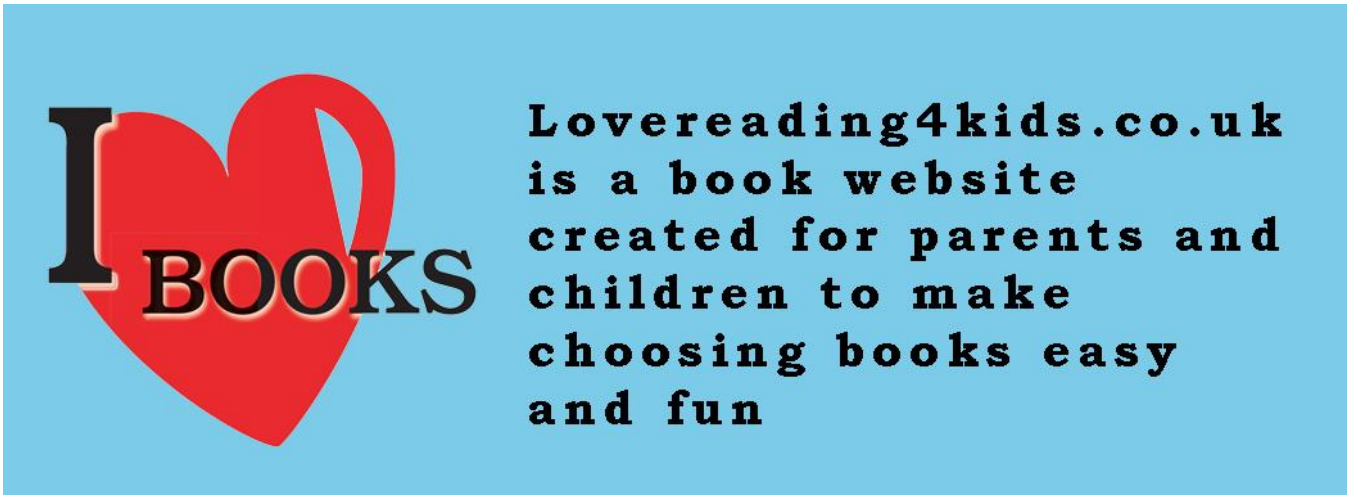


Opening extract from

The Fearless Travellers' Guide to Wicked Places

Written by

Pete Begler

Published by

Curious Fox

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

Please print off and read at your leisure.



The Fearless Travelers' Guide to Wicked Places is
published by Capstone Young Readers,
a Capstone Imprint
1710 Roe Crest Drive, North Mankato, Minnesota 56003

www.mycapstone.com

Text © Pete Begler 2017

Illustrations © Capstone 2017

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

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data is
available on the Library of Congress website.

ISBN 978-1-62370-799-6 (paper over board)

ISBN 978-1-62370-801-6 (ebook)

Summary: Twelve-year-old Nell Perkins knows there is
magic at work that she can't yet understand. Her mother
has been taken by witches and turned into a bird. Nell
must journey to get her mother back, even if it takes her
deep into the Wicked Places — the frightening realm
where Nightmares reside. There she must break the spell
and stop the witches from turning our world into a living
nightmare.

Designer: Kay Fraser

Cover Artist: Manuel Šumberac

Author photo © Miyoshi Barosh

Printed and bound in China.
009972S17

Chapter 1

In the week since the bruise-colored cloud had appeared over the tiny coastal town of Mist Falls, three mothers had disappeared. The first while riding her bicycle down a leaf-swept street, the second while sitting in a parked car drinking a cup of coffee, and the last from her bedroom while her new baby napped beside her. Not a single person had witnessed the cloud take the women, but Nell Perkins knew it was true.

Even now, as she piloted her bike along the damp streets, she felt the grim cloud watching everyone from above. One had only to glance up to see that this cloud was different. It didn't float along aimlessly like other clouds, but moved with slow scheming purpose, and while it had first appeared over the trees wispy thin, it had grown fatter with each passing day, like a bloated tick filling with blood.

Nell rode carefully, keeping a watchful eye on the leafy shadows on the cracked sidewalk, making sure to stay within their protection. She tried to tell herself that it was silly. *It's just a cloud*. But another voice inside her whispered for her to stay hidden from its dark wisps, which reminded her of a ball of cotton candy lying burnt and alone in an abandoned fairground.

The truth was this wasn't the first time people had disappeared from their small town. Over the years almost a

dozen people had simply vanished. Most were young women, though one was a boy Nell's age named Max. They had just started to become friends when he vanished four weeks ago. He was funny and daring and liked to play the trumpet. They had the kind of friendship built on nothing more than a love of weird jokes and an obsession with chocolate. He didn't vanish in the same way, though it felt the same to Nell. One night he went to sleep and he didn't wake up. He had fallen into a coma. They took him to the hospital, where he was still asleep.

As Nell pulled her bike into the schoolyard, she had the strangest thought. Maybe the cloud was behind it. Maybe it had drifted over his house while he slept and kidnapped a part of him. The thought sent a shiver up her spine and she quickly locked up her bike. The normally busy yard was empty. A few teachers were hustling the late students inside.

"Attention, students and staff!" Principal Green's voice crackled over the loudspeaker as Nell entered. "All students and faculty are not to go to their classrooms. Report directly to the school auditorium for a special assembly."

Nell's stomach was tight with nerves. The assembly was her chance to tell everyone what she knew to be the truth. The cloud had kidnapped the women and maybe Max as well.

I am going to look like an idiot, she told herself, but it was too late. She had decided she did not have a choice. Nell had seen a crime and the town needed to know about it, no matter how strange it would sound. It had happened quickly and was so weird that even remembering it now caused her heart to beat loudly and her breath to quicken. She recounted the facts as though she were telling them to a policeman.

A few days ago Nell had been at the town library until nearly dinnertime, reading about whales and secretly eating

chocolate-covered raisins. Perhaps she would leave that part out when she told it, but, she reasoned, it did show that she was thinking clearly and had an eye for detail. When the library closed, Nell walked outside. The sky was free of clouds and the streets empty of people. She got on her bike and headed home. As she rode she felt a great burst of happiness, like she was the last person on earth and free to do anything. Summer was coming and she had books to read and the ocean to dash into.

The mist was drifting off the sea, caressing her cheeks and dancing across her lips. Nell liked the briny taste of the salty air. She stopped her bike at the corner of Sea View and Stone Lane Road, and was taking in the view of the waves violently crashing upon the black rocks of the shore, when a high-pitched shriek rang out in the sky. Looking up she caught sight of a strange purple cloud, rising quickly from behind the large Victorian house at the end of Stone Lane Road.

The horrible cloud rose with a rumble, as if it were an animal Nell had surprised in the act of feasting on a fresh kill. All was still and utterly silent. Nell wanted to turn away, to ride as fast as she could in the other direction, but her eyes were locked on the cloud as it rose higher and higher.

As she stared, Nell wished for several things. She wished to be home, she wished she wasn't afraid, she wished she wasn't alone, and in a few seconds she would wish forevermore that she had closed her eyes. But her eyes were open, and Nell watched as from out of the purple cloud fell a woman's shoe, bright white and dotted with red marks that could only be blood. Alone. A single shoe and nothing more, spit out as if it were a part not worth eating. The shoe dropped slowly, twirling as it tumbled through the air, and without a sound disappeared into a clump of leafless trees.

Without thinking to look for it, Nell raced home, trying to understand how a bloody shoe could fall from a cloud. No plane had flown overhead. No giant bird. There was only one conclusion. Someone was trapped inside the cloud. The secret weighed on her for the next several days, and she told no one. How could she? It was ridiculous. Insane. Clouds don't kidnap people. They don't eat young women. Keeping quiet seemed like the best choice. But when the principal announced the special assembly, Nell knew it was about the disappearances, and she knew she had to tell. Suddenly, as she walked through the halls, she felt everyone's eyes on her, as if they knew she had a secret.

But they look at me anyway, Nell reminded herself. That much was true. On any day Nell Perkins was hard to miss. She was an uncommon-looking twelve-year-old girl, with hair so blond it almost appeared silver, large amber eyes, and a slightly crooked smile that seemed to be hiding something.

But it wasn't the way she looked or her smile or the slightly determined way she walked that made people look. No. People looked because Nell Perkins was well known in her small town for claiming to see things that did not exist.

Not things exactly, but creatures.

"Inner animals," Rose had called them when they first began making themselves known to Nell. They appeared right around the time Nell's father had gotten sick and passed away. Most of the creatures had human bodies and animal heads, though others had no human parts at all and could be a frightening mixture of animal and machine. Nell had begun talking to them when she was four.

The first one to speak to her had the body of a man and the head of an elephant. Being so young, Nell didn't think this

was unusual. His name was Jim and he delivered the mail. Nell would get excited and jump up and down when she saw Jim walking toward the house. His trunk would swish from side to side, his great ears twitching and his white tusks looking fierce and dangerous in the bright sun.

Nell had also discovered that if she blinked her eyes and said her name, the person would return to normal. The mask, which had suddenly appeared, would drop away. Without his inner animal, Jim was quite bald and had a face filled with freckles. As Nell grew older she accepted the fact that almost everyone she knew, except her family, had an inner animal that would sometimes appear to say hello. It was fun for Nell to see who was hiding what. Gentle-looking old ladies could suddenly turn into alligators, tough men on motorcycles could have the faces of soft rabbits. Nell never talked about her rare skill, for she thought it was normal. Then, during her first day of kindergarten, Nell Perkins learned the truth.

All the children were sitting on the rug with eager, excited faces, trying not to squirm. Nell wasn't sure she liked kindergarten and longed to be at home in her pajamas. The boy next to her, a redhead named Tommy Jenkins, was digging relentlessly into his nose with a pudgy finger and the whole place smelled like lima beans. Ms. Rook, the teacher, was another story. She was the prettiest person Nell had ever seen. She was explaining that good students could win gold stars and candy by following the rules when suddenly her inner animal appeared. In an instant Ms. Rook's pretty face disappeared and her head was replaced, not by the head of an animal, but by the head of a giant doll with a cracked skull and a missing eye. Nell screamed loudly and wouldn't stop screaming as the doll stood over her. Nell was so gripped with terror that her mind

felt blank. She couldn't remember how to make the terrible dead-eyed face go away. Other teachers came rushing in to help and their faces were just as frightening. Faces of stone, faces of tangled thorn, and worst of all, a face made of burning flames.

"You're special, Nell. Don't forget that and it will all be okay," her mother told her when Nell explained about the inner animals. For everyone else the answer was simple. Nell had an overactive imagination that encouraged her to see things that weren't there. The cause of her condition, they concluded, lay in the fact she didn't dream. Her nights were dark and dreamless.

"All that imagination has to go somewhere," said Wellington Miles, a famous doctor, who began to study her. He attached multicolored wires to her head and watched her as she slept. Despite what he said about their nonexistence, the doctor's own inner animal was that of a friendly walrus. Nell liked him very much, and he sat beside her for three nights, monitoring her sleep on a large machine and puffing on a pipe, his walrus whiskers twitching.

Nell and her family were told that her condition would diminish over time and she had to learn to live with it in the meantime. It did not diminish, but Nell learned not to tell anyone and to keep what she saw secret. Still there was only one way to make them go away. Nell was forced to say "My name is Nell Perkins" aloud several times a day. This declaration became a curse.

"My name is Nell Perkins."

It left others thinking her strange and her feeling lonely and odd and without much confidence that she would ever be anything but a freak.

"My name is Nell Perkins."

A shy girl who preferred books to people and whose only friend was now in a coma.

Now she was about to embarrass herself again. Nell felt a knot of fear grow in her stomach. As the teachers hustled the students into the auditorium for the big meeting Nell's breathing began to grow fast. All eyes were on the stage, where the local chief of police was standing with Principal Green.

I can't do it, she said to herself in desperation. *I'm not going to say a thing.*

Nell moved down the aisle and found herself sitting next to Todd Lincoln, a twitchy boy who dressed mostly in army fatigues and bragged about hunting deer. He turned to Nell and whispered, "My dad said the government is kidnapping people for experiments." He twitched and continued, "Have you seen those black vans on the road lately?"

Nell admitted she had not.

"Stay away from them," warned Todd.

"Children!" The principal stepped over to the microphone. Mr. Green was a trim little man with a beard and glasses, and a booming voice that made it seem as if he was always giving a speech. "There has been a lot of talk going on about recent events. Rumors can be scary things, and as you head out for summer vacation we want you to feel safe and be safe and make safe choices. The best way to do that is to make sure everyone has the right information, so we asked Police Chief Byrne to give us the facts about these recent events and relieve our worries."

"'Recent events.' How about 'experiments'?" Todd Lincoln elbowed Nell.

The police won't say what it is, Nell reasoned, *because they don't know the truth*. This meant Nell alone held the secret to

the disappearances, and afraid or not, she would have to tell them. Her stomach clenched even tighter.

The police chief nodded and stepped forward. He cleared his throat. "Three women have gone missing from our town. These are the facts. In these cases rumors can cause more problems than the actual incidents. All we know is that the three women — Connie Little, Saffron Jones and Lulu Gram — are all unaccounted for. As of yet we don't think a crime has been committed. We have seen no evidence of harm. Sometimes kids can be a great help to police. I want you to think. Do you have any information you'd like to share? Keep in mind this is a serious matter. We are only interested in facts. Things you have seen, not stories or rumors about UFOs or secret experiments."

Before she could stop herself, Nell stood. There were two hundred students in her school, and every single one turned and stared.

"Yes?" the police chief said, smiling. Nell felt her hands go clammy. She knew at once standing up had been a mistake. How could she possibly explain? She tried to think of a different story.

Mention a man in a strange mask or a black government van, she thought.

"Have you seen something?" said the police chief.

And out it came. Nell spoke.

"A shoe."

A hush fell over the students and Nell knew at once she had said something wrong.

"A shoe?" the chief said to Nell, who was not sure where to put her hands. A wet piece of candy hit Nell on the cheek and stuck.

The whole room broke out in peals of laughter.

"QUIET!" shouted the police chief. The mob grew silent.

"Sit down," Todd Lincoln hissed, but to everyone's surprise, including her own, Nell did not sit. She plucked the wet watermelon candy from her cheek and continued.

"The cloud that is hanging above town. Haven't you seen it? The dark purple one," Nell said, growing less confident with each passing second. "It did it."

"A cloud?" the police chief said, still trying to understand what this had to do with a shoe. Nell turned to the crowd and froze at the sight before her. There was a burbling sound of flesh stretching as everyone in the auditorium transformed. In an instant, Nell found herself staring not at a room of teens, but at a room of creatures with human bodies and animal heads. Pigs, hyenas, boars, dogs, cats, all still sitting as they had been moments before, dressed in the school uniform, unaware that their heads were furry and their mouths filled with razor-sharp fangs. Nell's heart began to pound and her face grew red and hot.

"No," she whispered to herself. "Not now." But like it or not, IT was happening again. She was having a "moment." The entire school was showing their inner animals. She had to make them go away as fast as possible or she would get flustered and everything would come out wrong. But that meant doing what she hated more than anything else: reminding herself loudly who she was.

"Did what?" the police chief said, his head now transformed into the head of a large frog with watery green eyes.

"My name is Nell Perkins," Nell announced nervously, "and the cloud is stealing people. I saw the shoe fall from it. I think there was blood on it."

A shocked and awkward silence fell over the room until a boy with the head of a hyena shouted, "My name is Nell Perkins and I'm a freak!"

The whole room erupted with laughter and the principal whispered something in the police chief's ear. He nodded and frowned. Nell knew what he was saying. "Don't listen to that girl. There is something wrong with her." Nell felt her cheeks flush with shame. As she sat, everyone's inner animal disappeared.

"That was awesome," Todd whispered to her, but she did not agree. She sunk into her seat.