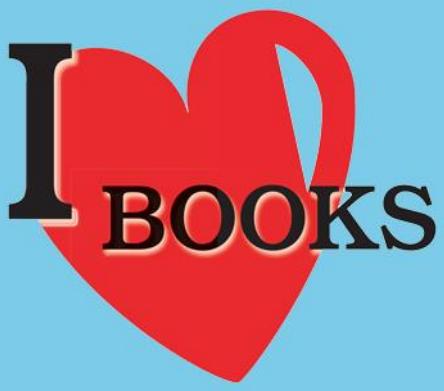


Lovereading4kids.co.uk is a book website created for parents and children to make choosing books easy and fun

Opening extract from

A Girl Called Owl

Written by

Amy Wilson

Published by

Macmillan Children's Books an imprint of Pan Macmillan

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

Please print off and read at your leisure.





First published 2017 by Macmillan Children's Books
an imprint of Pan Macmillan
20 New Wharf Road, London N1 9RR
Associated companies throughout the world
www.panmacmillan.com

ISBN 978-1-5098-3246-0

Text copyright © Amy Wilson 2017
Illustrations copyright © Helen Crawford-White 2017

The right of Amy Wilson and Helen Crawford-White to be identified as the author and illustrator of this work has been asserted by them in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means (electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise), without the prior written permission of the publisher.

1 3 5 7 9 8 6 4 2

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Printed and bound by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon CR0 4YY

This book is sold subject to the condition that it shall not, by way of trade or otherwise, be lent, resold, hired out, or otherwise circulated without the publisher's prior consent in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition including this condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser.

Jack

I thought I saw a figure there,
Dancing at the lake,
Alone but for the tide of ice
That followed in his wake.

I thought I saw a shadow there,
In winter's cruellest hour,
When frost spills, wicked beautiful,
Upon the boldest flower.

I thought I saw you there, Jack Frost,
I blinked and you were gone.
The magic that you left behind
Now sparkling in the dawn.



1

When you have a kid, don't call it something stupid.

Don't call it Apple, or Pear, or Mung Bean.

Don't call it Owl.

This advice is a bit late for me. Because she did. She did call me Owl. Thirteen years ago she looked down at a tiny little baby – me – and decided that Owl would be a good way to go.

I guess she didn't know then that I would grow up to have white-blonde hair that flicks around my face like feathers, no matter what I do with it. That my eyes would turn from baby blue to the palest brown, almost yellow; that my nose would be on the beaky side.

She should have seen that last one coming, though; I inherited it from her.

I like owls. I think they're beautiful. But you know,

my head doesn't rotate 360 degrees. I can't fly. I don't hunt at night.

All these are questions the other kids have asked me, over the years. Mum laughs when I tell her.

'See!' she cries, looking up from whatever she's doing, a glint in her dark eyes. 'Already you stand out from the crowd. Already you are different. Isn't it a wonderful thing?'

She's beautiful, my mum. Not in a subjective way, like she's my mum therefore she must be beautiful. She's actually beautiful. She has these big dark eyes, masses of dark hair and when she smiles, when she laughs, it's very difficult not to join in.

I do try my very best not to join in.

Her name is Isolde. She wears lots of bright colours, and tinkling bangles on her wrists. She smells of warm things: vanilla, cinnamon, oranges and blackcurrants, and something deeper that's just her, I guess.

My friends love her.

Which is annoying.

'Owl McBride!'

I look up from my desk. Mr Leonard is perched on the edge of his table, his ankles crossed in front of him.

His hands rest on the table, one finger tap-tapping against it. There's a diagram on the board behind him but it's all squiggles to me.

'Are you concentrating?'

'Yes, sir.'

'On the lesson, I mean, as opposed to your doodling?'

I blush as a roll of laughter goes around the room.

'Yes, sir. Sorry, sir.'

'That's all right. If you can tell me what *pi* is.'

Clearly it'd be a bad idea to tell him it's something I eat with my chips. His eyebrows are just daring me to do it. They look like black marker pen stripes, drawn too high on his forehead, trying to hide beneath his shaggy dark hair.

'It's where the circle has a diameter and the circumference is . . . when you calculate it . . . that's *pi*.'

I smile hopefully, but Mr Leonard drops his head and sighs.

'I suppose,' he says, standing up and walking to the board. 'I suppose I should just be happy that you know the right words, even if you've no idea what to do with them.'

He starts jabbing at the board with a blue marker, making more squiggles. I copy them down in my book. The rest of the class does the same.

Mallory, next to me, is still laughing.

'Shh!' I hiss at her, my pen moving across the paper, making alien mathematical shapes I've no use for.

It was an owl. The doodle in my maths book. I draw them, over and over. Little ones, big ones, owls with crazy whirly eyes, owls swooping from the sky. They're in all the borders of my lined schoolbooks. They're on Post-it notes around my bedroom. I have sketches of them, paintings, even little clay figures.

I'm not saying they're good. Actually, if you walked into my bedroom you'd probably run back out again screaming. They're a bit intense.

Mum loves them. *Loves* them. She thinks it's me expressing myself.

Drawing myself, over and over again.

Mallory just rolls her eyes when she sees a new one now. She bought me a card with a puffin on it for my birthday a couple of weeks ago.

'Maybe a change?' she wrote inside. 'Now that you're thirteen?'

But I'm not *called* Puffin.

And there has to be a reason.

A reason Mum called me Owl.



2

Clearly I must have a father somewhere. Everybody has one, after all.

But Mum won't tell me who he is. There are no photos, no certificates with his name on. Nothing. And whenever I ask her she goes all misty-eyed and tells me he was a beautiful man, who left her a beautiful gift. She wanders off to see him in her imagination and leaves me behind, in the kitchen, for example, while dinner starts to burn.

When I was younger, she would tell me fairy tales about how they met in one of the magical wintry lands from her old storybook, and I loved them, because it *was* magical, and I was just a kid. But I got older, and it started to annoy me, because I wasn't a kid any more, and I wanted real answers.

So she stopped with the stories and got vague instead. And that's the source of most of our arguments.

That and the Owl thing.

It's nearly impossible to have a satisfying argument with my mum. She watches seriously while you make your initial point. She considers, nodding, and then tells you something completely pointless.

'Dear sweet child,' she says now, deflecting my latest attempt to ask about fatherly things as I untangle myself from my scarf after school. 'Some things are not supposed to wear labels, or names. Some things remain a mystery, however hard we butt up against them . . .' She smiles, pouring jasmine tea into two tiny china cups and pushes one along the kitchen counter to me.

'So you don't know who he is, then?'

'Oh, I know him,' she says, picking up her own cup and looking down at the steaming amber liquid. 'I've told you about him, Owl, you just never believed me . . .'

'Well if you know him, he must have a name,' I say. 'And you can give it to me. Can't you?'

She takes a sip.

'Owl, drink!' she says, when she's finished. 'It's only good when it's hot.'

I take a sip.

'I have nothing to give you except this moment,' she says then. 'That is all there is. You and I, in this kitchen, drinking our tea.'

The china cups have jade green dragons inside them, eternally chasing their tails around the white background, breathing fire at themselves.

Sometimes I feel a bit like those dragons.

'Who needs a dad, anyway?' sighs Mallory on the phone later, when I tell her of my latest failed attempt.

That's easy for her to say. Hers is probably outside cleaning the car right now. I look out of the window, as if mine might just be there, looking for me, waiting for me to notice him. Brittle autumn leaves fall from the trees on the street and a little shiver runs down my spine; mid-November, and winter is here. Soon there will be frost and ice sweeping over the rooftops, curling down trees, making the grey pavements sparkle. The thought makes my skin itch, makes me impatient. The need to know where I come from is almost overwhelming.

'. . . and flipping annoying,' Mallory's voice cuts in. 'Honestly, you don't need a dad, Owl.'

'I do,' I tell her firmly. 'At least his name . . .'

'You are a bit fixated on names.'

'And why do you think that is?'

'Mallory isn't all that, you know. It's the name of an Enid Blyton school, for goodness sake.'

That's true enough. But it's better than Owl.

We spend the rest of the conversation talking about Justin. Mallory talks a lot about Justin. She's convinced they're soulmates, even though he's going out with Daisy.

'Double English tomorrow,' she says as we say our goodbyes. 'A whole hour and a half of English!'

Which means sharing a class with Justin. Which means they'll compete with each other every time a question is asked, and try to answer it in the most complicated, literary way possible, and I just have to sit there and watch it all and feel a bit stupid. I usually have a couple of new owls by the time I come out of English lessons.

I chuck the phone on to my bed with a huff and go to the window, muttering to the carved owl on the bedpost about how boys complicate everything. As I watch, half distracted, something moves between the trees outside the flat, something lean and hunched, with spidery limbs; something so alien, so out of place,

that my skin tightens with fear before I've even worked out what it is. I lean closer to get a better look, my breath misting the glass, but all I can see is shadows.

I have a good imagination. It was probably just a fox. I pull the curtains with a sharp tug and tell myself off for being such a kid.

About the legends Mum used to tell me. She hasn't got that old book out for years now, and I sort of miss it. I'd never admit it, but when I struggle to get to sleep sometimes I imagine the stories were true, and my father really is from some great fantasy land. I remember the way her voice changed as she told me of those strange places; the way her eyes glazed as she spoke of fairies and sprites, talking trees and fearsome queens. Sometimes it was a little scary – as if I'd lost her to that other world.

It was ever winter there. The deepest, coldest, the bluest winter; the winter of the world. The sky changed as day turned to night and night to day once more but the sun was a cold white disc in the sky, and the moon shone brighter against the darkness but still there was no heat about it.

Her ears screamed with the dead silence in the air.

Her chest burned to breathe against the bitter of the wind.

He found her, in the clearing between the trees that towered out in every direction: black with bark and white with frost. He found her by the plume of her breath, by the snap of frozen twigs beneath her boots as she turned and turned and turned again, waiting for something to become familiar.

Nothing was familiar.

He was blue-white as if he'd never seen the summertime. His eyes were mirrors in the dawn and his dark hair was tipped with the frost of the land. When he reached out his hand she thought it would be like ice.

It was not.

He gestured back the way he'd come and his grip tightened. She breathed in and prepared to launch her questions at him, but even as her lips gathered he shook his head and put a finger to her mouth.

'Not here, not now.'

'But why am I here and what is this place and where is home and where am I and who are you?'

He considered her and took his hands away and she was colder than she had ever been and clung to herself, but he was quick to unclasp his robe and sweep it over her shoulders.

Once more he took her hand.

'Now?'

'Now we run.'

The cloak he'd drawn around her was charcoal grey and heavy. It was the rough-smooth of new wool and though the plain was freezing and the wind howled in her ears she was not cold.