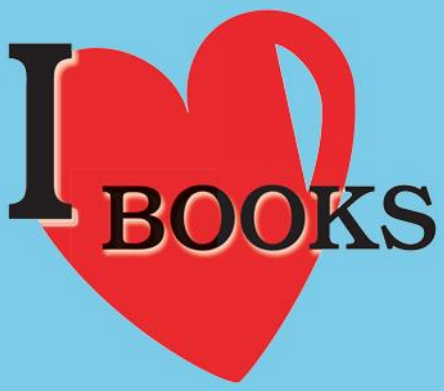


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Opening extract from

Mabel Jones and the Doomsday Book

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CHAPTER ONE
A Relic from a Hooman Age

This is the life, eh?

You, me and a tiny rowing boat dwarfed by the gargantuan waves of the **WILD WESTERN SEA**! Sure, the salty wind **lashes** against my cheeks like an angry bosun's whip, but that's what happens if you gamble and lose your trousers in a game of cards at the CADAVEROUS LOBSTER TAVERN.

Still, there is something magical about the **WILD WESTERN SEA**, thinks I, as I lie back, gaze lazily at the

stars and feel the cooling breeze around my –

I didn't say you could stop rowing!

We are drawing nearer to our goal. See there! Two dull shapes on the horizon. One large – a merchantman sailing from ALBEMARLE, I'll warrant. Probably the **OMBUDSMAN**, bound for the **NOO WORLD**. The other one is smaller, faster and closing in.

Is this it?

Is this the ship we seek?

Aye! I think it must be, for a flag is hoisted, and on that flag is a picture of a white ant on a background of inky blue-black. This is the RANCID TILAPIA, a pirate ship, captained by CAPTAIN RUFUS SICKLESMEAR THE YOUNGER.

Sicklesmear is a pirate of the old school – an aardvark with a wooden leg, a wooden nose and a habit of performing the foulest of acts, including

kidnap, blackmail and throwing his dung at a security guard during a public reading of his autobiography, A NOSE FOR PIRACY. But it is not him we *really* seek. It is a member of his crew. A hooman. Our hero, Mabel Jones.

DID YOU HEAR THAT?!

The distant sound of cannon fire!

Row faster, reader, for we are missing the action. A sea battle is under way! Row! Row **faster**, lest we miss the gratuitous bloodshed. For our story is about to begin . . .



In the hold of the RANCID TILAPIA, Mabel Jones's scrawny shoulders lie hunched beneath dribble-stained blankets, swinging in a hammock with every pitch and roll. She groans and tosses in her sleep. Her tattered and torn pyjamas are sodden with sweat.

Mabel Jones is deep within a dream.

A *bad* dream.

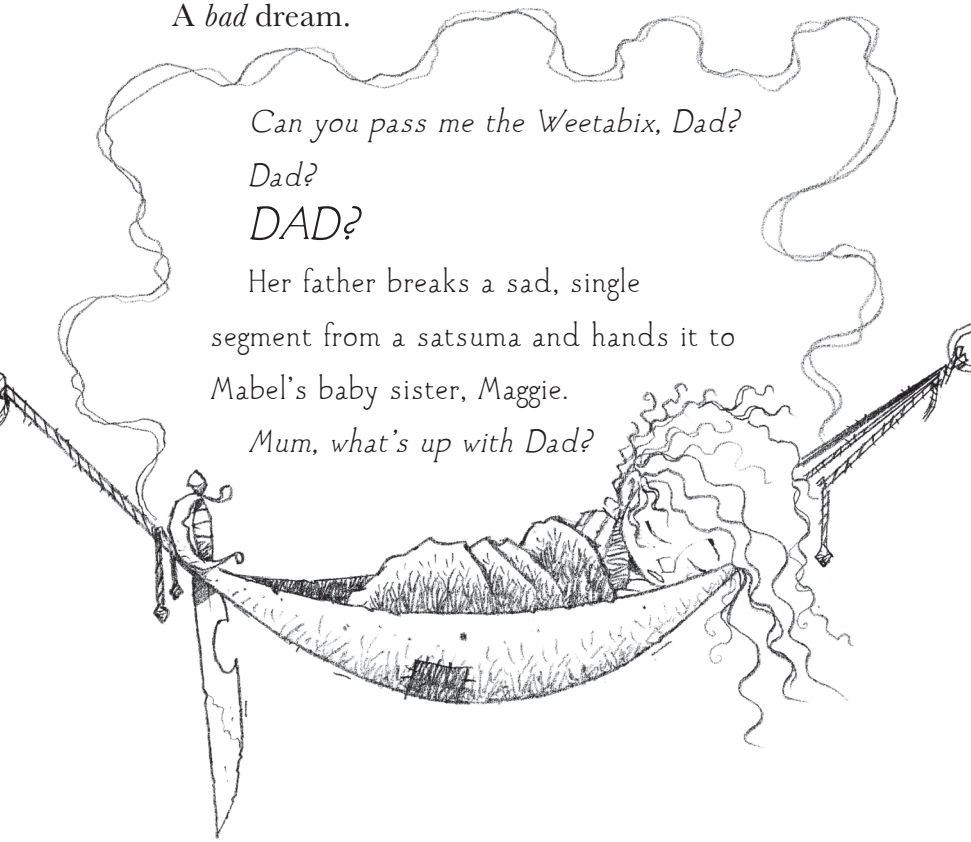
Can you pass me the Weetabix, Dad?

Dad?

DAD?

Her father breaks a sad, single segment from a satsuma and hands it to Mabel's baby sister, Maggie.

Mum, what's up with Dad?



Her mother looks at her father.

'I miss Mabel,' she says, staring through the window.

But I'm right here, Mum!

'I miss Mabel too,' says her father.

I'M. RIGHT. HERE.

But she wasn't.

Not any more.

Now she was **floating**. Floating high above 23 Gudgeon Avenue, the house where she once lived. Higher now. High above the messy, sprawling city and the

cars that filled the busy streets like ants in the litter of a spilt bin.

Higher still she floated, until the land and the sea and the clouds became swirls that curved and curled round the earth. And then there was a

bang

and the earth rippled like a puddle in the rain. And in the puddle Mabel could see her reflection, and her family's reflection, and that of her friends, and her teachers, and more and more and more and more people.

And . . .

And . . .

And then there was another bang.

The puddle became stir-murky with the blackest of mud, and the people disappeared into the swirling clouds, until there was just Mabel's mum and dad and Maggie.

And then they too were lost in the black fog.

And Mabel was alone.

And she knew that something bad had happened.

Mabel Jones sat up and rubbed the memories of the bad dream from her eyes. The whale-fat lamp swung with the pitch and roll of the RANCID TILAPIA and illuminated the snoring form of her crewmate **'Greasy' Daniel Lanolin-Flannel**, an old sheep sleeping off the effects of last night's rum.

Voices were shouting from above:

'All hands on deck! Prepare to attack!'

Mabel sighed. Being a pirate was hard work.

Dangerous work.

She reached for the cutlass that hung from her hammock and prepared herself for another bloody sea battle.