for a while, and he went to sleep.



Then he had a dream.

In this dream he was of all things a goat. Everything was dark and he was a very frightened goat. He was a goat wanting to bound away. But a rope round his neck held him tethered. At first he couldn't see anything, but gradually as if his eyes were growing used to the darkness he began to make out branches above and stars, then the post he was tethered to. He was in the middle of some sort of clearing among trees.

And as he saw all this he saw something dreadful. A lumpish black shape was moving and he knew, he absolutely knew, it was something dreadful that was going to jump

on him. He let out a wild screeching bleat – but he was too late, the shape was in the air, then he was crushed by its weight.

After that a number of things happened at once. A dazzling light flooded everything and he saw the massive striped arms of the giant beast that was bundling him up. Its jaws closed round his back and he knew he was being picked up. At the same time a sudden bang deafened him. Then he was flashing through darkness, twigs and leaves lashing him as he went, and with a mighty effort he came awake.

He was stumbling among scattered toys in his darkened bedroom, while his brothers shouted to him.

When everything was sorted out, and his father had been in to settle them down, it turned out that his eldest brother had heard him uttering the most ghastly bleating cries. He had switched on the light and managed to get a glimpse of Fred fighting out of his bedclothes when the lightbulb burst with a bang and everything went dark. In the darkness Fred had scrambled into the far corner of the room. What a nightmare!

But long after his two brothers had gone to sleep again Fred lay wondering what had happened. Did the tiger escape with the goat? Had it carried him off into the jungle and eaten him? Had the hunter with the torch managed to wound the tiger with his shot?

What happens to a goat that gets eaten by a tiger?

As he thought these thoughts Fred felt his left foot beginning to itch again. He reached down to scratch it and almost jumped out of bed with fright. He felt again more carefully.

Then he climbed quietly out of bed and quietly opened the door. The light on the stairs was always left on for his baby sister, and it showed him quite clearly all he wanted to see, as he put his left foot out onto the landing.

Just as it had felt to be! His left foot was covered with fur. But what horrified him most of all was that it was thick, yellow fur.

He was too frightened to wake his parents. Too frightened to wake his brothers.

He crept back into bed and closed his eyes tight, praying to God to make his foot ordinary again. And so he fell asleep.

In the morning he was wakened by his brothers telling him of all the racket he had made in the night. As if he couldn't remember it! The whole thing came back to him as if it had been waiting at the side of his bed.

Very cautiously he felt for his left foot. He almost cried with relief. It was smooth, human and normal. His own foot had come back!

*

That day was a schoolday. In the bustle of the morning, he forgot about his dream. Then it was arithmetic first. He enjoyed school because he had invented a way of handling his lessons. One day he had been daydreaming, his chin in his hand, his head screwed round, his gaze directed up into the sky through the topmost classroom window, when the maths teacher's voice had burst in his ears like a bomb.

The blackboard was covered with figures and the teacher was staring at him alone.

'I said what are you dreaming about, Willox?'

Fred stared. The class sat in hushed fear. The teacher, who was tall, bony,


$y\left(\frac{1+a\times 2}{x}\right)$
$\alpha = \pi r^2$
x^4+3x^2-7x
$\sqrt{1-\frac{v^2}{V^3}}$